

Max Bell Foundation & Burns  
Memorial Fund Policy Fellowship

# CONNECTIONS FIRST

MAX BELL FOUNDATION & BURNS FUND POLICY FELLOWSHIP

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

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- Burns Memorial Fund
- Max Bell Foundation
- Owerko Centre at the Alberta Children's Hospital Research Institute
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- University of Calgary

The **purpose** of the Fellowship was to advance knowledge and inform public policy on the use of Natural Supports as a prevention strategy to support children in their middle years and their families.

The **opportunity** the Fellowship has identified is to adopt a public policy approach to encourage and enable communities to become more naturally supportive and socially cohesive to improve well-being for children and families.

# I

## THE PROJECT

### **Project Overview**

This Project jumps off from the work of the “Change Collective” in Calgary. Working with Vulnerable Youth to Enhance their Natural Supports: A Practice Framework<sup>1</sup> was developed and implemented by the Change Collective with the support of the Burns Memorial Fund and United Way Calgary and Area. Implementation of the Practice Framework is demonstrating positive outcomes for vulnerable youth; this includes a Natural Supports approach in the intervention strategy. Given the early promising success of the new Practice Framework, the Burns Memorial Fund saw an opportunity to move upstream; to understand how Natural Supports could be used as a prevention strategy for younger children, before intervention services were required. They also saw an opportunity to spread awareness of Natural Supports across the province through public policy uptake. To that end, the Burns Memorial Fund partnered with the Max Bell Foundation to fund a two-year Fellowship to generate and mobilize new knowledge, and to inform public policy about the potential value of a Natural Supports approach for children in their middle years.

The documents on this website are products from the Connections First: Advancing Resiliency and Relational Networks for Vulnerable Children & Youth Project. This is the Fellowship Project funded by the Burns Memorial Fund and the Max Bell Foundation.

Over the two years of the Fellowship, we have engaged with a broad range of community stakeholders and service providers from across sectors, from organizations providing services to children and/or their families, to parents/caregivers, and to young adults. Each of these groups provided a perspective on the value of Natural Supports; in particular, the importance of developing Natural Supports when children were between 6 and 16 years of age. Over the two-year duration of the Fellowship, engagement included 20 presentations, 42 different stakeholder (individual and group) meetings, interviews with 23 community leaders, and engagement with more than 50 parents and youth (over 16 years of age) in consultation sessions. We also heard from over 300 families in response to our survey. We could not have completed this work without the generosity of stakeholder time and their insights.

We undertook an extensive review of the evidence related to Natural Supports and completed six new studies to build a foundation of contemporary information to inform a Natural Supports strategy to advance resiliency at the community, family and individual level. Underpinning this new evidence about the positive value of Natural Supports, the facilitating factors and strategies, as well as the barriers to advancing Natural Supports in communities, is the neuroscience; how the brain develops and how resiliency can reduce the impact of toxic stress responses to repeated threats and adversity - known as the ‘Brain Science’ and ‘ACEs’ (Adverse Childhood Experiences).

The number of children in Grade 4 reporting that they had no important adults increased from 15 to 29% from 2017-2018 to 2018-2019.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, 57.3% of children report they receive adequate support from families, 65.9% from their friends, but only 42.9% say they receive enough support at school.<sup>3</sup>

**Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)** refer to abuse, neglect and household dysfunction that occur during childhood that can potentially influence lifelong outcomes and health.<sup>4</sup>

To optimize the utility of the Natural Supports work, we linked it to two other recent and related evidence scans: Mobilizing the Knowledge of ACEs Prevention and Proactive Supports for Alberta's Children, Youth and Families: An Environmental Scan,<sup>6</sup> and, Out-of-School Time: Evidence Synthesis, Best Practices and Environmental Scan.<sup>7</sup> The links to these documents can be found in the "Resource" tab on the Connections First website ([www.connectionsfirst.ca](http://www.connectionsfirst.ca)).

The more we delved into this topic, the more we learned, and the more unanswered questions we had. The benefits of Natural Supports to children and families, were clear; an improved sense of belonging and esteem, and increased resiliency in the presence of risk.<sup>8-10</sup> Those with whom we spoke quickly understood the value of Natural Supports strategies targeted to an individual child. However, people struggled with thinking about how they could build more naturally supportive communities.

