



**STAFF REPORT  
ACTION REQUIRED**

**The Health of Toronto's Young Children Volume 3 – The Growing Child**

<b>Date:</b>	October 29, 2007
<b>To:</b>	Board of Health
<b>From:</b>	Medical Officer of Health
<b>Wards:</b>	All
<b>Reference Number:</b>	

**SUMMARY**

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*The Health of Toronto's Young Children* is a series of reports on the health of Toronto children from birth to age 6 years. The first two reports in the series were presented to the Board of Health in February, 2006. The third report in the series, *The Health of Toronto's Young Children: The Growing Child*, focuses on the health of Toronto's children age 1 to 6 years. The report describes the City's population of young children, selected aspects of their health, and the ways in which their families and their neighbourhoods contribute, positively or negatively to their health.

Although the majority of Toronto's young children are developing normally, ready for learning at school entry, and free from injuries, diseases, and conditions which affect their health, there is reason to be concerned about the health of some of Toronto's young children. There are significant disparities in young children's health, specifically in readiness to learn at school entry, early childhood tooth decay, and injury. Toronto data show these disparities are related to neighbourhood and family income, family structure, and country of birth. Over 50,000 children age 1 to 6 years live in low income families. The report highlights gaps in existing data which, if addressed, could assist in painting a more complete picture of child health in Toronto.

This report is intended to stimulate discussion and facilitate action among Toronto Public Health staff, City staff in other divisions, partner agencies and other levels of government regarding policy levers and program initiatives to enhance health outcomes for Toronto's children and decrease health disparities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. the Chair of the Board of Health request to meet with Premier McGuinty to discuss the impact of poverty on children's health and the need for a provincial child poverty reduction strategy with identified targets and timelines.
2. the Chair of the Board of Health write to Prime Minister Harper to outline the negative health impacts of child poverty and request that the federal government set targets and implement strategies to reduce child poverty.
3. the Board of Health endorse Canada's Child and Youth Health Charter which identifies key actions that must be taken in order to protect and promote child health and communicate its endorsement to Prime Minister Harper.
4. the Medical Officer of Health collaborate with key stakeholders to further investigate disparities in young children's health outcomes across Toronto, enhance monitoring and reporting of disparities, and further develop strategies to address the disparities.
5. the Medical Officer of Health collaborate with key stakeholders at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels to explore the feasibility of expanding and enhancing current databases and surveys to address data gaps in young children's health outcomes, including those related to contributing factors and disparities in outcomes.
6. the Board of Health forward this report to the Community Development and Recreation Committee for information.
7. the Board of Health forward this report to the Toronto District School Board, Toronto Catholic District School Board, Conseil Scholaire de district du centre Sud-Ouest, Conseil Scholaire de district catholique du centre Sud, Centre for Research on Inner City Health, the Centre for Urban Health Initiatives, Association of Local Public Health Agencies, Ontario Public Health Association, Ontario Medical Association, Registered Nurses Association of Ontario, Ontario Association of Family Physicians, Ontario Association of Pediatricians, Ontario Association of Infant and Child Development, Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, Ontario Ministries of Health and Long-Term Care, Health Promotion, and Children and Youth Services, Canadian Public Health Association, Public Health Agency of Canada, Council for Early Child, Development, Canadian Mothercraft, Canadian Institute of Child Health, Canadian Medical Association, Canadian Pediatric Society, College of Family Physicians of Canada, Campaign 2000, Toronto Children's Services, Toronto Best Start Network, Children's Services Advisory Committee.

## **Financial Impact**

There are no financial implications stemming directly from this report.

## **DECISION HISTORY**

*The Health of Toronto's Young Children* is a series of reports on the health of Toronto children from birth to age 6 years. The first two reports in the series were presented to the Board of Health in February, 2006.

