

# Weaving a new blanket together: Lessons on compassionate leadership and engagement from a virtual regional summit on early childhood wellness in northern communities of British Columbia, Canada <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## Abstract

### Background

Early childhood is a critical period of development for infants, young children, and their families. An array of services, programs, and interventions exist to support families during this life stage, often delivered by a diverse range of professionals. Overlap in early years services exists between healthcare, social care, childcare, education, and not-for-profit organizations. Such diversity in services has the potential to add a rich experience to early childhood development, or without collaboration, widen service gaps, risking providers' ability to meet the needs of families.

### Methods

In northern British Columbia (BC), Canada, a group of individuals came together to approach building relationships and engagement across sectors in early years services using compassionate systems leadership (CSL). A virtual summit was hosted with early childhood service providers including peer support workers and parents/caregivers using a hybrid model of pre-recorded asynchronous sessions combined with a live workshop. The purpose of the event was to find common ground, celebrate local success, and build understanding of how to work collaboratively across the region to identify and address early years priorities.

### Results

The event was successful in engaging 121 providers across early years services from a broad geographic region. Applying CSL principles for engagement allowed the team to examine how all partners could address silos in early years services across northern BC. Using a reflexive thematic approach, four key themes were identified at the Summit: (1) early years services are a patchwork but there are dreams of weaving a new blanket together, (2) an ideal model of service is family-centred and inclusive, (3) all sectors are needed at the table, and (4) compassion is the thread that weaves this work together.

### Conclusions

The application of CSL principles can be used to guide engagement and develop supportive spaces for open conversation about creating systems change. In facilitating a space that allowed for vulnerability and relational ways of engaging across sectors we discovered commitment and a willingness for those present to consider new ideas and partnerships that would allow for greater integration of early years services in northern BC.

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### Plain English summary

For children aged zero to eight years old there are a wide range of community services geared to supporting health, pre-school education, and parenting skills and knowledge. Getting the right services at the right time in early childhood can make a major difference to a child's health and development and influence their physical and mental health outcomes into adulthood. We know there are individuals from a wide range of sectors working with families during early childhood. Sectors include the health system, education, government ministries, childcare centres, and community programs. Despite working with many of the same families, each sector's services are often seen as separate which means that the opportunity to develop shared, family centred goals can be missed. In northern British Columbia, Canada we hosted a virtual event with 121 people who work in roles that support children between the ages of zero to eight and their families living in smaller, more rural communities. Using a blend of pre-recorded videos and a live online workshop we drew together a community of providers to learn about the work they are doing. Specifically, we were interested in exploring ways in which we can improve working

together to support positive early childhood experiences for children and their families.

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