By the time our work was half complete, we had determined that the greatest opportunity was in a naturally supportive communities' approach. Natural Supports 'community' approaches and strategies can improve outcomes for children over time, and improve social cohesion, which is foundational to civil society.

To that end, we have focused our final products and recommendations on strategies and approaches that could be used to advance this agenda in communities across Alberta and beyond. There are extraordinary and largely untapped assets in our communities. Businesses, faith groups, seniors, to name a few, could join together with community leaders in order to support the optimization of children's development through building stronger, naturally supportive communities. These approaches are ultimately more sustainable overtime than those which depend primarily on paid service providers. While paid providers and the promotion of individual Natural Supports are critically important for many children and families, children also need a healthy community. The best approaches to improving Natural Support networks in community and society will vary across context. Evidence included in this Project provides some guidance on both potential facilitating factors as well as barriers. Most importantly, a supportive environment is necessary to optimize outcomes for children, and to build a resilient community with resilient citizens.

**Brain Science** is the study of experiences and factors that influence brain development and health. **The Brain Story** from the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative shares and mobilizes knowledge about brain science to promote well-being ([www.albertafamilywellness.org](http://www.albertafamilywellness.org)).<sup>5</sup>

**Civil society**, according to the World Health Organization, refers to "collective action around shared interests, purposes and values".<sup>11</sup>

**There is a lack of contemporary evidence and key recommendations to enable community Natural Supports strategies. This project aims to inform and provide guidance for the creation of naturally supportive communities.** For example, from this project, identified barriers to community Natural Supports strategies include difficulty with recruitment and retention of volunteers, lack of access to space for community activities and events, and the need to resource community connectors, or those individuals that facilitate the creation of Natural Supports and connections between residents, families, associations, organizations, businesses, and schools.

The conversations with and the interest in the Project from community leaders and policy-makers at all three levels of government have far exceeded our expectations. We will continue mobilizing the knowledge products and adding resources on the website as we find them.

## NAVIGATING THE WEBSITE

The Fellowship products are presented on the Connections First Website as separate documents for ease of use. We believe, as Aristotle said, that “the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.” Accordingly, we suggest that readers review all the documents in totality. Then we encourage readers focus upon the specific product(s) that are of greatest utility for their purpose.

The products of this Fellowship Project found in the Connections First Website Tabs include:

### **Tab One: About**

This section begins with Reflections on the relevance and potential opportunities of this work in our changing world context. This is an additional document developed in response to the global pandemic and consequent challenges. We hope it stimulates some thinking about how to build on the knowledge and recommendations when we emerge from our current crisis.

This Tab provides a broad overview of the Project, a high-level overview to the other products on the Website (see below), a section that makes the case for Natural Supports, a section on the role of public policy and other ‘alignments’ in Alberta, as well as information about the Fellowship team and the committee that advised the Project.

### **Tab Two: Executive Summary**

This Tab contains an Infographic, a plain language Executive Summary, as well as two Calls to Action; one brief, and a second more in depth. We developed these products to provide those interested in advancing this agenda with short, accessible evidence-informed knowledge products that can be used to introduce the approach to others, facilitate conversation, and set the stage for planning related to community Natural Supports. We hope these offer an inspirational message that underscores the critical need for attention and action.

### **Tab Three: Toolkit**

In this Tab you will find the Natural Supports Tool Kit for Community Organizations. The Toolkit provides ideas as to how a community might develop a Natural Supports strategy for their children in their middle years. It is critical to note that this does not offer a “program” or a “model” for community Natural Supports. Rather, it provides evidence-informed ideas for approaches and strategies that can be considered in the context of each community.

Under this Tab you will also find suggested community indicators. Indicators were developed as a key product to help guide work at the community level, to enable public policy makers to identify parameters, to offer potential measures that could be included in funding opportunities, grants and policies, and to underpin future evaluation. In addition to the indicators, in the Toolkit you will find suggested approaches that could be used at the community level that relate to the indicators. This is not intended to be a prescriptive nor an exhaustive list. It is rather a way to stimulate thinking and planning within the context of each community.

#### **Tab Four: Recommendations for Public Policy**

Recommendations and suggested actions for public policy are under this Tab. Recommendations are suggested at the municipal, provincial and federal levels of government.