The first report, entitled *The Health of Toronto's Young Children: Setting the Context* ([http://www.toronto.ca/health/hsi/hsi\\_young\\_children\\_vol\\_1.htm](http://www.toronto.ca/health/hsi/hsi_young_children_vol_1.htm)), presented a socio-demographic portrait of Toronto's young children and their families. It also presented a model of child health which provides a framework for identifying key issues and indicators of young children's health. The model identified that health has two dimensions, development and functioning. 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.

The second report in the series, entitled *The Health of Toronto's Young Children: The First Year of Life in Toronto* ([http://www.toronto.ca/health/hsi/hsi\\_young\\_children\\_vol\\_2.htm](http://www.toronto.ca/health/hsi/hsi_young_children_vol_2.htm)), presented information on the health of Toronto infants from birth to one year of age. It concluded that the majority of Toronto babies are born healthy and reach their first birthday free from major diseases, disability and injury. It identified concern, however, regarding the prevalence of low birth weight, congenital anomalies and insufficient duration of breastfeeding. The report also identified that, although the number of injuries, poisonings, congenital infections, and vaccine preventable diseases are relatively small, these issues require continued attention as many are preventable. Finally, the report recognized that the picture of health for Toronto infants was incomplete. Subsequently, in collaboration with its partners, Toronto Public Health (TPH) has worked to address some of the data gaps that were identified (e.g., pre-term births) in the report.

The third report in the series, *The Health of Toronto's Young Children: The Growing Child*, focuses on the health of Toronto's children age 1 to 6 years.

## **ISSUE BACKGROUND**

The *Mandatory Health Programs and Services Guidelines* (1997) requires public health units in Ontario "to ensure that programs and services are based on community health status information." Boards of Health are required to assess community health status and report on key public health issues.

In this context, *The Health of Toronto's Young Children: The Growing Child* provides information about:

- characteristics of children age 1 to 6 years and where they live in the city;
- neighbourhood and family factors that contribute positively or negatively to children's health in Toronto;
- a range of child health outcomes in Toronto; and
- the immediate and long term consequences of these health outcomes.

## COMMENTS

Highlights from the report *The Health of Toronto's Young Children: The Growing Child* include:

- Nearly 160,000 children age 1 to 6 years live in Toronto, representing close to 20% of all Ontario children in this age group.
- Neighbourhood/community (e.g., income level, cohesion, safety, access to safe play areas, volume of traffic), family (e.g., income, structure, housing, family functioning, parenting practices, maternal depression, access to social support) and child related (e.g., age, gender, temperament) factors interact in complex ways to influence children's current and future health.
- Over 30% of Toronto's families with children age 1 to 6 years are low income families, representing over 50,000 children. Child poverty rates are disproportionately high among racial minority and lone parent families.
- Children living in poverty are concentrated in certain neighbourhoods throughout Toronto. In some areas of the City up to 50 % of children age 1 to 6 years live in deep poverty.
- Low income families with young children are experiencing challenges with acquiring stable and affordable housing, as well as with providing their children with sufficient nutritious food.
- Levels of positive parent child interaction, social support, and neighbourhood cohesion reported by Toronto parents of children age 1 to 6 years are high, but on average lower than those reported by parents in the rest of Ontario.
- The majority of Toronto's young children up to 47 months of age, display normal or advanced motor, social and cognitive development and are ready to learn at school entry. However, some Toronto children are experiencing developmental challenges, including not being ready to learn at school entry. There is a three fold difference in children's readiness to learn across the city. In some geographic areas, approximately 40% of children are vulnerable in one or more domains of learning readiness.

- The majority of Toronto's children age 1 to 6 years are free from conditions and diseases such as overweight and obesity, tooth decay, including Early Childhood Tooth Decay (ECTD), communicable diseases, and asthma. Young children not born in Canada have a 3.5 times higher risk of early childhood tooth decay, than young children born in Canada. However, young children not born in Canada were also more likely to have visited a dentist at least once, providing the opportunity for presentation and diagnosis.
- In some areas of the city the rate of injury related hospital emergency room visits for children age 1 to 6 years is approximately 2.5 times greater than for areas with the lowest rates.
- There are significant disparities in some aspects of young children's health in Toronto, specifically readiness to learn at school entry, ECTD, and injury. Toronto data show that these disparities are related to factors such as neighbourhood and family income, family structure, and country of birth.
- There are limited Toronto specific data on mental health outcomes, child abuse and neglect, disability, nutrition and physical activity. Data gaps present challenges in monitoring the health status of Toronto's young children and planning relevant programs. These gaps need to be addressed in order to better measure and improve the health of Toronto's young children.
- There is a need to continue to monitor the health of young children in Toronto and to obtain a more complete picture of their health.

