

# ***Navigating Adverse Challenges: The Childhood Experience***

**Understanding the Unseen Struggles and Unheard Traumas of Children and Families Facing Adversities**

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Institute for Community Prosperity | April 2024***



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## ***Land Acknowledgement***

In the spirit of respect and reconciliation, with truth and gratitude, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge that this scholarly output was written on Treaty 7 territory in Southern Alberta, precisely where the Elbow River and Bow River meet. I recognize that Mohkinstsis is the Blackfoot name of the city that we currently identify as Calgary. It is the traditional land of the Blackfoot Confederacy, including the Siksika, the Kainai, and the Piikani. This land is also home to the Tsuut'ina, the Îyarhe Nakoda Nations, and the Metis Nation Region 6 of Alberta. I am grateful for the Elders and Keepers who are still here with us and those generations who have gone before. In my journey of reconciliation, I stand in solidarity with the Indigenous peoples of this land. I humbly recognize and honor my role as a settler on this land where I play, learn, and work. Finally, I would like to acknowledge all the nations, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, with whom I share and honor this land.

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# ***Introduction***

*“Among 38 OECD countries, Canada ranks 30th for child well-being, according to UNICEF. On the Global Kids Rights Index, Canada ranks 81st. Numbers like these are entirely unacceptable in a nation overflowing with prosperity and promise. We cannot—we must not—leave our children behind!”*

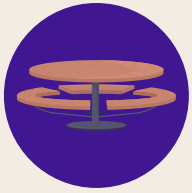
*- Children First Canada, Raising Canada 2023*

We look at our surroundings and assume that we are back to pre-pandemic normalcy, with the liberty to roam around mask-free, travel without extreme restrictions, and engage in social interactions in close proximity. Beneath the facade, the COVID-19 pandemic has left hidden scars that silently impact our emotional, physical, and mental well-being. In the wake of the pandemic, it created new challenges and exacerbated social and economic inequalities. Additionally, other societal issues predating the COVID-19 outbreak persist. Recognizing that our environment continues to adapt and systems are constantly changing, how can we empower equity-deserving communities to overcome challenges? More importantly, how can we, as a collective community, address and support children who have been overlooked for years, helping them heal from their unheard traumas and silent battles?

The burden following the COVID-19 pandemic and other community-wide disruptions are extensive, with equity-deserving communities having greater perceived impacts (Russell et al., 2020). This threatens the parents, guardians and care providers' to establish supportive engagement and foster a healthy environment for children. However, it is essential to note that this report is not to blame parents and guardians. Rather, it recognizes that children and their parents or guardians are both victims of economic and social disparities imposed by the broader community.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for collaboration among various sectors to develop new strategies for strengthening community-based and trauma-informed prevention programs. In the local context, Trellis Society is an important community-serving organization rooted in collaboration, and is the partner organization for this research. Inspired by the vision of providing one big open door to more services, the Trellis Society established multiple hubs offering wrap-around programs tailored for children, youth and families facing adversities. From 2022 to 2023, the organization served 1,061 families through specialized family serving programs to exit poverty, navigate out crises and move from isolation into community (Trellis Society, 2024; C. Aderson, personal communication, 2024).

Additionally, looking at the wrap-around support and programs available for children and families facing adversities through a systems lens, contributing factors such as poverty, stigma, scarcity of frontline workers, and lack of fundings from federal and provincial governments, coupled with the constant interaction of organizations, families, and communities, demonstrate that the system is extremely complex. Due to the research findings and current system events, this paper aims to navigate the childhood experiences and systemic barriers that equity-deserving families face considering recommendations to work toward our collective vision of providing all children the resources to flourish and have the best childhood experience.

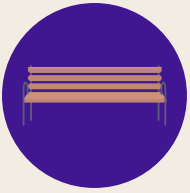


# *Methodology*

The How Might We question I explored is: **How might we leverage the role of government to ensure wrap around supports and programs are available to children (5 - 12 years of age) and families facing adversities?** Such topics focus on exploring community-based programs, barriers families face in accessing these programs, and other potential avenues for improvements and opportunities. Throughout my research, I examined an extensive array of academic and non-academic resources, considering their focus and publication date. Specifically, I delved into peer-reviewed articles from online platforms such as Google Scholar, PsycINFO, and the MRU online library. While reviewing multiple peer-reviewed articles, I filtered them based on their respective focuses and selected those published within the past 10 - 15 years.

