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THE PROJECT TO END
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

**HOW GOVERNMENTS AND
THE ANTI-VIOLENCE SECTOR
CAN CENTRE CHILDREN,
YOUTH AND THEIR FAMILIES
IN PRIMARY PREVENTION
EFFORTS**

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Shift wants to acknowledge that our team members live across Turtle Island in what is today known as Canada. We acknowledge that the places we call home have deep ties to the Indigenous Peoples that have stewarded this land since time immemorial. We also acknowledge that colonial actors and institutions perpetually deny Indigenous Peoples their rights to self-determination and sovereignty and these institutions must be challenged and changed. Shift is committed to the advancement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

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1.0 Introduction

This report is part of a series of research briefs* designed to inform the Alberta Primary Prevention Framework Collaborative (APPF), whose goal is to help the Government of Alberta (GoA) and the IMPACT collective identify strategies and actions that are focused on primary prevention of domestic and sexual violence.

This report builds the case to focus on children and youth as a key strategy for preventing violence in the next generation.¹ After explaining our rationale for centering children, youth, and their families, we move our focus to explore child maltreatment and its prevention as an effective strategy to prevent intimate partner violence as youth grow into adulthood. We define child maltreatment, briefly explain the drivers that make it possible, outline its many forms, and provide prevalence data to better understand the scope of the problem in Alberta and Canada. We end by listing a series of recommendations that the GoA and the anti-violence sector can implement to center children, youth, and their families in our primary prevention efforts.

Recommendations in this report emerge from the analysis of 70 gender equality and violence prevention plans from the global north, as well as almost 400 documents by Canadian policy actors, including researchers, non-governmental and civil society organization leaders, and activists working towards the empowerment of equity-deserving groups, including children and youth. We have selected directional recommendations that provide a comprehensive overview of all the areas in which policy and legislation changes are necessary to create favourable conditions for children, youth, and their families. However, we do not provide specific details on which Alberta laws must be amended and how policy changes should be framed. A more targeted and detailed approach focused on specific government ministries, laws, and policies will be the next step in our research.

2.0 A case for centering children, youth, and their families

We know from research that childhood experiences have lasting impacts.² Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as child abuse, maltreatment, and exposure to violence (to name a few),³ are particularly damaging to the long-term health and wellbeing of children and youth who experience them. Studies have shown long-term chronic physical health issues as a result of ACEs (e.g., cancer, chronic diseases, and premature mortality).⁴ In fact, the relationship between exposure to ACEs and poor health has been found among youth as young as 14.⁵ ACEs impact more than physical health; mental health consequences, such as suicide⁶. Children that grow up in family violence situations have been found to have multiple mental health issues such as anxiety and attention bias,⁷ as well as depression.⁸

Given the significant body of research identifying the serious consequences of ACEs,^{9,10,11} primary prevention and building protective factors should be of the highest priority. Healthy family relationships and safe and supportive home and community environments are not only critical for the wellbeing of children and youth but can be protective factors for many adverse experiences, such

* Other reports can be found on the [Alberta Primary Prevention Playbook](#) website.

child abuse, domestic and sexual violence.^{12, 13} Studies have found an association between domestic violence and child maltreatment with many shared risk and protective factors.^{14,15}

As a result, as adults, they may struggle with emotional regulation and rely on alcohol and other substances to cope with stress, which makes them more prone to resorting to violence, thereby perpetuating cycles of violence and the intergenerational transmission of violence.¹⁶ Additionally, evidence has demonstrated that women abused as children are four times more likely and men are twice as likely to be victimized as adults compared to those who were not abused as children.¹⁷

We are at a critical moment in our child and youth* work because the Covid-19 pandemic has increased all forms of child maltreatment, worsened the systemic conditions that create opportunities for child maltreatment, and resulted in poor socio-economic outcomes for many families, children, and youth.¹⁸ Parents' job losses, poverty, illness, and increased chronic stress; learning challenges because of past school closures; prolonged isolation from friends and relatives; and continued limited health and community services have not only impacted families' access to resources and opportunities but also children's and youth mental and physical health, learning, social skills, and future prospects.¹⁹ It is our common responsibility to stop this downward shift and ensure parents and caregivers are given easy access to the resources and supports they need. Furthermore, we need to create communities that can help children, youth, and their families grow stronger and permanently thrive.

This report calls on the GOA and the anti-violence sector to center healthy families and child and youth wellbeing in violence prevention efforts. Ensuring families have the resources and capacities to provide safe, stable, and nurturing environments for children and youth will contribute to reduced rates of child maltreatment and domestic and sexual violence in the province. In addition to families having resources and capacities, they also need support from people they trust.²⁰ Reducing the stigma of reaching out and building connections for support within a family's own community are needed.

Focusing our efforts on educating children, youth, parents, and community members about the root causes of violence and changing their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours related to inequality and exclusion will help raise a generation of Albertans who reject violence and promote gender and social equality. Developmentally, childhood and adolescence are crucial stages of forming gender roles and identities, sexual identities, and intimate relationship skills.²¹ Working with children, youth, and their families is therefore a true upstream primary prevention strategy worth investing in.

