

Open letter to:

Premier John Horgan, Katrine Conroy (Minister of Children & Family Development), Katrina Chen (Minister of State for Child Care), Rob Fleming (Minister of Education), Adrian Dix (Minister of Health), Shane Simpson (Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction), Judy Darcy (Minister of Mental Health & Addictions), Carole James (Minister of Finance), Scott Fraser (Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation), with copies to: Dr. Bonnie Henry (Provincial Health Officer), Jennifer Charlesworth (BC Representative for Children and Youth)

June 16, 2020

Re: **BC Children's pandemic recovery task force**

Dear Honourable Ministers,

We are a group of child advocates, physicians, researchers and health care professionals that share concerns about the significant impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the wellbeing of families and children in British Columbia. Children with [complex needs](#), [disabilities](#), and those marginalized by socio-economic inequities, racism and structural violence are most impacted.

Their unique needs require an urgent, equitable and collaborative response in BC to support their wellbeing during the pandemic recovery, and prevent short-term and long-term harm. As Children First Canada and allies have expressed, every day of ongoing stress matters for children's development and health outcomes. [Urgent action is needed](#).

Research from Europe indicates a significant [impact of the pandemic on children](#) that will last for many years, and a [similar impact](#) is predicted in BC. Given pre-existing child poverty affecting 1 in 5 children in BC, and increased family stress and violence during the pandemic, families with more financial and relationship stress need [additional support](#). A wealth of research indicates that resilience is more effectively supported through collective, [system-level supports](#) rather than relying on individual actions and the invisible labour of parents, caregivers and teachers to mitigate stress, often with insufficient resources to support them.

Children's social environments have shrunk during the isolation measures, diminishing critical opportunities for co-regulation of emotion and stress through social connection and the support of broader families, communities, and culture. Most adults in children's lives – parents, teachers, and caregivers – are working hard to protect children while carrying an additional burden of stress. Many adults supporting children are under additional financial strain, and a wealth of evidence indicates that this has [significant health impacts](#) in the short and long term, including long-lasting impacts on children's [biology and health](#). Furthermore, many organizations have raised concern about parallel epidemics of [domestic violence](#) and substance use, and dramatic increases in mental health concerns as parents struggle under real fears and pressures during the pandemic.

The [return to school](#) and phased increases in social supports present a critical opportunity to focus efforts on building resilience and [wellness](#) in children and families. This is within the scope of the Ministry of Children and Family Development, public health, and education systems, when resources are available to address the social determinants of health. However, exhausted by Covid-19 pandemic, these systems need more support to work at their full potential and ensure that no child is left behind. Additional, dedicated multi-disciplinary supports are needed to adequately support children, families, educators and care providers for children, to prevent short and long-term harm to children's health and wellbeing.

This letter builds upon the evidence-based requests outlined by [Children First Canada](#) in May. **We ask that a BC [task force](#) be urgently created to support an evidence-based, equity-oriented strategy for children’s wellness in the pandemic recovery.** Supporting children’s wellbeing is a cross-sectoral, interdisciplinary effort that should not be delayed because of the complexity of the work. We propose drawing upon a wealth of expertise in this province that will be amplified in collaboration.

Recommendations:

1. That a collaborative, interdisciplinary **Children’s Safety and Wellness Task Force** be implemented in BC, including governmental and non-governmental representatives, to support work across sectors, and to build resilience and support a healthy recovery for children from the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. That public health departments provide ongoing transparent communication and direct support to child development and child-care providers, teachers, and organizations providing essential supports to children, including consideration of relative harms and benefits of recommendations to prevent viral transmission.
3. That the task force take direction from Indigenous organizations and communities to ensure that the wellness of Indigenous children in BC are prioritized in the pandemic recovery, including respect for and upholding of self-determination of Nations regarding decisions about their children and families.

Recommended task force priorities:

1. Develop strategies to enhance the protective environment for children and build community resilience, by addressing poverty, food and housing insecurity, and toxic stress in children.
2. Address systemic racism throughout services and programs for children and families, to reverse the cumulative negative impact of systemic violence that is exerted through racism and discrimination, in particular towards Black, Indigenous and People of Colour.
3. Prioritize funding for accessible programs to support the mental and emotional health of children and families while taking into account the diverse needs of children, including increased funding for crisis support, appropriate follow-up, and ongoing mental health care.
4. Enhance access to equitable opportunities for [outdoor play](#), learning and connection for all children in BC, as an evidence-based means of supporting the health and emotional regulation of children.
5. Support health care providers to inquire about and provide support for family experiences of stress, including racism and discrimination, poverty, food and housing insecurity, parental mental health struggles, violence exposure, and inadequate access to essential supports, as outlined in the [CPS statement](#).
6. Support the essential needs of child development and child-care providers, and teachers, including support for financial and work-related stress, personal health needs, and child care, to create resilient environments for children and the adults who care for them.

References:

[2019 BC Child Poverty Report Card, First Call BC Child & Youth Advocacy Coalition](#)
[Drs. Kobor, Odgers & Schmidt: The hidden costs of COVID-19 for children, May 30, 2020](#)
[Social Pediatrics Section recommendations, Canadian Pediatric Society, May 5, 2020](#)
[Children First Canada: Kids Can’t Wait! May 7, 2020.](#)

Signed:

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Health Sciences Association of BC

Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC

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