On the non-academic side, I sourced information from reports in various databases, including the Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, and Government of Alberta. I also reviewed data and information from non-profit organizations' websites such as Children First Canada, Trellis Society, and Representative of Children and Youth, among others. Over the past six months, I have engaged with multiple scholars and community practitioners, gaining insights into social issues I am exploring from their experiences and perspectives as service providers. The research and community conversations are essential for raising my awareness and fostering advocacy toward a sustainable future for our community.





# ***Ecological System***

## ***The Interplay Between a Child and Their Environment***

Prior to delving into the barriers, it is crucial to navigate the relationships between a child and their environment that contribute to children's unique characteristics. The Ecological System Theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, serves as a conceptual framework for analyzing and understanding human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Its overarching purpose is to comprehend that a child's development is influenced by the interconnections of the systems and relationships within their respective environment, which are organized into five environmental systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Pushkarenko et al., 2023, p. 3). Bronfenbrenner's theoretical models suggest that both people and the environment in a child's immediate and distant surroundings can have a either positive or negative impact on development. This model helps researchers comprehend the interdisciplinary nature of health and why children have varying behaviors and characteristics. Recognizing the distinctiveness of each child's Ecological System, emphasizes that there is no uniform approach when it comes to providing help and services for children and youth.

### ***Note***

*Bronfenbrenner (1977) proposes that the microsystem is composed of the individual's direct contact or closest systems including family and peers; the mesosystem is the interaction between the closest systems including the child's parents and care providers; the exosystem refers to the child's external environment that indirectly impact the child including parent's workplaces; the macrosystem is composed of the structural and cultural contexts that the child is part of; lastly, the chronosystem that refers to constantly changing environments and systems (Neiterman et al., 2021, p. 2). Figure 1 is my attempt to workshop Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model for this report. However, it is important to recognize that this particular model has its limitations and may not represent the experiences and relationships of many children living in Canada.*

