

Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the **2025 Federal Budget**

Written submission by Inspiring Healthy Futures

Introduction

Canada is at a crossroads regarding the health and well-being of our kids. While we are no longer hunkered down at home, the impacts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic continue to exacerbate challenges, leading to a significant decline in the physical and mental health of children and youth. According to consecutive international UNICEF Report Cards, Canada consistently ranks near the bottom of comparable OECD countries in terms of children's well-being outcomes. This underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive, coordinated effort across federal and provincial/territorial governments to improve the systems that support our young people.

As a nation, we spend less on child, youth, and family benefits than most rich countries. According to UNICEF Report Card 16, Canada ranks 28 out of 38 OECD countries, spending just 1.68% of GDP on children and families, compared to an average of 2.38%. The 2025 federal budget is a significant opportunity for the government to demonstrate its commitment to reversing these trends. By investing in cross-sector, interconnected, sustainable systems, we can ensure that children and youth receive the services, care and support they need to thrive.

Priority Recommendations

On behalf of a pan-Canadian network of child and youth champions, including youth, Inspiring Healthy Futures calls on the federal government to prioritize the following actions in Budget 2025:

1. **Develop a National Strategy for Children and Youth:** Allocate \$11 million to establish a comprehensive strategy with clear targets and timelines to improve outcomes for children and youth, including \$1 million for an organization to lead the multi-sectoral collaboration.
2. **Support for Early Childhood National Data Collection:** Commit \$29 million to enhance data collection and research on children aged 0-6 and their families to inform evidence-based policy decisions and identify gaps in services.
3. **Enhance Social Programs like the Canada Child Benefit and Parental Leave:** Increase the Canada Child Benefit and expand parental leave to respond to equity gaps, ensuring adequate family income for the first 6 months of life.
4. **Fully Fund Early Child Care, School Food Programs, and Jordan's Principle:** Ensure full funding for the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care, the National School Food Program, and Jordan's Principle to provide necessary support and nutrition for children's success.

Recommendation 1:**Develop a National Child and Youth Well-Being Strategy**

Canada spends a significantly lower percentage of GDP on child and youth programs than many peer countries, leading to delays and inadequacies in essential services. A National Child and Youth Well-Being Strategy is essential for giving priority to children, youth, and families and giving agency to organizations and governments in this space to increase collaboration.

The multi-sectoral strategy would set benchmarks, targets, and timelines for improving child and youth outcomes. Funding would enable crucial collaboration with provincial and territorial governments, Indigenous leaders, and other key partners. It should include dedicated funding for an organization to coordinate the process. Given its strong, independent, nonpartisan connections with organizations and governments at both the federal and provincial/territorial levels, Children's Healthcare Canada is in the right position to coordinate this work.

Recommendation 2:**Support Early Childhood National Data Collection**

As the federal research granting councils consult on the creation of a new capstone research funding organization, the unique needs of children and youth must be explicitly included. A dedicated funding stream for maternal and child health research should be complemented by improvements in the quality, consistency, interoperability, and breadth of data and indicators focused on children 0–6 and their families.

Investment in this area supports working families and ensures that children are ready to learn and thrive from the start. Enhancing data collection and research will ensure that policy decisions are informed by robust evidence and tailored to the specific needs of children and youth, helping identify gaps in services and target resources effectively. Funding would enable Statistics Canada, the CIHR Institute of Human Development, Child and Youth Health, and key partners to consult on, develop, and implement a national plan for developing indicators and collecting data on children, youth, and families.

Recommendation 3:**Enhance Social Programs like the Canada Child Benefit and Parental Leave**

Child poverty has long-term detrimental effects on health, education, and social outcomes. Existing social programs for families, including increased Canada Child Benefit and extended parental leave, are vital. These programs help families provide the stable, nurturing environments their children need to succeed. According to a 2022 report by UNICEF Canada, comprehensive family support programs significantly reduce stress and improve outcomes for children in vulnerable families.

For the most vulnerable, the existing benefits are not enough. Changes like increasing the Canada Child Benefit with a Low-Income Supplement and enhancing parental leave programs will help lift children out of poverty and provide families with the necessary resources during critical early years.

Recommendation 4:**Fully Funding Previous Commitments to Child Care and School Food Programs**

Research consistently shows the importance of investment in reducing barriers to early childhood education. Providing affordable care and nutritious food ensures that all children have the necessary support to succeed. Well-funded childcare and school food programs play a critical role in early childhood development, offering children a foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour, and health.

Fully funding the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care initiative will ensure that the most vulnerable families have access to affordable, high-quality child care. Affordable child care supports parents in participating in the workforce, enhancing family economic stability and contributing to the broader economy. Similarly, the implementation of the National School Food Program will help reduce food insecurity, improve dietary habits, and enhance students' overall health. A national program will level the playing field, ensuring that all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background, have a healthy start to lifelong wellness, learning, and future employment.

In lockstep with these programs, we call on the federal government to fully fund and implement Jordan's Principle. This mechanism will ensure substantive equality and that no gaps exist in publicly funded health programs, services and supports for First Nations children, regardless of whether they live on or off-reserve.

Conclusion

Investing in children and youth isn't just an investment in Canada's future, it demonstrates our commitment to respecting their rights. By prioritizing these recommendations, the federal government can create a healthier, more equitable society where every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential. Members of the Inspiring Healthy Futures network stand ready to work with the federal government and all interested parties to make this vision a reality.

We urge the government to include these recommendations in the 2025 Federal Budget and demonstrate a strong commitment to the well-being of Canada's children and youth. Thank you for considering our recommendations and for the opportunity to contribute.

About Inspiring Healthy Futures

Inspiring Healthy Futures is a pan-Canadian, cross-sectoral network of champions committed to the well-being of children and youth in Canada. Hosted by Children's Healthcare Canada, we focus on strategic advocacy, research, and coordination to ensure that the voices of young Canadians and those working with them are heard at the highest levels of decision-making. To ensure a holistic approach to child and youth well-being, our efforts span across all determinants of health.

The foundational Inspiring Healthy Futures action framework was co-designed to mobilize and connect communities, spanning youth initiatives, research collaborations, grassroots parent groups, advocacy initiatives, and community and industry partnerships. Our interlinked priorities were picked because, if actioned, they would measurably improve the health and well-being of children and youth in Canada.