



# Children's Mental Health: A Focus on Relationships

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# Objectives

Highlight emerging research showing that healthy development depends on healthy relationships


Stimulate discussion about what we as adults can do to promote healthy relationships and mental health for children and youth in our care.



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## Which is more important: Nature or Nurture?

Children's biological inheritance works together with the environments in which they grow up to shape their development.



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# Healthy Development depends on Healthy Relationships

Emerging research on:

- Epigenetics: changes in gene expression
- Brain architecture and activity
- Family, peer, and other relationships
- Societal factors



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# Relationships Matter for Gene Expression

The “operating system” for genes is built over time through:

- Positive experiences, such as exposure to rich learning opportunities.. or
- Negative experiences, such as stressful life circumstances
- Experiences leave a chemical “signature” on genes, which can be temporary or permanent
- Affect how easily the genes are switched on or off.



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# Relationships Matter for the Brain through Genes and Experiences

The brain adapts to the experiences that a child has..

If the child has positive experiences, the brain adapts positively for learning, memory, and regulation


If the child has stressful experiences, the brain adapts negatively, with too much or too little response to any stress.

As the brain develops, the gene expression adapts as well, leading to further positive or negative brain development



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## What does this have to do with the role of adults?

Children experience their world as an environment of relationships.

- Relationships are important throughout development
- Relationships affect all aspects of development – intellectual, social, emotional, physical, behavioral, and moral.

***Adults are responsible for the quality of children's relationships***



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Relationships are the “active ingredients” of the environment’s influence on healthy human development.

Relationships engage children in the human community in ways that help them define who they are, what they can become, and how and why they are important to others. people.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child  
Working paper #1. Young children develop in the environment of relationships



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## Other Relationships are Important Too!

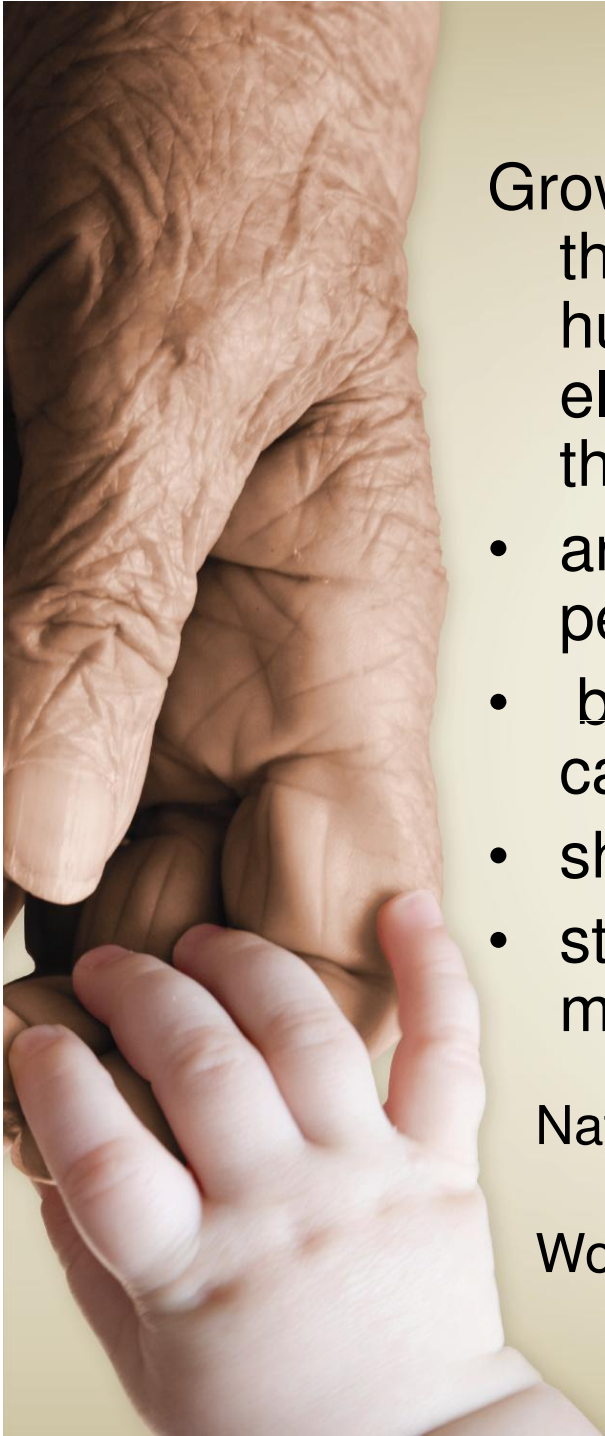
The relative importance of relationships with parents, other caregivers, other adults, and peers changes with development.

All of these relationships are central to children's development for mental health.



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Growth-promoting relationships are based on the child's continuous give-and-take with a human partner who provides what nothing else in the world can offer – experiences that:

- are individualized to the child's unique personality style
- build on his or her own interests, capabilities, and initiative
- shape self-awareness
- stimulate the growth of his or her heart and mind.

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# Society and Children's Healthy Development

Adults can help children and youth think critically about exposure to media and technology (e.g. aggressive children).

Social inequity in a country relates to the level of bullying and fighting.

