
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The Health of Toronto's Young Children is a series of reports on the health of Toronto children from birth to age six. The series provides the most current available information on the health of Toronto's young children. These reports provide a unique representation of the health of Toronto's youngest residents to help identify challenges, set priorities and monitor success in improving young children's health.

This first report sets the stage for the rest of the series. It presents a model of child health which illustrates a broad positive perspective of children's health. This model provides a framework for identifying key issues of significance to young children's health and health indicators presented in subsequent reports. The report also provides a socio-demographic portrait of Toronto's young children and their families and presents data on parents' perceptions of their young children's health.

The model of child health identifies that health has two dimensions – development and functioning. Healthy development involves acquiring the range of skills and abilities that can be attained through physiological maturation. Healthy functioning involves using these developed skills and abilities, as well as having and using all the other resources needed to cope, adapt, realize aspirations, and satisfy everyday needs successfully. Healthy development and healthy functioning in early childhood contribute to healthier school age and adolescent development and functioning, thereby increasing the chances of a healthy adult life.

This first report highlights the following key points:

- In 2001, just over 205,000 children aged six years and younger lived in Toronto.
- There are some areas of Toronto with much higher concentrations of young children than others.
- Several trends account for the decreasing numbers of young children in the city. These include the trends towards having fewer children or no children and a decrease in the number of women of childbearing age.
- Toronto's ethno-racial diversity is most evident among families with young children. In 2001, close to two-thirds (62%) of Toronto parents with children from birth to age six were born outside of Canada.
- Toronto's children are growing up in a variety of family structures. Far more children now experience major family change in their early years, such as parental separation or living in blended families.
- The average size of Toronto's families has decreased. The likelihood of having brothers or sisters varies significantly among Toronto's ethnocultural groups.

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- The average age of mothers in Toronto is rising. In 2000, more babies were born to women 40 years of age or over than to women under 20.
 - Nearly three in 10 or 51,000 Toronto children from birth to age five lived in low income households in 2000. The proportion of young children living in low income households is even higher for certain subgroups of children.
 - There is growing income inequality among Toronto's poorest and wealthiest neighbourhoods.
 - The vast majority (87%) of Toronto parents with children from birth to age six reported their children to be in 'very good' or 'excellent' health. However, parents living in low income households and parents not born in Canada were more likely to report that their children were in poorer health.
 - Diversity among Toronto's families with young children is a key theme emerging from this report. This plays a critical role in the experiences, development and functioning of young children. Ultimately, this diversity may result in differences in health outcomes.

Other reports in the series explore particular aspects of health status in Toronto's young children and the impact of diverse conditions on child health outcomes. Some of the key issues discussed include birthweight, breastfeeding, parenting practices, family functioning, safety, physical activity, injury, communicable diseases, and oral health.