3.0 An overview of child maltreatment

Child maltreatment is a complex issue occurring across ages, stages, and settings.²² Although there are variations in the way it is defined, for the purposes of this paper, it is understood as "the harm, or risk of harm or harm, that a child or youth may experience while in the care of a person they trust or depend on including a parent, sibling, other relative, teacher, caregiver, or guardian. Harm may

* In this paper, children and youth comprise all age groups up to the age of 29.

occur through direct actions by the person (acts of commission) or through the person's neglect to provide a component of care necessary for healthy child growth and development (acts of omission)."²³

3.1 Drivers of child maltreatment

Drivers of child maltreatment are cultural and systemic factors that make the act thinkable and doable. They are:

- **Normalization of social inequality based on age.** Children and youth are portrayed and treated as not fully formed individuals whose lives should be fully controlled and directed by adults, and whose rights can be curtailed arbitrarily. An example of how this inequality shows up is the proverb, "Children should be seen and not heard."
- **Normalization of control, coercion, aggression, and violence against children and youth.** Harsh discipline against children and youth is seen as acceptable for teaching them valuable life lessons and cultivating their resistance to life's hardships. While less acceptable, the proverb, "Spare the rod, spoil the child" still informs many parents' approaches to discipline.
- **Gender inequality.** Children and youth of different genders and sexual orientations experience different forms and rates of maltreatment. For example, because of misogyny, girls, young women, and boys who challenge masculinity norms tend to experience higher rates of sexual violence.

These drivers of child maltreatment are compounded by certain negative outcomes of systemic inequalities that create or reinforce opportunities for perpetrators to use violence against children and youth. These compounding factors include the following:^{24,25,26}

- **Poverty.** A lack of economic resources deprives families of necessary material and social resources for taking care of children and increases stressors for family members and caregivers, making them more prone to using violence. Additionally, poverty may lead to children and youth being sex trafficked.
- **Inadequate housing.** Inaccessible, unaffordable, or unsafe housing creates opportunities for perpetrators to exploit cramped living conditions to commit violence and increases stressors for family members and caregivers, making them more prone to using violence.
- **Housing instability and families' social isolation.** Constant moving deprives families of social supports from neighbours and community members who can help them with basic caregiving tasks and keeping children safe.
- **Weak institutional child protection policies and practices or their inadequate enforcement.** Inadequate policy provisions expose children and youth to unmonitored contact with peers and adults, especially in exclusive and hierarchical organizations (e.g., religious camps away from parents or sports teams that travel to compete), creating opportunities for perpetrators.
- **Communities with high violence rates and criminal peer groups.** Exposure to community violence normalizes the use of violence by family members as well as children and youth and promotes violent practices against peers and outsiders.
- **Parents' or caregivers' experience of trauma and discrimination.** Unhealed trauma, social exclusion, and their consequences, including domestic violence, poor mental health, substance use, and low parenting skills, increase the risks of violence. Research has shown

that parents struggling with health issues or parenting are more likely to use violence, either because they cannot regulate their emotions or because they have no better strategies to control their children.²⁷

3.2 Forms of child maltreatment

Child maltreatment includes several forms, such as:

- **Exposure to family violence.** A situation where children/youth witness violence among family members (e.g., being present during incidents of intimate partner violence; being used by the perpetrator as a means to control and coerce their partner; or experiencing the consequences of violence, such as child welfare or law enforcement involvement). Children exposed to domestic violence may be affected by more than the physical violence perpetrated by one parent against the other. Children may be harmed by non-physical abusive behaviours inherent in coercive control-based domestic violence, including continual monitoring, isolation, verbal, emotional, psychological, and financial abuses.²⁸
- **Neglect.** A situation where a parent or caregiver fails to provide their child with basic age-appropriate care (e.g., food, clothing, protection from harm, and love), which results in serious harm to their child's development or endangers their child's life.^{29, 30}
- **Emotional abuse.** A situation when a parent, caregiver, or another individual inflicts serious mental or emotional harm on their child (e.g., by calling the child names or humiliating the child, refusing to comfort them when they are upset or frightened, setting unrealistic expectations, or exposing the child to a negative home environment that includes substance use).³¹
- **Physical abuse.** A situation when a parent, caregiver, or another individual intentionally inflicts an injury or trauma to the child's or youth's body (e.g., by hitting or pulling hair), which results in serious harm to the child.³²
- **Sexual abuse.** A situation when a parent, caregiver, or another individual exposes a child to inappropriate sexual contact, activity, or behaviour. Sexual abuse can involve non-touching activities such as inappropriate sexual conversations or exposure to pornography, including through technology, as well as sexual touching activities and sexual exploitation, which includes child luring for sexual purposes and forcing a child into pornography or sex work.³³

In addition to these forms of maltreatment, youth can experience and perpetrate adolescent or teen dating violence, a form of intimate partner violence in which a partner or former partner uses physical, sexual, or psychological aggression, or stalks, either in person or electronically.³⁴

3.3 Prevalence of child maltreatment

Child maltreatment is very common in Canada and Alberta. Data suggests that:

- 33% of Canadians have experienced some form of child maltreatment before age 15.³⁵
- In 2019, harsh parenting was cited as the most prevalent form of child maltreatment, experienced by 62% of Canadian children.³⁶

- 21% of Canadian children have been exposed to domestic violence.³⁷
- 22% of Canadian children have experienced physical abuse and 6% have experienced sexual abuse.³⁸
- In Alberta, 34% or one in three Albertans experience sexual abuse before age 18: 44% of girls and 24% of boys.³⁹
- Adolescent dating violence has affected over 33% of Canadians.⁴⁰
- In over 60% of physical abuse cases, the most serious instances were perpetrated by a parent or stepparent. On the other hand, over 60% of sexual abuse was perpetrated by someone outside the family.⁴¹
- Based on 2019 police-reported data, 57% of survivors of family violence against children were girls and young women.⁴²
- Most cases of child maltreatment are never officially reported: 93% of survivors have never revealed their victimization to either police, child protective services, or another agency.⁴³ This contributes to the widely accepted fact that data on documented maltreatment under-represents the scope of the problem.⁴⁴

Research has shown that addressing the negative long-term impacts of child maltreatment is not only much more costly than preventing it in the first place but also less effective.⁴⁵ Clearly, more needs to be done to prevent child maltreatment from ever occurring. The next section provides a list of recommendations that can help promote healthy families and the primary prevention of child maltreatment.