Of note, a key finding from the evidence was the need to be flexible in the implementation of Natural Support approaches, which will differ based on the characteristics of the population. Specific approaches that accommodate culture, language and common interest have a high probability of success.

#### **Tab Five: Evidence**

This includes a summary of the evidence; evidence abstracts, including a rapid review abstract and poster, and policy alignment abstract and poster; an environmental scan summary of frontline community representatives; as well as detailed research on Community Perceptions of Social Connections and Natural Supports Strategies. Also, under this tab, is a summary of what we heard from both youth and family as part of our engagement strategy.

#### **Tab Six: Resources and References**

This Tab has links to the many documents and research articles that informed this Project. We will continue to add to it following the conclusion of the Project as we become aware of useful and credible resources. We would be pleased to receive your suggestions for additional resources using the Contact Information on the Website.



## MAKING THE ‘CASE’ FOR NATURAL SUPPORTS

*“Alberta’s future rests with the infants, children and youth of today. Policies and programs that promote resiliency and well-being are key to ensuring the province flourishes—now and in future generations.”<sup>12</sup>*

### **What are Natural Supports?**

Humans are social animals. We all require social connections as we navigate through our lives. Our personal “Natural Supports” are those with whom we celebrate our life achievements and important milestones. They are also the people we turn to when things get tough. These are people who comprise our Natural Support networks and may include friends, family members, both immediate and extended, as well as the people we interact with on a daily basis

**Natural Supports are informal reciprocal relationships and associations that are sustained over a period of time. These relationships are built on trust, dependability, kindness and mutual respect, and involve some form of give-and-take.<sup>1</sup> In other words, they are healthy supportive relationships.**

The concept of Natural Supports is not new. It is well integrated into strategies designed to improve outcomes for those with disability, as well as newcomers to Canada. Mentoring, such as the programs of Big Brothers Big Sisters organizations, are well known for promoting Natural Supports.

“Natural Supports” exist across all ages and stages of life. Natural Supports include family, close friends and those in the community. For children in their early years, family are almost their exclusive Natural Support. For parents of children at this stage, Natural Supports in the community improve well-being and development.

As children begin school and throughout their middle years, living in a naturally supportive environment becomes increasingly important to build resilience and optimize development. Growing up is filled with new learning, opportunities, building friendships, exploring new interests; an exciting time of developing one’s own personality. While development continues across the entire life course, of particular interest for this Project was the ‘middle years’, children aged 6 to 16.

The most paramount and a commonly recognized and understood type of Natural Supports are the ‘significant other(s)’ that people have in their lives; our best friend, our mentor, the person whom we turn to for wisdom, love and emotional support.

There are two other types of Natural Supports: those that bond people together, and those that act as a bridge for people.<sup>1</sup> “Bonding” supports are essentially common ties that people share. For example, those who identify with a particular interest or activity. These common ties give us a sense of relatedness

and familiarity. These are Natural Supports that we become familiar with, and create a sense of belonging and responsibility. For example, in a community garden you may notice that another plot needs watering, and you feel comfortable watering the plot knowing that your neighbour may help you on occasion. In another case, you may feel comfortable talking with your local hairdresser about a shared interest in pets or relationship challenges.

“The brain is a use-dependent organ that changes in response to **patterned, repetitive activity**. Thus the more any neural network of the brain is activated, the more that part will change.”<sup>13</sup>

The third type of Natural Supports are called “bridging” supports. These are Natural Supports that help connect us to the information and resources we need. Coaches, mentors and neighbours are good examples of bridging supports. These supports play an important role because they bring diversity to our knowledge-base and frequently provide new perspectives that we might not have thought about. For example, you decide to volunteer at a drop-in tutoring initiative - you would feel welcomed to participate and valued for your contribution. Over time you may get to know more young people, as well as the other tutors to whom you feel connected.

**Both bonding and bridging supports can range from infrequent to frequent, and casual to intimate. The goal is to create enough Natural Support options so that when a child or youth is under stress or adversity, they can access assistance according to their needs and preferences.**

Numerous formal programmatic strategies have been implemented to support the development of children and youth, including Big Brothers Big Sisters, Scouts, Guides, Art and Recreation programs, etc. While effective, a programmatic approach may not reach all children, is resource intensive, and may be stigmatizing.