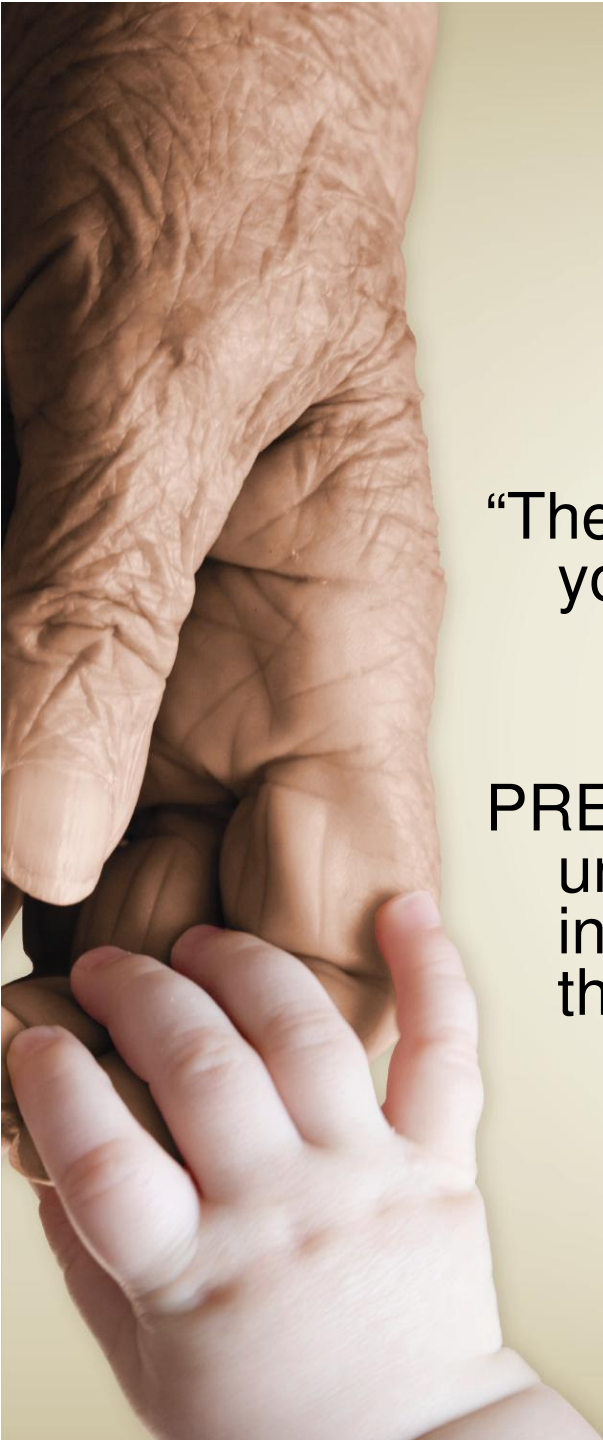
Canada does not fare well on international comparisons of relationships, behaviours, risks, and bullying.

*What are we doing as a society to promote healthy relationships for children and youth?*



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# Children's Mental Health: It's up to all of us

“The mental health of Ontario's children and youth is a shared responsibility.”

Ontario's Policy Framework for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2006

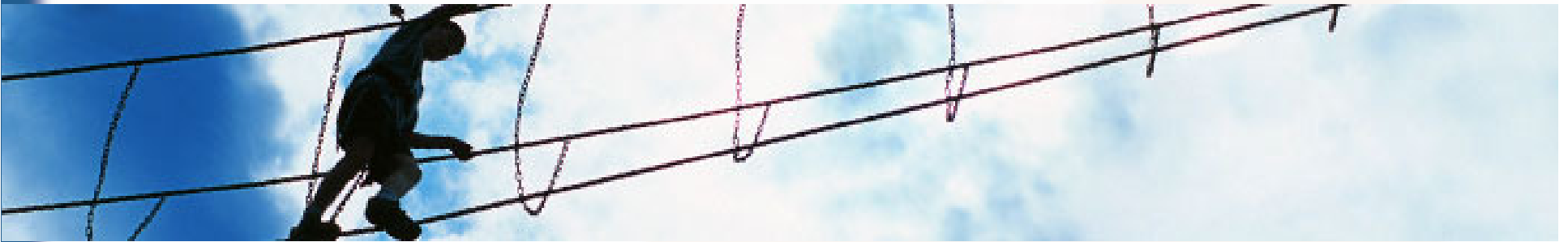
PREVNet's goal is to enhance the understanding and practices of all those involved with children and youth wherever they live, learn, play, and work.



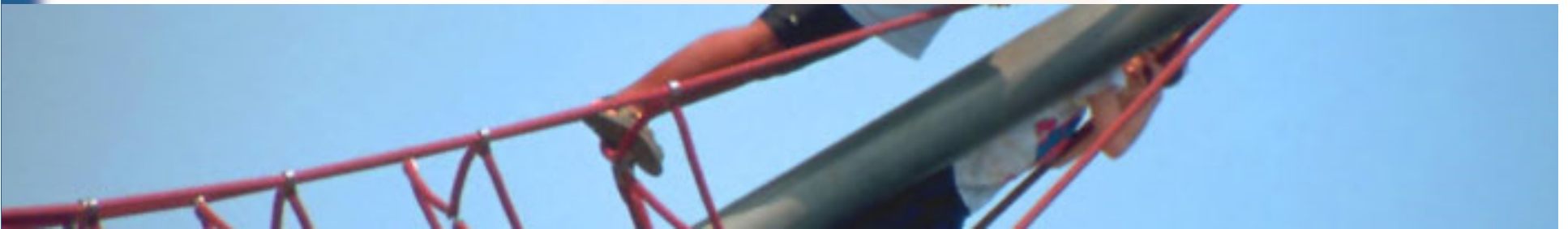
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# THANK YOU!



For Interest in Bridging Research and Practice  
to Promote Mental Health and Healthy Relationships for  
All Children and Youth



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Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence  
La Promotion des Relations et l'Élimination de la Violence