4.0 Recommendations to promote healthy families and the primary prevention of child maltreatment

Recommendations listed in this section reflect best or promising practices and existing gaps identified by Canadian policy actors. They are mostly directional rather than specific as we suggest high-level reforms rather than changes to precise Alberta laws and policies. While some recommendations are targeted to the GoA, many must involve both the provincial government and the anti-violence sector. For example, while the GoA will develop policies and laws, the anti-violence sector can leverage its expertise to advise the GoA on the most effective strategies for designing and implementing them.

We recommend the following strategies to help center children, youth, and families in primary prevention efforts:⁴⁶

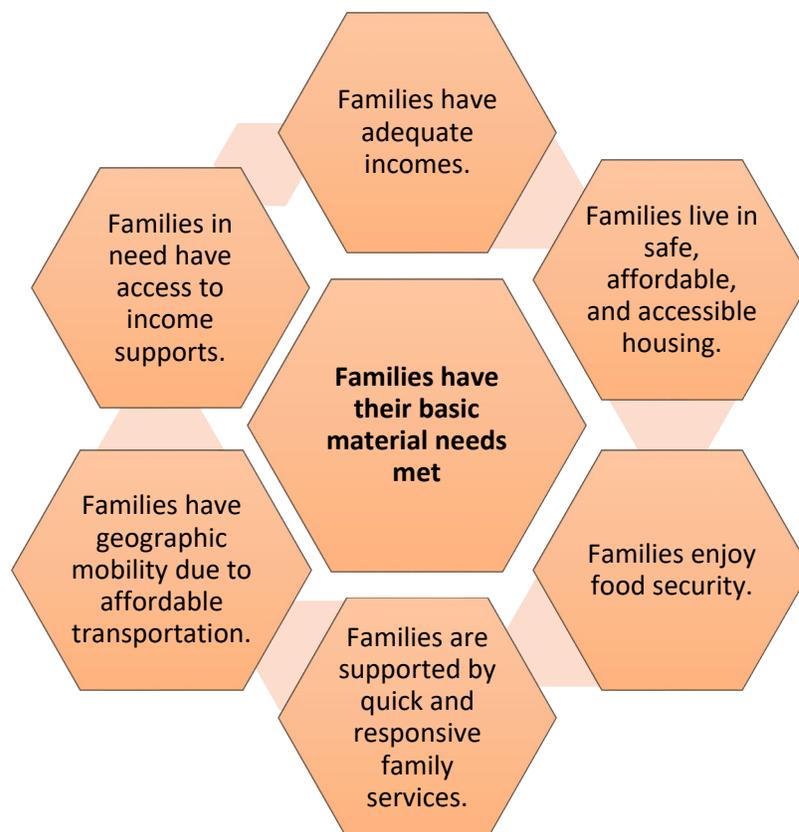
- Facilitate families' access to necessary material resources. This ensures that perpetrators cannot take advantage of poverty to abuse children and prevents parents from experiencing financial stress, which can lead to child maltreatment.
- Build parents' and caregivers' capacity to provide stable, supportive, and warm family environments based on positive parenting, healthy relationships, and protection from ACEs.
- Create safe communities, organizations, institutions, and spaces for children and youth, including in the systems of sorrow, such as child welfare and the legal system.
- Increase children's and youth's abilities to build and maintain healthy relationships, as well as provide access to comprehensive, gender-transformative sexuality education.

- Ensure good outcomes in all systems and institutions for all children and youth to increase resilience, empowerment, and social integration, thereby reducing opportunities for violence.

4.1 Strategy 1: Provide families with necessary material resources and relevant services

Research has shown that poverty is strongly correlated with all forms of child maltreatment because poor families face extreme stress, unemployment, unstable housing, poor community support, and live in communities with higher poverty, isolation, and violence rates.⁴⁷ We must ensure that families have their basic material needs met and, when necessary, can rely on quick, effective services for assistance. This will protect children and youth from risky environments and situations, such as poverty, hunger, or homelessness, which make it possible for others to perpetrate violence against them. Financially and economically secure families will also be less stressed, which will reduce the likelihood of child maltreatment in the home. Figure 1 below provides a visual summary of the outcomes we need to achieve under this strategy.

Figure 1: Supporting healthy families to meet their basic needs



Legislation needed:

- Introduce housing legislation to prevent youth from being unhoused. This includes a “duty to refer,” requiring all professionals working with youth to refer unhoused youth to relevant services, and a “duty to assist,” guaranteeing appropriate advice and hands-on supports to youth at risk of being unhoused to remain housed and those unhoused to be quickly rehoused.