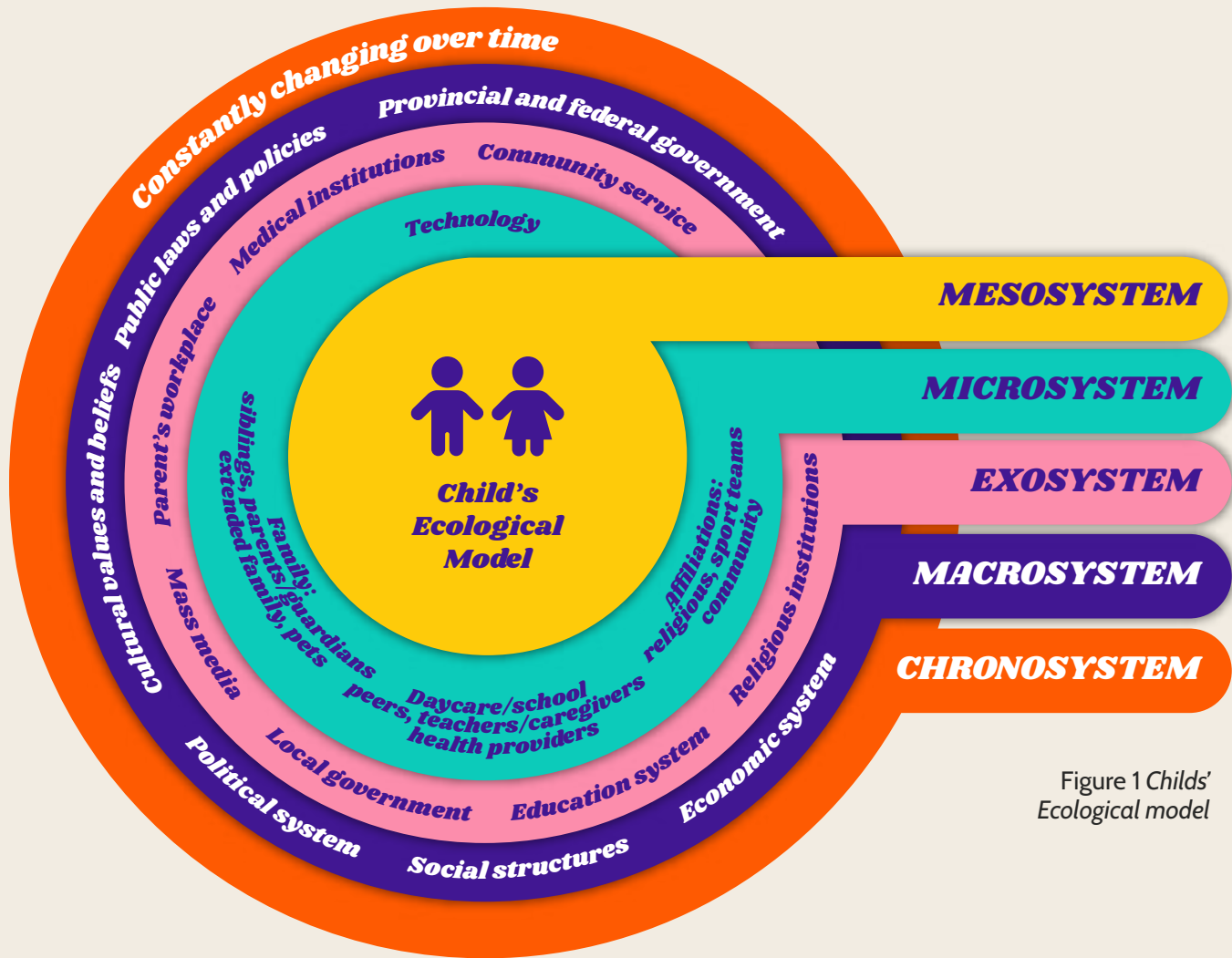


Figure 1 Child's Ecological model



# ***Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)***

My research question addresses wrap-around support for children ages five to twelve, also known as middle childhood. During this developmental phase, “children shift from an inward view of the world to an outward view”(Mah & Ford-Jones, 2012). Thus, they become aware of their feelings and other people’s feelings, gaining cognitive and emotional skills, along with communication abilities, empathy, and moral values important for adulthood (Mah & Ford-Jones, 2012). As we observed in the ecological system above, children are exposed to various experiences and practices that directly and indirectly impact them. The study of the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) within the ecological system framework reveals the links between diversity and negative outcomes in the future. This knowledge emphasizes how vital early childhood intervention programs are, in terms of assessing challenging behaviors of children while maintaining positive relationships and building their resilience.

According to the Government of Canada (2024a), ACEs are traumatic life experiences that “refer to instances of abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction that are linked to a number of negative outcomes”. The adverse outcomes includes substance abuse, mental health issues, suicide and self-injurious behavior, poor education and employment outcomes, criminal activities and incarceration, impacting individuals throughout one’s life (Correctional Service Canada, 2024). One study has also shown that higher ACE scores are associated with increased health and developmental risks. Webster (2022) mentioned that children who had experienced four or more ACEs showed a 12 times higher risk prevalence of health risks such as alcoholism, drug use, depression, and suicide attempts. Children worldwide experience ACEs as it is an enduring global issue that “**do not discriminate**” which persists today (Waite & Ryan, 2020). There is no single cause of ACEs, thus, addressing ACEs is not an individual effort but a collective one. The government cannot combat ACEs alone, we need to make ourselves accountable to ensure better quality of life for our children and the well-being of our community.