The information presented in this report is intended to inform Toronto Public Health staff, Board of Health members, City staff in other divisions, community and partner agencies and other key stakeholders at the local, provincial and federal levels about the current health status of Toronto's young children. It can be used to inform discussion regarding policy levers and program initiatives to enhance health outcomes for Toronto's children and decrease disparities in health outcomes.

There is an urgent need to reduce disparities in health outcomes, both for disadvantaged children whose lifelong opportunities are affected, and for Canadian society, which has set expectations that its youngest citizens grow up healthy, achieve academic success and economic independence, and engage constructively with others as adult citizens. Family income is a key contributor to disparities in child health outcomes. Living in a low income family during early childhood is associated with academic problems, functional health problems, overweight and obesity, asthma, and both intentional and unintentional injury. In addition to its impact on health outcomes, living in low income families limits children's ability to participate fully in recreational, school and community activities. Low income families, on average, are more likely to experience high levels of chronic stress, which can, in turn, have a negative impact on their young children.

Toronto Public Health will continue to work with partner organizations and networks at the city-wide and neighbourhood level to support the use of health-related data in planning children's programs and services and advocacy regarding child health issues.

In July 2005, the Board of Health approved TPH's strategic plan which emphasized the importance of addressing health inequalities and promoting the health of children, youth, and families. TPH addresses disparities in child health outcomes by providing a range of public health programs and services, health status assessments, research, and advocacy for healthy public policies. A number of reports have been presented to the Board of Health on health inequalities in Toronto, some specifically directed to families with young children.

In October, the Canadian Medical Association, the Canadian Paediatric Society, and the College of Family Physicians of Canada delivered the Child and Youth Health Charter to government leaders urging them to take action on a situation they say is growing increasingly alarming. The Charter provides a framework for improving child health and identifies 16 specific areas of action. It represents the collective consensus of a broad spectrum of Canadian organizations and associations concerned with child and youth health (see attachment 1).

Every child in Toronto deserves the opportunity for healthy growth and development and long term health. All children must receive adequate nutrition and housing, and be cared for in nurturing and stimulating environments. Supporting families and creating safe and cohesive communities in an effort to provide the best possible environment for children are critical investments. Children are the next generation of adults. Healthy young children are vital to the current and future health of Toronto.

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## **ATTACHMENTS**

Canadian Medical Association, Canadian Pediatric Society & the College of Family Physicians of Canada (2007). *Child and Youth Health: Our Challenge*. Canada's Child and Youth Health Charter. Ottawa, Ontario: Authors.

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1. Toronto Public Health (2006). *The Health of Toronto's Young Children: Volume 1 - Setting the Context*. Toronto, Ontario: Author. Available from: [http://www.toronto.ca/health/hsi/hsi\\_young\\_children\\_vol\\_1.htm](http://www.toronto.ca/health/hsi/hsi_young_children_vol_1.htm)
2. Toronto Public Health (2006). *The Health of Toronto's Young Children: Volume 2 - The First Year of Life in Toronto*. Toronto, Ontario: Author. Available from: [http://www.toronto.ca/health/hsi/hsi\\_young\\_children\\_vol\\_2.htm](http://www.toronto.ca/health/hsi/hsi_young_children_vol_2.htm)
3. Toronto Public Health (2007). *The Health of Toronto's Young Children: Volume 3 – The Growing Child*. Toronto, Ontario: Author.
4. Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. (1997). *Mandatory Health Programs and Services Guidelines*. Toronto, Ontario: Author.