Strategies and plans:

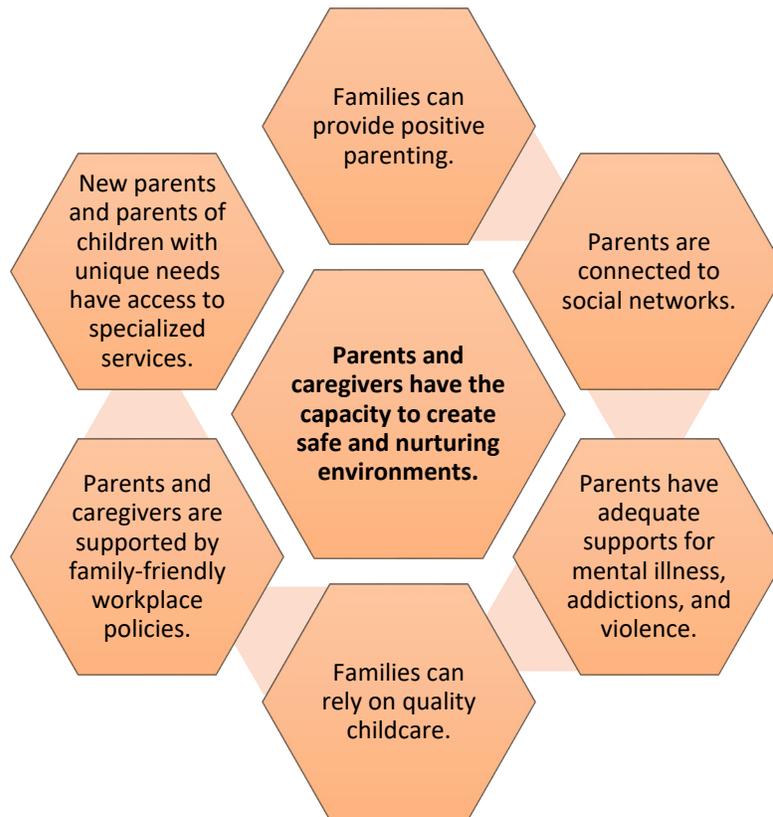
- Design and implement a provincial systems integration strategy and action plan to ensure that families can quickly and successfully navigate and transition among various systems, institutions, and services, aiming for a “one beneficiary, one case” policy for all services.
- Implement pay equity legislation to ensure all families have adequate income to provide for their children, especially families headed by single mothers, which are more prone to poverty.
- Design and implement a provincial poverty reduction strategy and plan to guarantee a livable basic income and livable income supports, annually re-costed based on the provincial cost of living, with special measures for families with children and youth.
- Design and implement a provincial food security strategy and plan, ensuring families with children have access to affordable and healthy nutrition that promotes proper development.

Funding:

- Invest in housing for families with children, especially co-housing and other stable housing options that allow families to avoid transience, offer children a sense of community, and help parents form support groups. Allocate funding for families with children with complex needs (e.g., 2SLGBTQIA+ youth with disabilities), and children and youth aging out of shelters and hospitals.
- Subsidize public transit and intercity transportation for families with children and fund free public transit for children and youth to allow families to access necessary services, participate in their communities, and interact with their social networks to counter isolation.

4.2 Strategy 2: Invest in parents and caregivers

Parents and caregivers who lack parenting and caregiving skills, struggle with communication and maintaining functional families, are socially isolated, struggle with poor health and addictions, or care for many children or children with unique needs, are more prone to child maltreatment.⁴⁸ Therefore, we must build parents’ and caregivers’ capacity to create safe and nurturing environments for their children, cultivate positive parenting practices, and provide adequate supervision and support to their children. In addition to building capacity, we must ensure that parents are healthy, socially connected to peers and communities, have necessary supports when facing challenging circumstances, and have an adequate work-life balance to be able to provide good care to their children. Figure 2 below provides a visual summary of the outcomes we need to achieve under this strategy.

Figure 2: Promoting healthy families by building capacity and supporting parents and caregivers**Legislation needed:**

- Adopt legislation offering workplace accommodations and flexible working arrangements by default to allow parents and caregivers to reconcile work and parenting responsibilities.
- Introduce legislation on offering mandatory parental leaves for fathers to involve them in children's lives from the start.

Strategies and plans:

- Design and implement a provincial parent and caregiver strategy and plan outlining adequately funded services and initiatives for parents' and caregivers' social, emotional, and physical needs (e.g., paid parental leave, caregiving leave, and flexible working arrangements).⁴⁹

Funding:

- Fund accessible and culturally appropriate community-based antenatal and postnatal services, as well as mental health initiatives, to support parents during the first year after their child's birth.
- Fund expanded home visitation initiatives for new parents to help develop respectful relationships based on a gender-transformative approach while building parenting skills.

- Fund universal access to parenting programs (e.g., the Triple P Positive Parenting Program) and other initiatives for parents, including online, to teach all parents about child development, basic caregiving skills, positive parenting, and appropriate discipline measures.
- Fund initiatives that teach parents to use gender-transformative parenting strategies (e.g., using non-gendered expectations and praise; steering children towards non-traditional activities, education, and careers; and raising boys as allies for girls and women).
- Fund initiatives for families more at-risk for child maltreatment, including new parents, adolescent parents, families with many children, parents of children with unique and complex needs, military and law enforcement families, and parents who have been involved in the legal system.
- Fund initiatives that build families' capacities for communication, conflict resolution, equitable division of labour in the home, and family cohesion. Allocate special funding for separated and divorced parents to help them co-parent in an amicable and healthy manner.
- Fund initiatives that increase families' social networks and access to social supports to reduce parents' stress and social isolation, and integrate them into a parenting community, thus improving parenting skills.
- Invest in trauma-informed harm-reduction-based initiatives for pregnant women and families with children to address mental health issues, addictions, and prevent children's exposure to family violence, aiming to keep families together where possible.
- Fund affordable, accessible, and culturally appropriate, quality, licensed childcare with flexible hours, especially in low-income neighbourhoods, and flexible after-school and summer programs, including in rural areas, to support parents and improve children's social skills and learning.

