

Executive Summary

Raising healthy children is the responsibility of all Canadians. Supporting and promoting infant, child and youth (hereafter “child and youth”) mental health is central to enabling them to become lifelong, positive contributors to their communities and society. Strengthening policies and programs that support positive mental health for children and youth is vital to creating a sustainable and inclusive Atlantic Canada.

During 2020–2021, the Atlantic Summer Institute on Healthy and Safe Communities (ASI) developed this policy brief, in partnership with A Way Home Canada and a policy brief working group, to promote investment in upstream policies and supportive actions for child and youth mental health. This work is based on the belief that with collective action we can shift the ways in which community and government drive policy and fund innovation.

While governance rests with federal, provincial, municipal and Indigenous leadership in each province, Atlantic Canada has characteristics and infrastructure that bond and unite us as a region, enabling unique knowledge-sharing and collaboration. Despite our strengths, the Atlantic provinces currently have an incomplete and disconnected patchwork of strategies, frameworks and programs intended to address mental health needs. This policy brief draws on current evidence with the goal of influencing policy in Atlantic Canada to promote the mental health of children and youth. This document aims to highlight and strengthen the great work already being done in Atlantic Canada.

We propose transformative change, calling for action on four broad priorities, which, if done in concert, can integrate efforts into a comprehensive approach that promotes and supports the mental health of children and youth, their families and communities. These priorities require the adoption of new approaches and are outlined here:

A “whole-of-government approach” by implementing a **Mental Health in All Policies Framework** by all sectors, building on the Health in All Policies Framework developed by the World Health Organization (WHO 2014).

A “whole-of-society approach” through development of a **Multistakeholder Platform** for the Atlantic region, where representatives from diverse communities, Indigenous organizations, academia, governments and the private sector share knowledge and codesign solutions for evidence-based policies and programs.

A “whole-of-community approach” through **Investment in Community Action**. Community groups and organizations are already doing the work to create supportive environments for their children and youth. Ensuring communities have the support necessary to do this work is vital.

A **Sustainable and Integrated Funding Model** that supports these comprehensive approaches to invest in and maximize social capital in our communities. The funding would consist of multisectoral contributions in each province; a single application from communities; multiyear sustainable funding; and a focus on the promotion of mental health through innovation, addressing the roots of mental health inequities, and evaluation.

Recommendations

Transformative change will require leaders (including provincial, federal, municipal, community and Indigenous leaders) to undertake fundamental changes in the way we build public policy. A focus on

Mental Health in All Policies will guide the creation of new structures and processes to support upstream investments that promote mental wellness. We recommend the following:

1. Atlantic provincial governments recognize that all policies affect the mental health of children and youth, and coordinate efforts to support existing and future commitments to upstream investments in this area, guided by a Mental Health in All Policies Framework.
2. Atlantic provincial governments build on existing Atlantic linkages and structures, such as the Council of Atlantic Premiers, to set an Atlantic regional direction for Mental Health in All Policies.
3. Governments work to develop relationships and strengthen collaboration with Indigenous Peoples in all settings to:
 - prioritize the development of mutually respectful relationships between settler and Indigenous communities;
 - strengthen provincial and Indigenous relationship-building and collaboration through codesign of policies and programs specific to Indigenous communities;
 - provide resources and supports for pre-existing and future Indigenous-led initiatives; and
 - draw on Indigenous knowledge for policy development for all of Atlantic Canada.
4. Governments support a regional Multistakeholder Platform to facilitate alignment of provincial and local child and youth mental health promotion efforts with shared goals, vision, values and strategies.
5. Governments recognize and support the role of community-based organizations as a focal point for upstream investment in child and youth mental health.
6. Governments review investments and funding frameworks and align more closely with the proposed Sustainable and Integrated Funding Model outlined in this policy brief.
7. Governments work to build capacity for child and youth mental health promotion, including professional development focused on social determinants of mental health inequities, policy development, knowledge mobilization and learning how to work collaboratively across sectors.
8. Governments work with diverse groups and communities to ensure equitable investment in child and youth mental health promotion.
9. All stakeholders in Atlantic Canada apply a Mental Health in All Policies lens in development and implementation of organizational and municipal policies.

This policy brief makes the case for a commitment to transformative change, challenging leaders (including provincial, federal, municipal and Indigenous elected officials) to undertake fundamental change in the way we build healthy public policy. A focus on Mental Health in All Policies will guide the creation of new structures and processes to support upstream investments that promote mental wellness. We would like to stress that these ideas are not new; this policy brief includes examples of communities, provincial departments and non-profits engaging in important work supporting child and youth mental health promotion. This work needs to be supported and invested in, and ASI and its partners are well positioned to play an active role.