## **The ACE Pyramid**

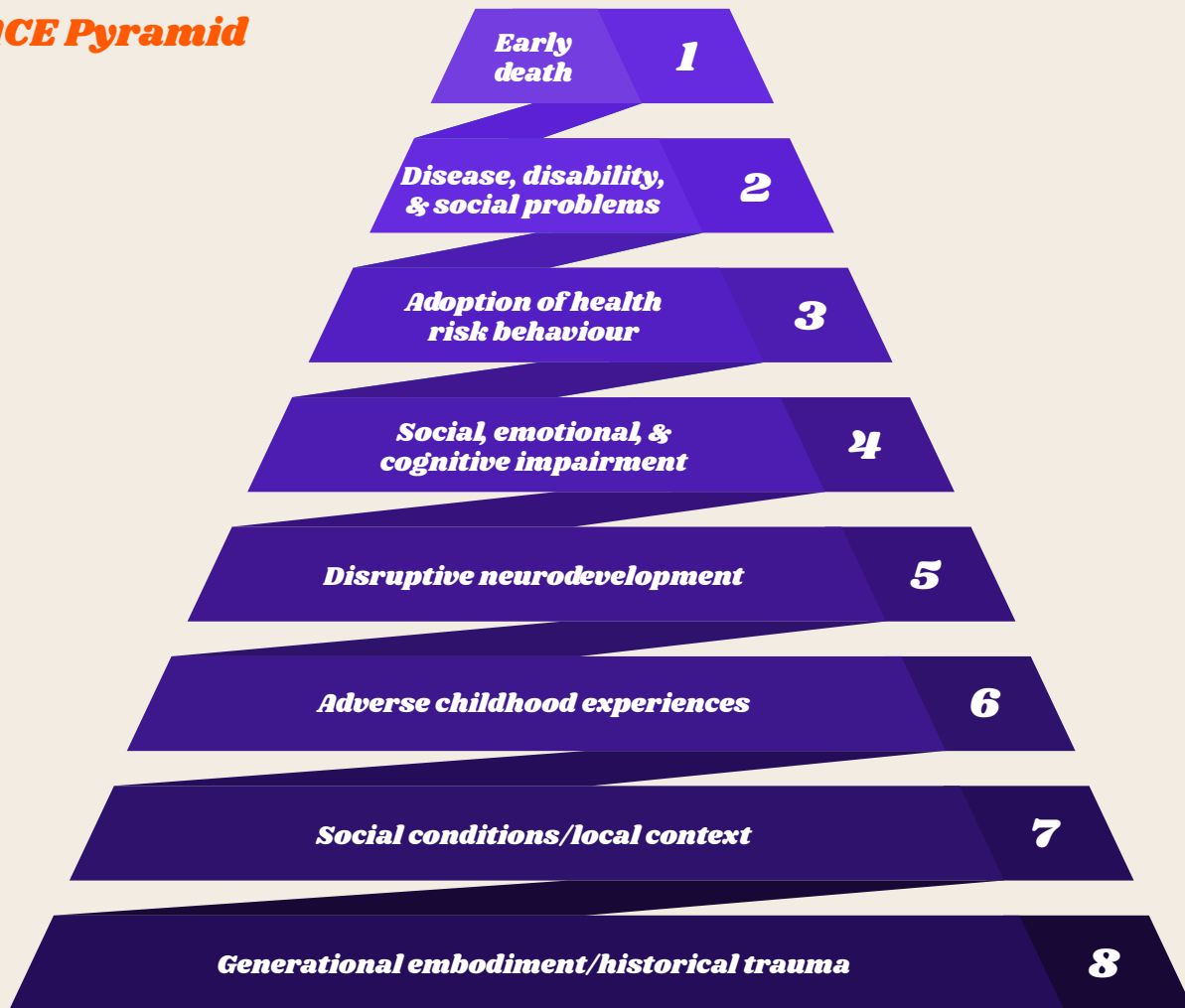
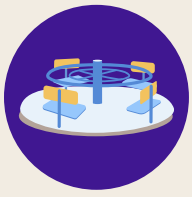


Figure 2 The ACE Pyramid

### **Note**

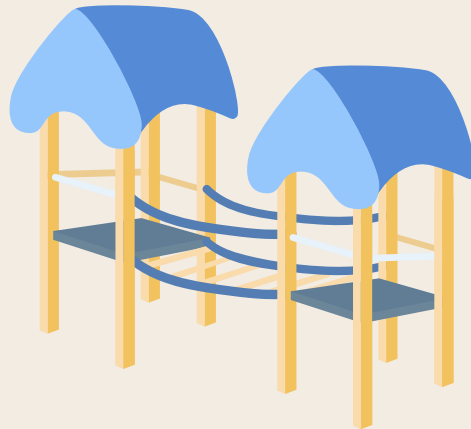
The ACE Pyramid designed by Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2024), serves as a visualization of the conceptual framework of Adverse Childhood Experiences.



# Identified Barriers

As I began exploring this topic, I immersed myself in understanding the barriers and associated issues surrounding wrap-around support for children and families facing adversities. As an emerging changemaker, I have learned that changemakers invest time in identifying the problem, barriers, and their interconnectedness to other issues instead of immediately initiating effort on how to solve it. Consequently, I followed a similar approach using the Impact Gap Canvas developed by Daniela Papi-Thorton, which allows me to understand the complex issue.

## Impact Gap Canvas



### Challenge Mapping

- Inadequate allocation of funding for social service programs
- Front-line providers harbor preconceived notions on assisting children and families
- An increasing number of children are facing multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
- Overrepresentation of Indigenous children in Canadian Welfare
- Black and people of color communities face social and economical inequalities

### Impact Gaps

- Open communication between families and frontliner workers; frontline workers and organization; organizations and government; government and community members
- Collaboration to birth sustainable initiatives/ programs
- Understanding familial dynamics and their unique needs
- Foster cultural sensitivity
- Develop empathy and patience
- Increased capacity of social programs
- Promoting of trauma-informed practices
- Move towards quality, accessible, and affordable services
- Community involvement and empowerment
- Research data and accountability
- Anti-racism initiatives and actions
- Education and awareness

### Solution Mapping

- Building partnerships with multiple community practitioners including local businesses, non-profit organizations, and government agencies
- Uniform approach when helping children and families
- Prioritizing prevention over child apprehension
- Increase trauma-informed practices in school, workplaces, and community settings
- Long queue for programs and services
- Fostering holistic approach rather than isolated approach
- Decolonizing approach in education and practices
- Exclusive social programs
- Understanding misconceptions and stereotypes that exist

## Poverty

In July 2023, the latest Census Family Low Income Measure After Tax indicates that 15.6% of children and youth aged 0-17 live in low-income homes, an increase from 13.5% in 2020; these numbers represent over 1.1 million children across Canadian provinces and territory (as cited in The Raising Canada, 2023). Due to poverty, one in four children in Canada lived in households with food insecurities in 2022 (Raising Canada, 2023).