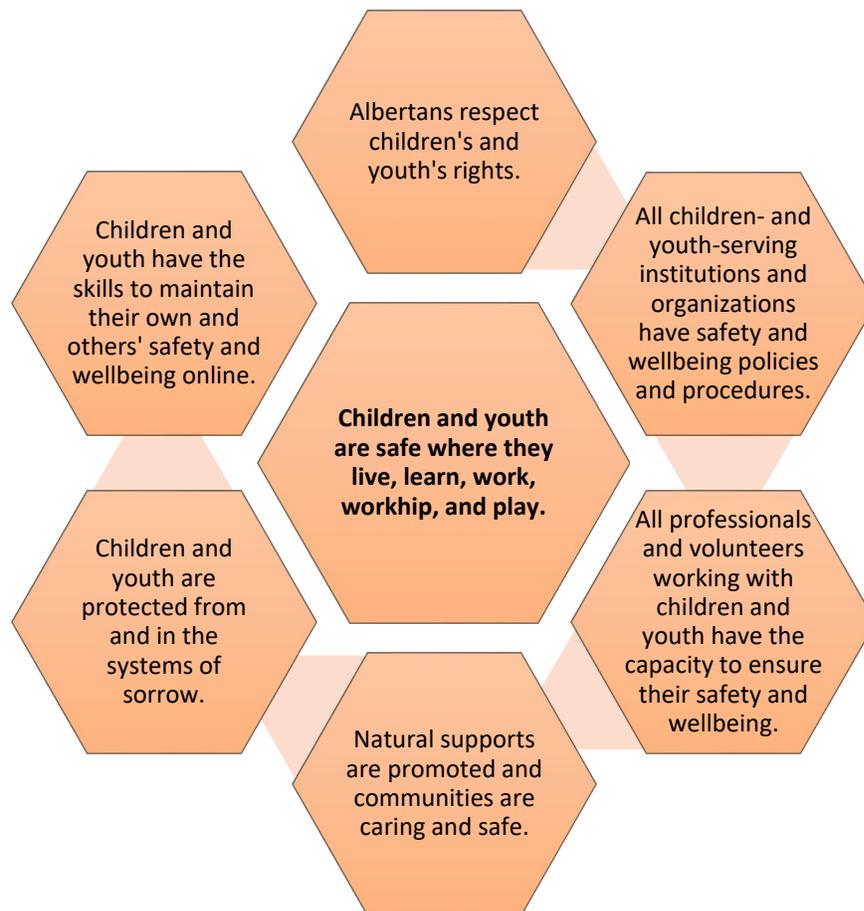
4.3 Strategy 3: Create safe environments for children and youth

Risk factors of child maltreatment include tolerance of violence and inequitable, negative attitudes towards children.⁵⁰ "Conversely, growing up in families with strong social support networks and being able to rely on caring adult role models and mentors outside the family are protective factors against child maltreatment"..⁵¹ These natural supports are informal and local in nature, giving children, youth, and their families a sense of identity and belonging, as well as helping them to meet physical and basic needs.⁵²

We must ensure that Albertans do not tolerate violence, including violence against children and youth, and that gender and social equality are normalized and practiced everywhere children and youth learn, work, worship, play, and socialize. We must pay particular attention to the fields where inequalities and aggression have long been normalized (e.g., traditional cultural-religious organizations, sports organizations, and digital spaces). Additionally, we must ensure that children are protected from sexually explicit material that normalizes inequalities and violence, as it is associated with greater likelihood of perpetrating sexual violence.⁵³ We must try to protect children and youth from the systems of sorrow, including child welfare and the legal system, where the likelihood of physical, psychological, and sexual victimization is high, particularly for Indigenous and equity-deserving groups.⁵⁴ For those involved in the systems of sorrow, we must maximize safety and wellbeing. Finally, we need to build protective factors, such as natural support networks and caring

communities, that help children, youth, and their family flourish. Figure 3 below provides a visual summary of the outcomes we need to achieve under this strategy.

Figure 3: Promoting the wellbeing of children and youth by creating safe communities, institutions, and systems



Legislation needed:

- Mandate all child, youth, and family-serving organizations and institutions to adopt a natural supports approach to services"
- Mandate all childcare facilities and educational institutions to implement protocols and procedures to ensure safety from sexual abuse and sexual violence, as well as build educators' capacity to identify children and youth at risk and ensure their safety.
- Mandate all children- and youth-serving organizations to adopt anti-oppression, anti-discrimination, and violence prevention policies and procedures and implement compulsory capacity building on anti-oppression, anti-discrimination, and violence prevention for all professionals and volunteers working with children and youth.
- Mandate all educational and children- and youth-serving organizations to implement digital and technological safety policies and procedures and offer high-quality, age- and activity-

appropriate capacity building on digital and critical media literacy to all children, youth, professionals, and volunteers working with them.

- Mandate provincial technology and digital service providers to implement increased controls to prevent children and youth from accessing violent and degrading sexually explicit material.
- Amend legislation to reduce access to guns, decrease the density of alcohol outlets, and reduce the harms of drugs in communities.
- Amend the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* to allow children in foster care to remain in care until at least 24 years old or until graduation from their first postsecondary institution.
- Amend the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* and related policies and practices to reduce overrepresentation of children and youth from equity-deserving groups in care and provide better services to them.
- Mandate all child welfare institutions to adopt anti-oppression policies and practices in strategic plans, performance monitoring and evaluation, and other organizational documents, and ensure racial, cultural, and religious matching of services and foster care, facilitating care by kin where possible.
- Mandate law enforcement and the judicial system to apply diversion strategies for youth (e.g., implement intersectional analysis when deciding on charges; keep young people out of detention centers whenever possible; and work with school and community partners to find solutions that avoid incarceration or criminal charges for youth.)
- Mandate law enforcement and the judicial system to destroy all historic carding data and regularly purge non-conviction records.