Efforts to develop Natural Supports and naturally supportive communities can enhance well-being for children and families in the absence of a program or service, or as an augmentation to existing programs and services. The opportunity is to encourage and engage with those citizens who do not see themselves as providing services to children and families, to recognize the value of sharing responsibility and reaping the mutual benefits of contributing to the building of a **naturally supportive community**.

### **What do we mean by Community Natural Supports?**

Individual-level Natural Supports are critically important and are much better understood than the concept of community Natural Supports.

People need social interaction, and indeed, loneliness has been identified as an important health risk. Because we are social animals, we need family, friends, as well as members of the communities that we live in, to give us a sense of belonging and to help provide needed social connections and support.

In the context of community, Natural Supports, or informal mutually beneficial relationships, might include owners and staff in local businesses, Community Association leaders and members, faith-based groups, and as well as community volunteers, to name a few. It could be those involved with sports teams, book clubs or drop-in events, and people we regularly see in our daily lives such as coffee baristas, hairdressers, bus drivers, and others. Generally, we think of these relationships as ones that are locally developed, create familiarity and trust, and have some give-and-take. A good example may be the coffee shop owner, who depends on the local community for revenue, who provides the drinks and participates in the community picnic or sports day. Another example are local Community Association leaders who ensure



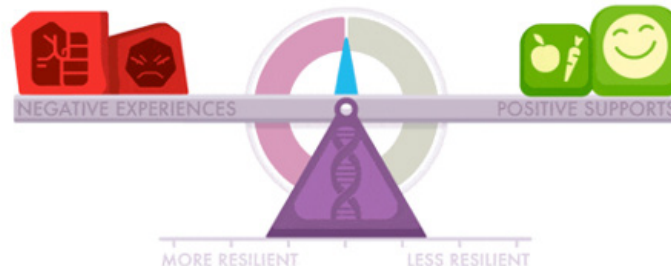
there are safe places for youth to meet and play by enabling access to space, washrooms, resources, and arrange for local volunteers to be there for the youth. In a naturally supportive environment, people develop relationships based on trust, dependability, kindness and mutual respect.

For optimal development, and to help buffer the negative experiences children may encounter, it is important they experience healthy positive relationships outside of home and immediate family. Together, the individual Natural Supports and strategies in which we invest in, create naturally supportive communities can reduce the impact of adversity on development more than either alone.

“Our ability to bounce back depends more on what’s around us than what is within us.”<sup>14</sup>

All people face adversity in their lives. These adversities range from the more common, such as scholastic and interpersonal challenges at school, and navigating daily interactions with others; to the more complex, such as having exposure to family violence at home, parental substance abuse, poor parental mental health, poverty or discrimination. When children and youth have exposure to chronic or more complex forms of adversity, they are at increased risk of poorer physical and mental health outcomes. These risks include inadequate self-control, poor mental health including depression and anxiety, low educational attainment, substance misuse, being a victim of or engaging in bullying behaviours, early child-bearing, self-harm, and violence. Natural Supports, and naturally supportive networks can mitigate the influence of stress and adversity because they create a sense of belonging and acceptance. In addition, these supports often help with problem solving and the development of life skills which increase the chance for better outcomes in the future.

“Science shows that children who do well despite serious hardship have had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult. These relationships buffer children from developmental disruption and help them develop ‘resilience’, or the set of skills needed to respond to adversity and thrive.”<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1:** Alberta Family Wellness Initiative fulcrum illustrating how positive and negative experiences can influence resilience and outcomes.<sup>15</sup> Available at: <https://www.albertafamilywellness.org/what-we-know/resilience-scale>

Dr. Michael Ungar, Canada Research Chair in Child, Family and Community Resilience, a professor of Social Work at Dalhousie University, recently wrote in the Globe and Mail an engaging piece suggesting that becoming more resilient to life’s challenges is not something people should do on their own.<sup>14</sup>

Dr. Ungar argues that rather than try to face these challenges on our own, we actually require the assistance and support of others. “Science shows that all the internal resources we can muster are seldom of much use without a nurturing environment” Ungar says. He explains that these nurturing relationships provide the best shields against volatility, complexity and threats; all things vulnerable 6 to 16-year-olds are exposed to on a daily basis:

“We know that those closest to us within our environments – our families, friends, and colleagues at work – have an enormous effect on our collective capacity to thrive. Improve the functioning of the family, peer group or work team, and individuals are more likely to show resilience, even if their larger world is seeming to become more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.”<sup>14</sup>

The intrinsic value of community Natural Supports is embedded in Indigenous approaches to community well-being. There is much to be learned from Indigenous cultures to help us build more naturally supportive communities.