The persistent threat of poverty remains a significant peril in Canada, constituting an enduring violation of Canadian children's right to an adequate standard of living (Raising Canada, 2023). Other related economic challenges under the banner of poverty, including limited financial resources, housing insecurity, employment struggles and low-quality child care, contribute to a cycle of poverty.

**Over 1.1 million children and youth live in low-income homes across Canada**

*“A significant number of children in Calgary are not meeting their developmental milestones and are not ready to succeed in school. This stage of a child's life has an immense impact on collective poverty risks. It sets the foundation for learning, supports family employment, and fosters community belonging. When it comes to fostering community well-being, early childhood education is starting us at a disadvantage.”*

*- Enough for All, 2024*

When poverty persists, families are often forced to make difficult choices, including those noted by Enough for All (2024) such as living in unsafe environments, and foregoing education, which ripple effects impacting increased health risk and fewer employment opportunities. For example, families experiencing poverty may prioritize securing housing over investing in social programs for their child's development. Recognizing diverse family challenges fuels a cycle of disadvantage, exacerbating social and economic inequality, leading to increased rates of poverty.

## Stigma

Nurturing social and emotional development during childhood is crucial for lifelong mental well-being and resilience (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2017). However, according to the Mental Health Commission of Canada 2017, mental illness affects children and youth, with 70% experiencing symptoms before reaching 18 years old, totaling 1.2 million individuals in Canada. The stigma surrounding mental health prevents youth from seeking professional support, leading to adverse outcomes such as self-harm and chronic disorders (Raising Canada, 2023).

Mental health stigma also affects parents and guardians who experience personal and systemic barriers to seeking help, resulting in detrimental outcomes, including substance abuse and unsafe life decisions. Some parents and guardians feel isolated with their problems concerning their mental health due to fear that seeking help might result in the removal of their children. While multiple services are available in our community that greatly benefit children, parents, on the other hand, are neglected and left alone to deal with their issues. The unheard trauma left parents and guardians experiencing poor mental health, significantly impacting their education, social life, and familial relationships.

**Mental illness affects children and youth, with 70% experiencing symptoms before reaching 18 years old, totaling 1.2 million individuals in Canada.**

