

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study found that considerable numbers of Canadian youth were defined by their teachers as experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties at school. Survey results represent teacher perception of student behaviour and difficulties, and not student assessments or diagnoses, but they are nevertheless an indication of problems. The Report on the Schools Survey, with its focus on etiology, attempts to show that the key contributing developmental variables for disruptive behaviour and conduct problems are located in inter-generational processes in family systems, and particularly in insecure attachment.

The roots of numerous disabilities and disorders can be traced to attachment deficits: neurological development, motor and language delays, and emotional-social disorders. Attachment is seen as a principal dynamic governing the development of internalizing and externalizing disorders, and related learning difficulties. It is suggested that many of the key variables involved in child pathology in general, and in disruptive behaviour disorders in particular, either flow into this central element, or flow from it. Specific and foundational neurobiology and neuroendocrinology are laid down in more substantial ways than imaged during critical phases of attachment and development in the first two years of a child's life. Selected areas of interface in neurology, psychiatry, biology and genetics are synthesized and summarized in the report so that they can be made widely available for parents and professionals.

Of particular importance is the association between insecure attachment and neuro-biological development, a factor which tends to have inter-generational stability. It is suggested that enhanced public health education about attachment and its related outcomes could save a great deal of suffering as well as economic cost. While the plasticity and ability of the brain to change and develop is recognized, research demonstrates that a child's early environment and experience can have profound, lifelong consequences for his/her intellectual, emotional, verbal, cognitive, behavioural, and social functioning. Of particular importance are certain critical windows of prime time, or optimum development opportunity, during which the impact of environmental factors on brain development is dramatic and specific, influencing the general direction of development and actually affecting how the intricate circuitry of the brain is connected.

Two additional areas of similar import are the prevention of head injury/brain trauma from early physical abuse and the prevention of low birth-weight babies via prenatal care for high-risk populations of parents. These three areas are linked with difficult temperament, aggression, impulsivity, violence, learning and behavioural disorders. Well-designed intervention programs for disadvantaged youngsters, children with developmental lags or early indications of behavioural problems do make positive differences and can preempt a host of subsequent difficulties. It is widely acknowledged that such programs should be more accessible and a key recommendation of this report is that education-based intervention in grade one and two is an efficient, effective and inexpensive way to prevent costly problems from unfolding. Policies and programs that affect young children

are struggling to keep pace with scientific advances, as well as a changing society. This report strongly recommends simple universal screening in grade one and the application of expertise and assistance to support targeted development for at-risk children. These children will be at risk as a result of family functioning difficulties which may include parental substance abuse, low birth weight, maternal depression, family violence and parental involvement with the justice system. Traditional intervention programs with systems to identify families and to provide augmented service have been found effective in research evaluations, but implementation issues and resource availability hamper service delivery.

Children who enter school from dysfunctional, abusive homes or families with psychopathology are much less likely than their healthy counterparts to perform adequately and to achieve continuing developmental and academic milestones. For at-risk children (and this report documents substantial numbers) services must begin no later than grade one. It is equally important that early missed attachment opportunities be revisited since they serve as a foundation for all subsequent learning. These findings are offered with documented research to substantiate the need for early assessment activities in schools, and also to support specific intervention processes in grade one and two based on principles of attachment. Insecure attachment truncates a child's development across all domains and this missed development opportunity must be revisited before subsequent learning will ensue. Nurture Groups are one intervention which holds promise in this regard and which can be initiated and implemented at the school level, with minimal oversight by a board of education.

The distinctive contribution of attachment and related variables involved in the production of emotional and behavioural difficulties, as well as serious aggression and violence, require collaboration and information sharing for: a) appropriate policy development; b) salient public education processes; c) incorporation of critical information into curriculums at various levels in the formal education system; d) recognition of the critical importance of these variables for intervention, prevention and treatment methodologies.

For any number of reasons, schools are often reluctant to release data on internalizing and externalizing problems among student populations. Some boards of education may not have a uniform reporting system to collect this information. Educators may worry that data of this nature will reflect badly on local accountability and performance criteria. It is hoped that the research supporting this report will alleviate these concerns and open the way for a constructive, cooperative, intergovernmental (education, health, and justice) dialogue to address fundamental issues for the youth of Canada. Schools are today faced with many new problems in terms of student health and behaviour. Data on these developments is the necessary foundation for addressing emerging needs related to children's well being, so many of which are a function of our changing socio-economic environment and its impact on family systems.