

Premiers must address child poverty: Well-being of children is key to our future. [CA] ^[1]

OPINION

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As Canada's premiers meet later this week at their annual gathering, important issues related to health-care funding are likely to dominate the agenda.

But given a report to be released today by the National Council of Welfare that shows that almost 1 in 5 children in Canada remains poor, the premiers would be wise to broaden their discussions about the country's health.

We should not have to remind our provincial and territorial leaders that the well-being of children and the health of Canadians need to be approached as one and the same issue.

With more than 1.3 million children living in poverty, we hope that Canada's premiers will keep the well-being of our younger generations at the top of their minds during their discussions.

Canadians know that there is a fundamental link between a healthy start in life and the long-term impact on the well-being of children.

We also know that low income children are more likely to encounter more hurdles to healthy development and to experience a host of negative situations that affect their health.

Research by the Canadian Council on Social Development, the Canadian Institute of Child Health, and others, shows that low income children are more likely to have lower birth weights, resulting in adverse effects, such as chronic illness and disability. Poorer children are more likely to have lower functioning levels of vision, speech, mobility, dexterity, cognition, emotion and pain.

Children living in poverty are also less likely to live in safe neighbourhoods and are at a disproportionately higher risk of exposure to environmental contaminants.

Investments in preventative measures and health promotion should be an integral part of our health system. We also need to do a much better job of protecting the environments where children and families live.

A collective commitment to the health and well-being of children and families requires a shift in public policy priorities.

The recent focus on tax cuts has not been successful in substantially reducing child and family poverty. Instead, it has contributed to the severe reduction of social and economic supports to families over the past decade.

For instance, there is regulated child care to serve only 1 in 10 children under 12 years old in Canada. And with a freeze on social housing across Canada, affordable units are increasingly out of reach for many families.

In the midst of prosperity, low income families with children are living, on average, more than \$9,000 below the poverty line.

To begin to turn around the appalling situation facing too many children in Canada, our premiers must demonstrate their willingness to collaborate and significantly increase investments in a comprehensive plan for children that promotes a healthy, inclusive society.

This week's premiers' conference is a good place to start.

The National Children's Agenda emerged in 1999 as a positive first step in federal-provincial collaboration.

But the results of this once-promising partnership have had only a limited impact in meeting the needs of families and children.

We know what it takes to make a difference. Those nations that have done a much better job in reducing child and family poverty than Canada have done it through a healthy stock of good jobs, generous income security and unemployment benefits, national affordable housing programs as well as widely accessible early childhood education and care programs.

We can also do much better.

Let's start by reducing our levels of child poverty by 50 per cent over the next five years by raising the annual child benefits from the current \$2,400 to a maximum of \$4,200 per child available to all low, modest and middle-income families.

Let's introduce new investments and policy mechanisms for quality early childhood education and care services that are universal, inclusive and accessible in all communities.

Let the provinces join in a political and financial partnership with the federal government with the goal of increasing the number of new affordable units produced to 20,000 annually and the number of refurbished units to 10,000 per year. And let's make sure that parents have access to jobs with good wages to support their families.

The next steps of a National Children's Agenda can be taken if governments at all levels choose to work together with the interests of children as a guiding principle for action. Let's put children on the premiers' agenda.

Pedro Barata is the Ontario co-ordinator of Campaign 2000, a cross-Canada coalition dedicated to ending child and family poverty. Marcel Lauzière is president of the Canadian Council on Social Development.

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