## ***Scarcity of frontline workers***

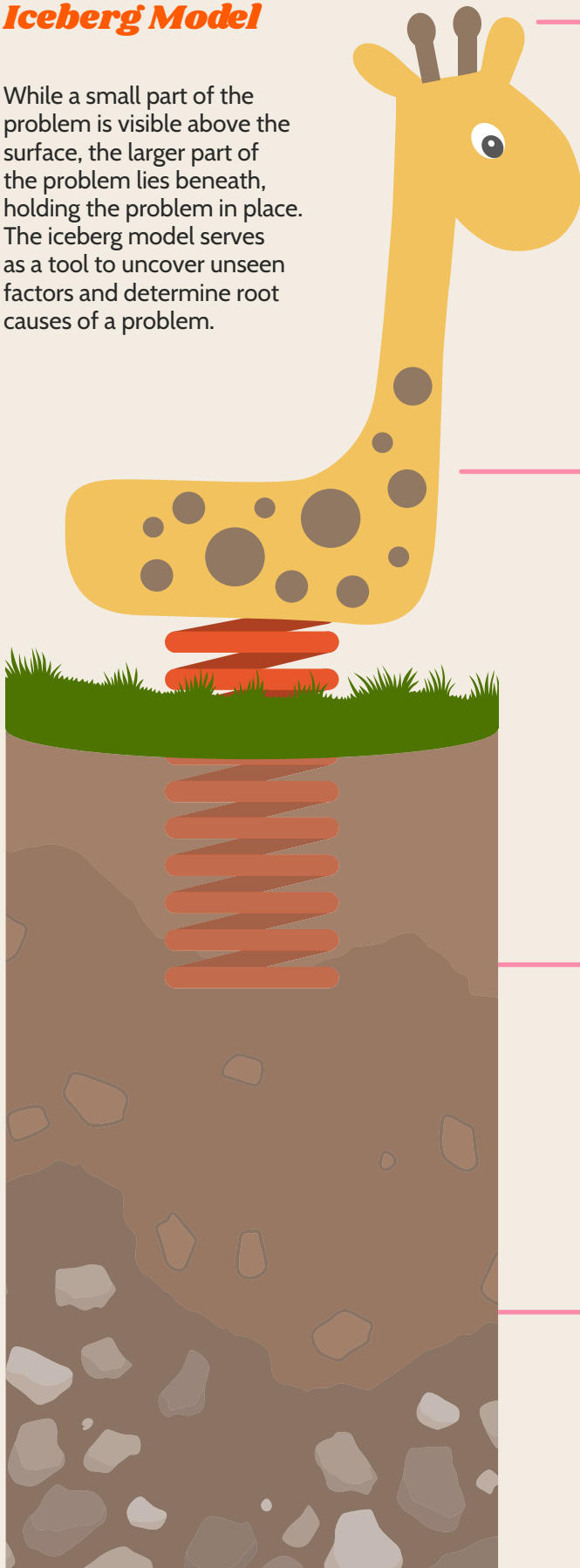
One important lesson I have learned is that the success of early childcare programs and services relies on the support and guidance provided to front-line workers. With this in mind, supportive programs greatly benefit and empower frontline providers, and foster an effective workforce and environment. Moreover, according to Silva and Calheiros (2022), being the closest adult figure to out-of-care placement youth, residential caregivers are presumed to be the main source of the youth's identity construction. This concept describes how other people function as a "social mirror" from whom the individual learns to appraise and represent his or her personal identity (Silva & Calheiros, 2022). As we observe in the Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, the role of front-line workers has a significant impact on those who seek them for support. In Canada, front-line workers currently receive inadequate support for their well-being and are compensated less despite the high demand of their work. Thus, it results in feelings of burnout and depression, which lead them to pursue other careers. It is important to move towards approaches that prioritizes the safety and well-being of frontliners and social service providers.

## ***Funding***

I recognize the effort and initiatives that the municipal, provincial and federal government introduced in our communities, however, the underfunding of existing social services and programs contributes to the broader problem. Many programs introduce social innovations and strength-based approaches but are expected to work on a limited budget. When organizations and representatives ask for additional funding, the government often requires data and evidence to support their request. Such practice emphasizes the dependency on research data, which is highly impactful in this matter. However, should we, as a collective society, tell them that their experiences are not enough to change the system? In order to receive support, people in need must not only share their personal stories but also provide documented evidence for the government to recognize that they are indeed struggling. Consequently, government agencies will approve the funding request only marginally adequate, expecting organizations to flourish (C. Turner, personal communication, January 31, 2024). Closer to home, many child-serving organizations are experiencing financial constraints. These programs struggle to survive and meet the demand of their clients due limited resources and fundings. Front-line workers and social services providers often hit a block when assisting children and families (K. Stevens, personal communication, November 30, 2023). Through conversations with multiple community practitioners and researchers, it became clear that the underfundings of community-based programs, early childhood preventions, trauma-informed care and other social programs have been and still are the major barriers to providing wrap-around support to all Canadians.

## Iceberg Model

While a small part of the problem is visible above the surface, the larger part of the problem lies beneath, holding the problem in place. The iceberg model serves as a tool to uncover unseen factors and determine root causes of a problem.



## Events

### What's happening?

- Increased number of children that need support
- Increased rate of families facing multiple adversities
- Violence against children and youth, poverty, and systemic racism
- Scarcity of counseling services
- Overrepresentation of Indigenous children in child welfare system
- Decrease in funding for community-based programs and trauma-informed services
- Families struggling with substance abuse
- Increased immigration

## Patterns

### What trends have there been over time?

- Longer wait times for resource or social program accessibility
- Adverse Childhood Experiences linked to future health and social issues
- Separation of children and parents promotes trauma for both parties
- Decreased number of child care or service providers due to burnout
- Intergenerational trauma
- Investors in social programs are interested in programs with established track records

## Structures

### What has influenced the patterns?

- Poverty
- Cost of social programs
- Inadequate funding for care providers and teachers
- Lack of support from the government
- Lack of shared advocacy
- Lack of awareness

## Mental Models

### What assumptions, beliefs and values do people hold about the system?

- Assumptions that children will outgrow their "bad" behaviors
- Solely blaming parents and guardians for their behaviors toward children
- Discrimination
- Racism
- Colonialism

# **Indigenous Children in Canadian Welfare**

According to the Government of Alberta's Child Intervention Information and Statistics Summary, as of March 2023, a total of 9,363 children and youth received child intervention services. Of those, 7,851 were in care, and 1,512 received services at home (not in care). Additionally, it was determined that **71%** of children and youth receiving child intervention services were Indigenous, and among those in care, **74%** of children were Indigenous (Government of Alberta, 2023).