Strategies and plans:

- Design and implement a provincial code of conduct to eliminate harassment, abuse, and discrimination in sport.
- Develop and implement a comprehensive provincial diversion policy and plan to offer youth alternatives to incarceration, addressing the systemic inequalities that put youth from equity-deserving groups at risk of facing the legal system.
- Develop age-appropriate and culturally sensitive corrections services for youth based on their needs and preferences.

Funding:

- Fund community campaigns that promote children's rights and empowerment and mobilize entire communities for children's and youth's safety and wellbeing.
- Invest in natural supports training for child, youth, and family service providers and practitioners.
- Invest in child-friendly spaces in low-income communities, offering activities for children such as games, sports, drama, informal learning opportunities, and referrals to other needed forms of support, while simultaneously engaging parents and caregivers.
- Fund initiatives that promote positive digital citizenship, including engaged bystander interventions for technological inclusion and safety, and initiatives that promote positive masculinity in online and technology-facilitated interactions and spaces, protecting boys and men from groups that promote hate and violence.

- Fund child welfare initiatives that build capacity of foster parents and staff to meet children’s and youth’s needs, and ensure safe living conditions, including ongoing capacity building on gender equality, social inclusion, and anti-oppression.
- Fund capacity building initiatives for family violence legal network professionals (lawyers and judges) to help them understand coercive control and its impacts on children and how to work with families from equity-deserving groups.
- Fund targeted interventions for communities with high rates of youth violence (e.g., awareness campaigns, trainings, community forums, films screenings, and discussions with prominent community members).
- Offer free legal advice for youth.

4.4 Strategy 4: Support children and youth to build healthy relationships

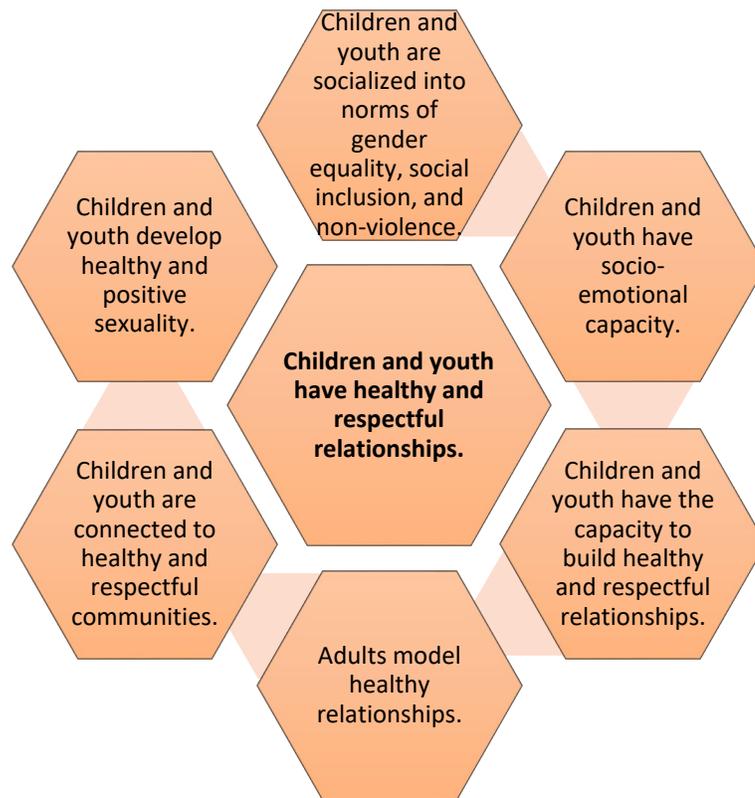
Children and youth who accept violence as normal and justified^{55,56} and practice traditional and rigid gender and social norms^{57,58} and roles^{59,60} are more likely to use violence against their peers. We also know that adhering to stereotypical masculine ideologies impacts the health and wellbeing of all genders and that initiatives that promote gender equality change gendered behaviours and attitudes, improving wellbeing and health outcomes.⁶¹ Therefore, we must socialize children and youth into gender and social equality norms, behaviours, and practices that promote empathy and harmony and reject violence in all relationships. We must also support initiatives using gender-transformative approaches, because research shows that gender-transformative approaches can help individuals to resist dominant gender ideologies and promote gender equality.⁶²

Since strong positive relationships can protect children and youth from violence, we must cultivate their social connections to responsible adults, positive peers, and healthy communities so that they develop a sense of belonging and feel integrated.⁶³ In this way, we will ensure that children and youth do not victimize their peers and will prevent sibling abuse, adolescent dating violence, and child sexual abuse. Figure 4 below provides a visual summary of the outcomes we need to achieve under this strategy.

Legislation needed:

- Mandate capacity building on equity, social inclusion, and violence prevention for all educators, and mandate educators to reduce the use of control, coercion, and violence in teaching and class management, to promote empathy, cooperation, and mutual support inside and outside the classroom.
- Mandate all schools (i.e., elementary, secondary, and post-secondary) and children- and youth-serving organizations to teach social-emotional learning, respectful relationships, and gender-transformative, comprehensive sexual health and sexual violence education curricula, and ensure quality curricula and teaching packages are designed for schools.
- Mandate all schools (i.e., elementary, secondary, and post-secondary) to develop explicit and stand-alone sexual harassment policies and promote healthy-relationship skills.

