

# Ontario Early Adversity and Resilience Framework Topic Summaries

## Connections Between Early Adversity, Resilience and MENTAL HEALTH

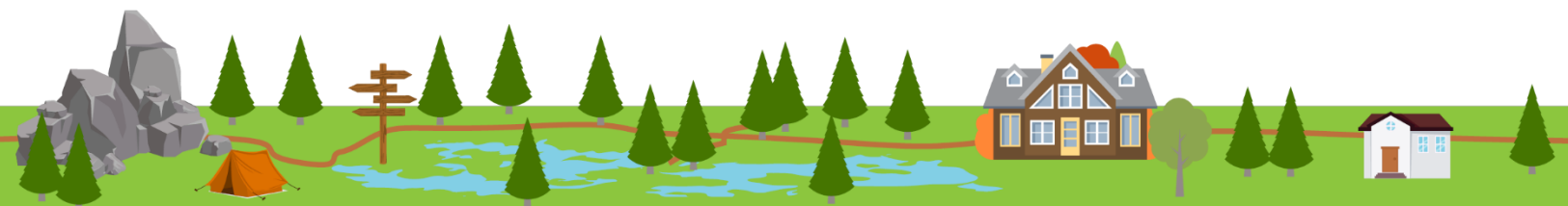
The [Ontario Early Adversity and Resilience Framework](#) is a call for collective action across sectors. It aims to inspire and mobilize communities to work together to develop innovative and meaningful solutions that prevent adversity, strengthen protective factors, build resilience, and support healing in families and communities. This document will provide a summary of how early adversity and resilience connect to mental health.

Reducing early adversity and strengthening resilience is a powerful prevention strategy. By implementing evidence-based interventions that build protective factors and address risk factors linked to the social determinants of health and inequity, we can act upstream to lessen both the likelihood and impact of harm and improve health and well-being.

Mental health is a vital component of overall health throughout life, and is deeply shaped by adversity across the life course, affecting individuals, families, and communities.<sup>1</sup> Parent/caregiver mental well-being and healthy relationships are important for fostering infant and child mental health.<sup>1</sup> Early experiences of trauma, neglect, and other forms of adversity significantly increase the risk of developing mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and suicidality.<sup>2</sup> These impacts often begin in childhood and can persist into adulthood, shaping long-term emotional and psychological well-being. In Canada, mental health concerns are rising sharply among children, youth, and adults, with nearly one in four hospitalizations among individuals aged 5 to 24 now related to mental health. This growing public health concern affects children and youth, impacting their development and quality of life, potentially leading to more severe mental health concerns later in life.<sup>1-5</sup> These trends highlight the urgent need for early, evidence-based interventions that promote early mental health, build resilience, and address the social determinants of health.

### What is the connection between early adversity and mental health?

- 1. Mental health begins to be shaped in the early years through safe, stable nurturing relationships and environments.** Prenatal and postnatal exposure to adverse environments and conditions, including maternal stress, perinatal mood disorders, and substance use during pregnancy, can significantly impact a child's attachment with their primary caregiver, as well as their immune system, brain development, and epigenetic predisposition to diseases later in life.<sup>6-13</sup> Early relational health, referring to the emotional connections between children and trusted adults early on, supports healthy brain development, emotional regulation, and reduces the risk of negative health outcomes.<sup>14, 15</sup>
- 2. Having four or more ACEs in childhood is more common among populations with a history of mental health issues,** substance use or addiction, unhoused individuals, and among certain groups such as individuals from low-income households and Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities.<sup>16</sup> Some populations experience more systemic, structural and historical trauma in addition to adversity experienced at home. For example, many Indigenous people experience the effects of colonization and intergenerational trauma linked to a higher risk of poor self-reported mental health and a greater likelihood of suicidal thoughts and attempts.<sup>17</sup> Mental health interventions need to consider the individual as well as their social and environmental context and the “intersectional and cumulative impacts of discrimination, poverty and exclusion”.<sup>1 (p. 6)</sup>
- 3. Early adversity can lead to toxic stress that increases the risk of long-term mental health conditions.** Toxic stress occurs when there is a prolonged stress response without adequate support or buffering relationships. It interferes with brain development, immune function, and stress regulation, increasing the risk of mental health and physical health concerns such as anxiety, depression, cancer, and diabetes. It can also contribute to risky behaviours like substance use, poor physical activity, and unsafe sexual practices. Significant early adversity is associated with higher rates of suicide attempts and opioid misuse.<sup>18</sup>



4. **Sensitive and responsive caregiving supports the development of emotional regulation, social skills and cognitive abilities that foster resilience.** Developing critical executive functions like problem solving and impulse control is crucial for regulating stress hormones, learning to cope with challenges, and thriving despite adversity. This supports healthy brain development, secure attachment and forms the foundation for emotional, social, and intellectual growth that supports positive mental health throughout life.<sup>6, 14, 15</sup>
5. **Access to timely services** such as mental health care, intimate partner/family violence response services, parenting supports, affordable housing, and income support are community level protective factors that reduce stress for families, prevent early adversity, and promote mental well-being across the life course. Resilience is not an individual trait but rather nurtured by supportive families, communities and systems. The shortage of mental health services, long wait times for counselling and other mental health services, especially for youth, continue to exacerbate the problem.<sup>19</sup>

