



Child and Youth Officer

f o r B r i t i s h C o l u m b i a

ISSUE PAPER 4

Towards a Strengths-Based Approach to Government Policy and Services for Children and Youth in British Columbia

Issue

In a previous issue paper, the Child and Youth Officer for British Columbia advised the government of British Columbia to adopt a cross-government approach to the planning and delivery of services for children and youth based on the principles underlying the international *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (the Convention).ⁱ

These universal principles can be linked with important findings in resilience research and resilience-based practice models like the Circle of Courage.ⁱⁱ How can these linked principles, research findings and practice models guide the development of a cross-ministry plan to achieve the government's stated vision of children in the province "being supported to be the best they can be physically, intellectually, socially and emotionally"?ⁱⁱⁱ

Background

- The Convention reflects a rights-based perspective on optimal child and youth development. Two key principles underlying the Convention are that children should be raised in families and communities, and that these families and communities should be supported by government.
- The Convention affirms children's fundamental human rights in four important areas:
 - Development – Children are entitled to grow to adulthood in a nurturing family and community environment, with an adequate standard of living to support their full development.
 - Protection and survival – Children have the right to life and the right to be protected from all abuse, violence, exploitation and neglect.
 - Participation – Children are fully persons with the right to express their views and participate in decision-making concerning them.
 - Non-discrimination – All children are entitled to have their fundamental human rights respected and protected, and to benefit from those rights, regardless of their race, ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, disability or other characteristics.



- While the Convention affirms the individual rights of children, its vision is that families and communities are the natural environment for the development and well-being of children; parents have primary responsibility for nurturing children; and the role of governments and communities is to support children and their families.
- The principles underlying the vision and rights in the Convention are consistent with the core findings of international studies of resilience, which have identified factors associated with positive child and youth development that are common throughout the world.^{iv v}
- These **protective factors** bolster development for all children, and act as buffers for children exposed to chronic risk, allowing them to achieve levels of competence and psychological well-being that they might not otherwise have been able to achieve. They include **caring relationships** with supportive caregivers and pro-social adults who have **high expectations** of them, and provide them with opportunities for **meaningful participation** and **contribution**.
- Resilience theory and research provide a strengths-based framework for thinking about child and youth development that is markedly different from many classical child development theories, which tend to focus on what has gone wrong (deficits) rather than on what often goes right (assets). Proponents of a strengths-based approach are interested in cultivating the factors that promote positive development, particularly among the most vulnerable children and youth.
- In striving to understand how some children are able to overcome adversity and achieve good developmental outcomes, resilience researchers have paved the way for a psychology of positive human functioning^{vi} concerned with identifying and nurturing human strengths and the conditions that promote children thriving.
- This positive psychology is reflected in the Circle of Courage, a resilience-based approach to child and youth development grounded in traditional Native American culture and childrearing philosophies and encompassing the following core values:
 - Belonging – Children need to develop a sense of belonging through **caring relationships** with people in their families, schools, neighbourhoods and communities.
 - Mastery – Children strive for success and need adults in their lives who have **high expectations** of them and provide them from an early age with opportunities to experience success, acquire skills, and learn from the wisdom of their elders.
 - Independence – Children strive for autonomy and control over their own lives. They need to be heard and respected in their homes, schools and communities. They also need to develop self-discipline – and the capacity to make responsible decisions – in environments that invite and facilitate their **participation** in decision-making and use disciplinary methods that teach social responsibility rather than compliance.



- Generosity – Children benefit from the opportunity to perform service for others and **contribute** to their communities. It enhances their self-esteem and sense of belonging, and promotes social responsibility.
- While founded on traditional Native American customs and belief systems, the Circle of Courage reflects universal needs and values that are similarly reflected in the Convention and resilience theory.

Observations

- Most of the core findings of resilience research are not new revelations but rather confirmation of the regenerative resources inherent in individuals, families, communities and cultures around the world.
- The Circle of Courage focuses on four core elements of positive development, and speaks to the interconnectedness of children and their environments in ways that resonate with Aboriginal values, cultural practices and belief systems.
- Underlying all three paradigms – resilience theory, the Circle of Courage, and the Convention – is a strengths-based perspective and recognition of the fundamental importance of family and community in the healthy development of children and youth.
- There is a powerful simplicity to the lessons these models offer, beginning with the understanding that resilience is not a special quality some children are born with and others lack, but a process through which a child's internal and external resources interact to help the child successfully adapt to changes and stressors in his or her environment. Thus *every* child has the capacity for resilience and positive developmental outcomes.
- The fundamental external resources that every child should have from the very start – in addition to an adequate standard of living – are strong, positive attachments with caregivers and other responsible adults who hold high expectations for the child and provide the child with opportunities for meaningful participation in his or her own development, as well as the family's and community's development.
- For the provincial government, this strengths-based approach to child and youth development, and the research and practice evidence on which it is based, can contribute in a powerful way to the development of cross-government plans, strategies and actions that stand a good chance of influencing actual developmental outcomes in line with the government's vision of children and youth in British Columbia being supported by their families, communities and governments to be the best that they can be.

Advice

- Use the strengths-based approach reflected in the Convention, resilience research and the Circle of Courage model to guide the government's cross-ministry planning process for children and youth.



- Expect this approach to be applied in policy development at different levels in all ministries of government that provide or fund services for children, youth and their families.
- Expect this approach to be applied in practice on the front line where government funded services are delivered.
- Develop and apply a strengths-based lens when reviewing, revising and developing all policy, programs and services relating to or affecting children, youth and their families. Ask of each government initiative:
 - How does it support families in caring responsibly for their children and youth?
 - How does it support children and youth in forming strong, positive attachments with their caregivers and other responsible adults?
 - How does it reflect the high expectations we hold for children and youth in this province, and how does it support them in meeting those expectations?
 - How does it support communities in effectively promoting positive child and youth development?
 - How does it promote and support the participation of children and youth in decisions that affect them both personally and as members of their communities and civil society?
 - How does it provide opportunities for youth to develop skills and competencies that build on their existing strengths?

For more information about the Child and Youth Officer for British Columbia, please go to our website at www.gov.bc.ca/cyo.

ⁱ Child and Youth Officer for British Columbia. (2005). Issue paper 2: The *Convention on the Rights of the Child*: A framework for public policy in British Columbia. http://www.gov.bc.ca/cyo/down/unrc_issue_paper_sept2005.pdf

ⁱⁱ Brendtro, L., Brokenleg, M., & Van Bockern, S. (2002). *Reclaiming youth at risk: Our hope for the future* (Rev. ed.). Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.

ⁱⁱⁱ StrongStart BC Committee of Cabinet. (2006). Vision statement (unpublished).

^{iv} O'Dougherty Wright, M., & Masten, A. (2005). Resilience processes in development: Fostering positive adaptation in the context of adversity. In S. Goldstein & R. Brooks (Eds.), *Handbook of resilience in children* (pp. 17–37). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.

^v Ungar, M., & Liebenberg, L. (2005). The International Resilience Project: A mixed-methods approach to the study of resilience across cultures. In M. Ungar, (Ed.), *Handbook for working with children and youth: Pathways to resilience across cultures and contexts* (pp. 211–226). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

^{vi} Seligman, M., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5–14.