Figure 4: Promoting child and youth wellbeing by helping build healthy relationships



Strategies and plans:

- Design and implement mandatory curricula on gender equality, social inclusion, and violence prevention using gender-transformative approaches in all educational institutions, and mandate all educational institutions to adopt gender equality, social inclusion, and violence prevention policies.

Funding:

- Fund initiatives that build the capacity of adults, such as parents, caregivers, educators, and coaches, to model healthy relationships, discuss the link between gender and social inequalities and violence, and intervene in inappropriate or harmful behaviours by children and youth against their peers, in families, communities, or organizations.⁶⁴
- Fund initiatives that build and expand supportive family, peer, and community connections that reduce the risk of domestic and sexual violence for children and youth.
- Fund community-based initiatives that build children's and youth's capacity around healthy sexuality, including access to sexual and reproductive health services and free contraception.
- Invest in safe and confidential counselling for children and youth who are worried about their sexual thoughts or behaviours (e.g., sexual attraction to younger children or siblings) in all educational and children- and youth-serving organizations.
- Fund initiatives that involve students in sexual violence prevention on campuses (e.g., legally binding, standardized anti-sexual violence and anti-harassment policies; compulsory

education on consent and sexual violence for all staff and students; campus alcohol policies and social norms change on alcohol use; and targeted trainings and initiatives for members of fraternities and athletes).

4.5 Strategy 5: Improve children’s and youth’s outcomes in all systems and institutions

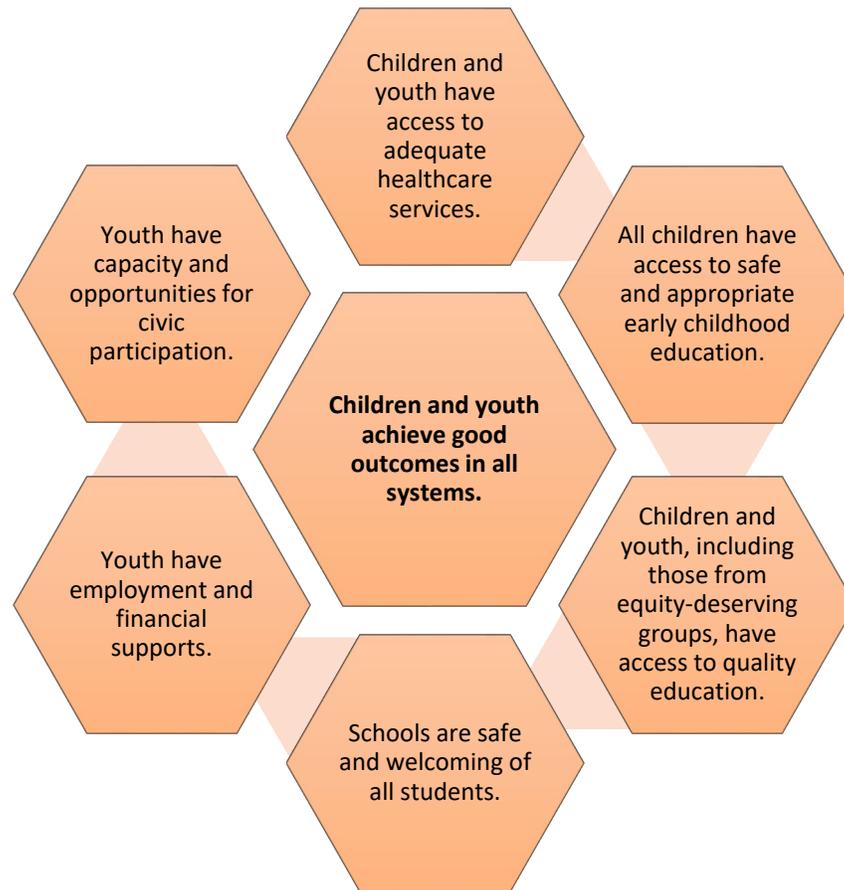
Research shows that children who suffer from poor health are more likely to experience maltreatment in their families.⁶⁵ Therefore, to prevent maltreatment, we must ensure that children and youth have access to responsive and age-appropriate physical and mental health care, including sexual and reproductive health services and addictions treatment for optimal health. Research also shows that children underperforming in schools are more likely to experience maltreatment in their families.⁶⁶ Moreover, children who are disengaged from school and communities are also more likely to both perpetrate violence against peers and be victimized by peers and adults.⁶⁷ Peer victimization may result from disengaged children and youth spending more time with peers who promote violence and inequity and adopting such behaviours or suffering their effects. Therefore, we must ensure that schools are welcoming and accepting of all children and youth and focus on promoting good educational outcomes for all students.

In addition to ensuring that institutions, like schools, are child- and youth-friendly, we also need to make sure that public and online spaces are free from violence and exploitation. Victimization by adults may also result from children’s and youth’s isolation and spending time in online communities or in public spaces, which adults may exploit. Additionally, youth in precarious employment or living in poverty may be exploited by others. To prevent youth from facing poverty or working in conditions that increase opportunities for exploitation and abuse, we must create safe well-paying jobs for youth. Finally, we must ensure that youth are engaged in their communities and society as a whole and can shape our province and country based on their needs through civic participation. Healthy and well-educated children, as well as well-employed and civically engaged youth, will have higher chances of safety from child maltreatment and overall success. Figure 5 below provides a visual summary of the outcomes we want to achieve under this strategy.