For many years, the Canadian child welfare system has been and still is criticized for prioritizing the apprehension of children rather than prevention (Leckley, 2022). In the 1960s, Millennium Scoop was adopted in the children's welfare system, where children, with little to no evidence, are said to be abused, neglected or "at-risk" and removed from their homes into foster care (Leckley, 2022). However, this practice of "mass removal" of Indigenous children has been an ongoing legacy for many Indigenous children today (Leckley, 2022). Additionally, underfunding Indigenous communities imposes a detrimental and long lasting negative impact on Indigenous well-being. Indigenous peoples were found to be more likely to experience poor mental health as a result of colonization, intergenerational trauma, and racial discrimination (Raising Canada, 2023). When considering wrap-around support for all families, we must not overlook the distinct challenges faced by Indigenous peoples, as they are important members of our community.

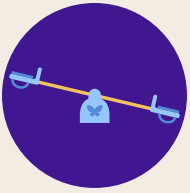
***"They told me I was lucky. I didn't feel lucky."*<sup>1</sup>**

***"Belonging is hard for me to feel or have when the people around me and 'caring' for me don't look like me, speak like me, or respect me, it makes it harder to feel like I belong here."*<sup>1</sup>**

***"Sometimes the people I feel are important to me are not always someone other people think are safe."*<sup>1</sup>**

***"I need you to remember I am not hard to place, it is not hard to find family for me, the system is hard to survive."*<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Quotes from "Youth Voices" (Representative for Children and Youth, 2024)



# ***Social Impact Bonds***

## ***A source of hope or an emerging challenge?***

One type of social financing I came across is Social Impact Bonds, a new model and approach to finance social programs that are slowly spreading across Canada. According to the Government of Canada (2024b), Social impact bonds are “an innovative funding model that drives government resources toward social programs that prove effective while providing results to the people who need them most.” This new approach facilitates the collaboration of government, private investors, and external organizations. The process involves investors providing upfront financing for a government selected social program to be addressed. If the program successfully delivers outcomes, and satisfies the government, investors receive reimbursements with interest; otherwise, repayment in the event of a social impact bond failing will depend (Khovrenkov & Kobayashi, 2018).

However, social impact bonds face criticism for determining which social programs and issues are deemed a priority. The critique arises from the selection process, which may not reflect the complex and diverse needs of communities. However, when properly implemented, it addresses resource limitations and encourages reinvestments. For instance, in 2021, an investment of up to \$4.5 million over five years for the expansion of YMCAs of Quebec’s Alternative Suspension program marked the first social impact bond approach in Canada, aimed at reducing delinquency risk factors and improving educational outcomes for participating youths aged 12 to 17 (Government of Canada, 2021). This initiative extends services to 1600 youth across British Columbia, Quebec and Ontario, with 90% expressing satisfaction and willingness to return to school as mentioned by Solani Bhayani in her interview with CTV News (2022). Nonetheless, further research and thorough evaluation are necessary when implementing social impact bonds.





# ***Recommended Action***

Systemic issues are challenging to navigate as they persist because many individuals benefit from the existing system, including ourselves. A deeper understanding of the issue helps us shift our focus to sustainable actions instead of band-aid solutions.

## ***Awareness and Education***

While provincial and federal governments do express their concern for Canadian children and youth, it is clear that children's challenges and well-being are not their foremost priority (S. Austin, personal communication, February 27, 2024). Evidence of decreased funding for social services and programs can be noticed and felt by many organizations, employers and front-line workers (N. Dawes, personal communication, January 24, 2024). However, addressing the complex social issues is not solely a government responsibility. A collaborative effort working with the government, organizations and communities, is considered the most successful approach. Nevertheless, a collaborative approach is only possible if we are aware that a problem exists. When no problem is identified, no actions will be taken. Awareness is just a starting point; the next step is to engage in community conversations. It is common to assume that our children are doing "just fine", but the UNICEF Canada (2020) and Raising Canada (2023) reports suggest otherwise. Let these numbers be a wake up call, urging us to take immediate action to address the issue at hand.

