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## Canada is a laggard on children's health. We need to do better

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With the desk-banging, heckling and mock outrage that passes for debate in Question Period, the ham-fisted attempts to steal from the cookie jar that is the public treasury and the almost laughable denials of the obvious, the antics of Parliamentarians can, at times, seem childish.

So it is nice to see that someone has thought it fit to set up a big sandbox near Parliament Hill – complete with pails and shovels – and invite MPs and Senators alike to come play.

The “world's biggest sandbox” (as it is billed) is not designed to mock the foibles of elected officials but rather to engage them, to remind them that, when it comes to kids' health, Canada can do a lot better.

Consider that among the world's 21 richest nations, the United Nations ranks Canada a middling 12th on child well-being.

The country comes out no better in an analysis conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. It said that, among 29 OECD countries:

- Canada ranks 22nd when it comes to preventable childhood injuries and death;
- Canada ranks 27th in childhood obesity (meaning there are only two countries, proportionally, with more obese children);
- Canada ranks 21st in overall physical health and mental health of children.

Not a record of which we should be proud.

The [Sandbox Project](http://sandboxproject.ca/) [http://sandboxproject.ca/] wants to improve that record. In fact, it has set the

lofty goal of making Canada the country with the world's healthiest children. (An honour now held by Finland.)

"We're trying to raise awareness of the importance of child health," Christine Hampson, CEO of The Sandbox Project. "We're trying to be political but in a non-partisan way."

One Wednesday at 11 a.m., members of the Conservative Party, Liberals, New Democrats and Green Party (so far, no one from the Bloc Québécois has confirmed) will gather at the sandbox for a sand-castle building contest. The judge will be federal Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq, no less.

The sandbox is actually located on Ottawa's Sparks Street pedestrian mall, a short walk from Parliament. That's because the paperwork required for actually putting a temporary sandbox on Parliament Hill is overwhelming. It's a no-fun zone.

Anyhow, the idea behind the sand castle building contest is not that Parliamentarians produce works of art; in fact, when they did this last year their efforts were pretty lame; the kindergarteners proved to be much better sand architects.

Rather, what matters is the symbolism: Everyone, regardless of political stripes, in the sandbox together for a common cause.

That's the idea behind the Sandbox Project more generally. It's a tiny organization that doesn't have any big projects of its own. It sees itself as a facilitator and a catalyst. For example, it will try to get diabetes and mental health groups – both of which are interested in physical activity as prevention – to work together. It will work with a corporate sponsor looking for a cause to support to find the right fit. Or act as a bridge between researchers and parents of children with disabilities.

An example of how this kind of approach should work is the creation of Parachute, a new group that was created by the merger of four small childhood injury prevention groups: Less bureaucracy and more clout.

The Sandbox Project was founded by Dr. Kellie Leitch, a pediatric orthopedic surgeon who is now a Conservative MP. She was widely viewed as a leading candidate for Minister of Health – and may still end up there after a coming cabinet shuffle – but, sadly, like most backbenchers, she doesn't have much of a public profile.

That is unfortunate because the report she wrote as the [Advisor on Healthy Children & Youth](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/alt_formats/hpb-dgps/pdf/child-enfant/2007-advisor-conseillere/advisor-conseillere-eng.pdf%20) [http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/alt\_formats/hpb-dgps/pdf/child-enfant/2007-advisor-conseillere/advisor-conseillere-eng.pdf%20] remains an excellent blueprint for what needs to be done to improve the health of Canada's children.

What the report – and the recommendations therein – needs is a champion. In fact, while they are playing in the sand this week, Parliamentarians should be reflecting on the report's five main recommendations:

- Develop a national injury prevention strategy;
- Establish a national Centre of Excellence on Childhood Obesity;
- Improve mental health services for Canadian children and youth;
- Undertake a long-term longitudinal study to understand the impact of environmental factors on children's health;
- Establish a National Office of Child and Youth, with a permanent adviser.

Little or no progress has been made on these issues since the report's release 2008.

"Everybody agrees that we need to focus on improving the health of children and youth, but..." Ms. Hampson said. She doesn't need to finish the sentence; the "but" is that there is little follow-through on the pro-kid, pro-family rhetoric.

It is time for elected officials to stop building sand castles in the sky (or on Sparks Street) and implement some concrete measures.

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