### What actions does the Ontario Early Adversity and Resilience Framework recommend?

Upstream approaches to preventing mental health concerns start with prenatal health and continue with the prevention of adversity, supportive programs and policies that connect children, youth, and adults with ways to cope with trauma, and environments that promote mental health.<sup>1</sup> “Ecological models enable understanding that individual or even family functioning alone will have limitations, as much of our health is influenced by the communities and structural context in which we live”.<sup>1(p. 11)</sup> Recommended core components for organizations and communities to support infant and early mental health include resources and tools specific to birth through age six, leadership that promotes the importance of supporting early mental health, a commitment to building knowledge and skills, engagement in research and evaluation to measure work on early mental health, and system change with locally developed care pathways.<sup>20</sup> With the right supports and interventions, individuals can heal, grow, and thrive despite past challenges. All sectors need to be included in these approaches and work from a trauma-and-violence informed care (TVIC) lens, especially primary care, mental health service organizations, childcare and education sectors. This approach helps recognize and respond to the effects of trauma, and foster safety, empowerment, and healing.<sup>21</sup> Although all of the activities in the framework contribute to an environment that will address adversity and increase resilience, [the actions highlighted on the next page](#) are some examples of those with strong alignment to mental health.

**Legend:** Each colour corresponds to a focus area

<b>SOCIALLY CONNECTED, EQUITABLE, AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES</b>	<b>SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND RESILIENCE</b>	<b>REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND PARENTING/CAREGIVING READINESS</b>	<b>RESPONSIVE AND CULTURALLY SAFE PARENTING/ CAREGIVING</b>
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	CHILD/YOUTH	FAMILY	COMMUNITY	SOCIETY
Shift social norms	Promote the importance of addressing mental health and developing healthy coping strategies. Promote evidence-based programs such as <a href="#">Circle of Security</a> , <a href="#">Roots of Empathy</a> , * <a href="#">Connect</a> <sup>22</sup>	Normalize the experience of mental health issues during pregnancy and parenting/caregiving to reduce stigma around seeking help	Promote and support <a href="#">School Mental Health Ontario</a> 's initiative to develop and deliver a systematic and comprehensive approach to school mental health. *Implement <a href="#">the Right Time, Right Care</a> resource <sup>23</sup>	Reduce stigma, blame and discrimination around seeking help with parenting/caregiving challenges including but not limited to substance use, mental health challenges, and financial hardship
Integrate upstream strategies	Utilize <a href="#">The Care Pathway for the Management of Perinatal Mental Health</a> for primary care providers to standardize the identification, assessment and monitoring of mental health issues during pregnancy and post-partum <sup>24</sup>	Empower caregivers with opportunities for active skill building for self-regulation and embedding SED practices in the home, and work with professionals to ensure these opportunities are available in both rural and remote communities (e.g., HBHC, NFP)	Promote the importance of infant and early mental health by investing in strategies that help families build safe, stable and nurturing relationships and connecting families to support, for example by developing community-specific <a href="#">Infant and Early Mental Health Care Pathways</a>	Advocate for equitable access to green spaces to allow for unstructured outdoor play in nature to reduce stress, enhance health, stimulate creativity, and build essential life skills
Influence healthy public policy	Secure funding and implement programs that enhance self-regulation and executive function skills, and boost incentives for two-generation programs that support these skills in both children and caregivers	Support workplace policies that promote wellness, professional development, healthy living, mindfulness, and team building	Provide an evidence base for municipal policies that reduce sources of stress for children and families such as providing a range of accessible housing, food, transportation, childcare, recreation, and employment services along with liveable wage	Work alongside racialized, Black and Indigenous communities to co-develop policies and practices that prioritize a child- and family-centered approach, addressing the unique needs and circumstances of these populations
Intervene to lessen harm	Advocate for the juvenile justice system to offer intervention programs to support youth in addressing the effects of early adversity such as the * <a href="#">mental health diversion program</a> , or receive treatment while in detention or on probation <sup>25</sup>	Support adults to access healing practices and mental health services to support their roles as parents/caregivers and themselves	Integrate a trauma- and violence-informed approach into all programs and services	Support National and Provincial funding for promoting universal, free mental health care (no referrals, no fees, any ages) that supports development of social and emotional skills
Collect and use data	Utilize resources such as the Community Child and Youth Wellbeing Survey, to measure the well-being of youth in Canada from birth to 18 years of age	Advocate for developmental monitoring for children under six using <a href="#">The Canadian Database of Development, Infancy to Six (CanDDIS)</a> developed by Queen's University and Infant and Early Mental Health Promotion (IEMHP) at SickKids	Utilize geographic data to determine which neighbourhoods could benefit from additional resources, programs and services to ensure equitable access.	Collaborate with partners to apply research and data to influence policies, practices and processes for children, youth and families.

\*Interventions not included in the OEAR framework

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The strategic actions in this document are drawn from the [Ontario Early Adversity and Resilience Framework](#), which includes actions originally adapted from *A Health Promotion Strategy to Prevent Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Foster Resilient Children, Families and Communities* published by Fraser Health Authority, as well as additional actions included specifically for the OEAR framework and referenced therein.

## CONTRIBUTORS

This topic summary was produced by members of the Public Health Ontario ACEs and Resilience Community of Practice, with contributions from collaborators and subject matter experts, to support implementation of the Ontario Early Adversity and Resilience (OEAR) Framework.

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