Legislation needed:

- Amend legislation to reduce the age at which youth can advocate for themselves in the healthcare system so that youth under 16 years can self-refer and access mental health and addictions services without parental consent.
- Adopt legislation on provincial universal early childhood education and childcare (ECEC) to guarantee a place in ECEC institutions for all children.
- Mandate all educational institutions to amend school suspension and expulsion policies to prevent jeopardizing students’ achievement and loss of school attachment, and mandate educational institutions to adopt a harm reduction approach to keep all children and youth in school.

Figure 5: Promoting child and youth wellbeing by building pathways to good outcomes



Strategies and plans:

- Design and implement a provincial health strategy and plan, focusing on physical, mental, and sexual and reproductive health of all children and youth, including those from equity-deserving groups, and integrating a harm reduction approach.
- Design and implement anti-oppressive curricula that are 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusive and affirming and adopt an explicit social equity lens while eliminating the current Eurocentric colonial bias.
- Adopt Universal Design for Learning, a collaborative approach to instruction and assessment that promotes participation for all learners, including those with diverse needs, and mandate all educational institutions to amend all education programs to be truly inclusive and integrated.
- Involve youth in curricula design to inform it by self-identified educational needs and preferences.
- Design and implement a Youth Job Guarantee policy that ensures young people under 25 years old have access to a good job, paid internship, or training position within four months of leaving formal education or becoming unemployed.
- Implement student debt forgiveness initiatives for low-income and equity-deserving students.
- Offer incentives and supports for employers to hire and retain youth at risk.

- Implement a strategy to engage youth in formal decision-making and institutional processes to make them more accessible and youth friendly.

Funding:

- Invest in the child and youth health sector, including low-barrier, community-based physical, mental, and sexual and reproductive health, and addictions services, especially in underserved communities.
- Fund initiatives to promote healthy body image, body confidence, and self-esteem among children and youth.
- Invest in specialized treatment programs for children and youth prone to harmful sexual behaviours that reflect modern norms around children's and youth's sexual exploration and self-expression; children's and youth's sexual agency and decision-making capacity; and the rights and needs of children and youth who exhibit harmful sexual behaviours.
- Fund trauma-informed treatment programs that focus on healing adults who are both victims and perpetrators of abuse and maltreatment.
- Invest in an integrated ECEC system based on holistic development and learning with a strong focus on play, social skills development, and other child-initiated activities for cognitive and non-cognitive development.
- Fund schools to reduce class sizes and teaching workloads, which will benefit all students, especially those with special needs.
- Fund better mental health services in schools delivered by highly qualified professionals trained in child- and youth-centred anti-oppression and allyship, cultural competency, empathy, and trauma-informed approaches.
- Recruit and retain educators and school staff who are male or from equity-deserving groups to make all students feel represented and so that they can identify with role models from their groups.
- Fund initiatives that close students' digital divide, especially in rural and remote communities, Indigenous communities, racialized neighbourhoods, and low-income households and neighbourhoods.
- Fund school hubs, after-school programs, and community-based groups in partnership with community agencies for students to access necessary services and supports and learn about available social services in the community.
- Fund scholarships, grants, internships, and summer jobs for women and students from equity-deserving groups in post-secondary education to increase their chances of gainful employment after graduation.
- Fund effective, evidence-based leadership training and mentorship programs and leadership opportunities for children and youth, especially girls and equity-deserving groups.
- Fund initiatives that support youth to connect to the systems of power and share their perspectives on the issues affecting them, ensuring that their opinions and perspectives are informing policies.
- Fund community hubs to provide co-located services, supports, education, religious, and spiritual initiatives for youth.

5.0 Reflections and considerations

Part of the process for developing these recommendations was to have IMPACT members (from the anti-violence sector) provide critical feedback through its APPF Foundation Document Review Working Group. Robust discussion highlighted several important reflections on what it means to center children, youth, and their families in our primary prevention efforts and implications for current systems of sorrow (e.g., child welfare).

Despite the sector's best efforts, they feel that prevention and early intervention remain stubbornly siloed. In addition, the child welfare system is perceived to be currently disengaged from community engagement with the sector. This coincides with more and more children, youth, and families being in crisis and lacking the support they need.

IMPACT members were clear: in their minds, primary prevention efforts should focus on children and youth that experience or are exposed to maltreatment, as this is the way to stop and disrupt intergenerational violence. Suggestions to advance prevention include amending the *Child and Youth Enhancement Act* and treating the effects of multigenerational trauma on parents. It was acknowledged that current parenting programs tend to focus on building parent knowledge and skills, as opposed to acknowledging, addressing, and healing the trauma that many parents have experienced in their own lives.

Finally, more training on domestic and sexual violence is needed for child welfare staff, and educational requirements need to be enhanced if we are to ensure the best and brightest are working with children, youth, and their families. The current requirement of a diploma (lowered from a degree) has resulted in staff that may not be fully equipped to deal with the complexity and difficulty they are presented with in the current child welfare system.

6.0 Conclusion

Healthy families and safe and supportive environments are critical to children's and youth's wellbeing. By working upstream to prevent child maltreatment, we will not only ensure children, youth, and their families experience positive outcomes, but create a safer and healthier province for all Albertans. The GoA and anti-violence sector can focus on promoting children's and youth's rights; supporting their families; creating safe environments where children and youth live, learn, work, worship, and play; and improving their outcomes in all systems to increase their resilience, improve health, ensure good educational achievement and decent employment, and provide opportunities to shape policies that affect them. Strong, empowered, and healthy children and youth will enact the norms of non-violence and equity, contributing to a better future for all Albertans.

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