## ***Holistic Approach***

Holistic approaches urge us not to focus on one challenge and ignore its interconnectedness to other relevant issues. When considering wrap-around support for children and youth, a holistic approach suggests considering parents' and childcare providers' emotional and mental well-being, recognizing their crucial role in fostering a healthy and nurturing environment for the child. Trellis Society offers wrap-around programs to support individuals navigating from childhood to adulthood (aged 12-18 year olds). The organization provides youth employment programs, including a Leaders in Training (LIT) to support youth in employment opportunities.

Additionally, they offer Building Youth Connection, supporting newcomer youth in various aspects of life, and the Ilyika'kimaat Program, offering Indigenous youth aged 12-21 an opportunity to reach their full potential through culturally relevant and leadership-specific programs (C. Anderson, personal communication, April 10, 2024). Overall, a holistic approach determines root causes and enhances the quality of interventions and programs, which leads to sustainable initiatives.

## ***Funding***

When leveraging wrap-around support for children, youth, and families facing adversities, it should involve adequate resources and funding in social services. The funding will accommodate areas such as food assistance, unemployment benefits, income support and affordable housing. Moreover, allocating resources for professional development, related benefits and increased wages for frontline staff is crucial for the overall effectiveness of the programs. Integrating and strengthening these programs and policies will present positive social outcomes such as promoting equity ensuring that every member of our community, regardless of socioeconomic status, has the resources they need to support their growth. Additionally, these findings will prevent families from falling into poverty and break the cycle of disadvantage. This approach will have a long-term impact on overall well-being. Trellis Society, for example, receives a substantial portion of its funding from multiple Ministries within the provincial government, alongside individual and corporate donations (C. Anderson, personal communication, April 08, 2024).



## ***Building resilience***

The idea of resilience is not to step back or avoid challenges that come our way, rather to confront these challenges with strength and determination. Building resilience can be achieved by fostering hope and positivity, practicing healthy self-care, or simply by observing someone who has overcome challenges. Resilience promotes positive and supportive relationships, better well-being, and fosters positive social influences. Through a micro lens, individuals with resilience build self-efficacy within themselves. It allows individuals to adapt to stress and challenge. From a broader lens, communities that maintain resilience offer them to withstand and recover from societal dilemmas such as natural disasters, health emergencies, and economic crises. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic challenges our communities but also reveals our strong resilience as a collective community.

## ***Recognizing biases and developing empathy***

A quote from bell hook (2000) says, “We must confront the enemy inside to confront the enemy outside.” Although rooted in feminist ideas, the quote underscores the need to confront our internal biases. Biases that contribute in some way shape and form to the inequalities in the existing system. We must acknowledge that we are part of the problem; we are part of keeping the problem in place. Western culture fosters individualistic practices emphasizing individual achievements, independence, and self-expression. However, it is time to open our minds to collective practices that protect and prioritize the well-being of equity-deserving communities. Social change and transformation are possible but not easy. It starts with confronting the enemy from within, understanding complexities and developing empathy. Empathy is when you take the shoes off the other person and experience life in their shoes. This practice allows us to draw connections in our experience regardless of how distinct it is from each other. Empathy is crucial to developing positive relationships, effective communication, and conflict resolution.

## ***Amplifying voices of equity-deserving children, youth and families***

The quote “Be the voice of the voiceless” is an adage we sometimes hear from leaders addressing social issues, particularly when minority groups are neglected and overlooked. However, we must realize that the goal is not to speak on their behalf; instead, we aim to amplify their voices while they speak for themselves (S. Austin, personal communication, February 27, 2024). Our nation celebrates diversity and multiculturalism, having diverse backgrounds should be uplifting and empowering. In spite of differences, we must embrace the diversity within our community and choose to be kind and supportive towards each other.

Above all, we must empower children to tell their stories and realities. We must avoid assuming their struggles and worries, as our experiences from decades ago, will ever mirror their experiences today. Let us educate children about their rights to demand change from the existing system. Addressing social issues with children enhances their quality of life and the better of our community’s future



# ***Concluding Remarks***

Navigating the complexities of wrap-around support and programs for children and families facing adversities reveals the interconnectedness of other associated issues. This report begins by examining a child's ecological system and understanding adverse childhood experience. Then identified barriers that are widespread and long-lasting, deeply rooted in social and economic inequalities that significantly affect most of the population. Moreover, this report recognizes the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in Canadian welfare systems highlighting the urgency needed to protect and better support Indigenous children. While broad recommendations are outlined to address the complex issue at hand, it is through shared advocacy that we hope, as a collective community, to strengthen government support that will diminish the identified barriers that equity-deserving children, youth, and families persistently face. This research intends to raise community awareness and demand actions inspired by the aphorisms that suggest:

*"No one is protected until everyone is protected." - Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020*

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