We know that Natural Supports play a critical role in promoting resiliency, social integration, and positive development. With Natural Supports in place, children who have strong ties to their families, communities, and other role models in their lives, have a much better ability to be resilient to the curves and adversity life may throw at them.

**“Investing in programs and services that promote healthy environments and positive experiences at critical stages in development (infancy, the early years of childhood and adolescence) offers the greatest benefit to individuals, families and communities.”<sup>12</sup>**

### Why focus on the Middle Years?

The middle years are a critical time of development for children, including life skills, attitudes and personal competencies that will prepare them for lifelong success in careers, in relationships, and ultimately for their place in society. In these years, children are going through changes in their physical, emotional, social and cognitive development, and are strongly influenced by experiences that inform their sense of self-worth and well-being. Where they grow up and with whom is critical to the development of skills and attitudes that influence lifelong success. Nurturing, positive, and consistent Natural Supports that surround children in the middle years can have a significantly positive effect on their resilience and long-term outcomes. While schools are a critical source of supports for children in their middle years, we need to augment the support which schools provide within the broader community. With an opportunity to interact with Natural Supports or connect with others in a supportive community environment, children are better able to develop life, relational, or coping skills which can reduce the impact of stress and adversity.

While the need to enhance Natural Supports and advance more naturally supportive community environments is clear, there are contemporary factors that make this more of a challenge and more of a need.<sup>17,18</sup> Almost 70% families have 2 parents in the work force,<sup>19</sup> and many parents have multiple jobs. Work hours no longer align nicely with school hours or even Monday to Friday school days. Families try to seek care for their children outside of the traditional hours of out-of-school care; however, 24% of Grade 4 children are unsupervised during this time.<sup>2</sup>

Canada ranked 24th out of 29 developed countries based on children and youth's self-reported life satisfaction.<sup>16</sup> In 2018-2019, fewer children also reported that they were thriving on the Well-being Index than in previous years.<sup>2</sup>

Evidence suggests that barriers to participation in community activities include a lack of awareness about opportunities and busy family schedules.<sup>20</sup> It is these challenges that make it compelling to develop a broader community approach to Natural Supports to better support children and their families through these critical years. How can members of the community help? How can we be more creative about opportunities for children in the evening and weekend hours building upon Natural Supports in the community? Are there seniors in the community who are also lonely who could help?

## IV

### THE ROLE OF PUBLIC POLICY

**Making social and emotional skills part of the learning equation will help children succeed in school and life. With social and emotional skills, children can manage emotion, build positive relationships and navigate social environments. When adults focus on helping children develop these skills and are supported by good policies and training, children are better prepared for the world and able to fulfill their potential.<sup>21</sup>**

Public policy can both enable and promote the building of more naturally supportive communities. Advancing civil society and promoting social inclusion strategies are priorities for many governments today. Advancing Natural Supports at a community-level aligns with these agendas. All are interrelated.

An uptake of a Natural Supports approach as a prevention strategy to optimize outcomes for children in their middle years could benefit from a cross-government approach. Ideally leadership should come from many different ministries/departments and from all levels of government.

With public policy support and direction, there is an opportunity to augment and leverage publicly funded programs and services delivered to children in their middle years and their families with informal, unpaid Natural Supports in the community. From a system effectiveness and fiscal management perspective, public policy-makers should be interested in how Natural Supports can be used to support existing publicly funded services.

Schools play a central role in the development of Natural Supports for children in their middle years. Currently the majority of public policy related to this age group sits within the Education sector. While schools are key influencers, and educators are critical to the development of children in their middle years, schools cannot do it all, and neither can parents.

#### Public Policy Alignment in Alberta

**Making social and emotional skills part of the learning equation will help children succeed in school and life. With social and emotional skills, children can manage emotion, build positive relationships and navigate social environments. When adults focus on helping children develop these skills and are supported by good policies and training, children are better prepared for the world and able to fulfill their potential.<sup>21</sup>**

“Albertans recognize that children are the future of the province and that ensuring that every child has the opportunity to become a successful adult will benefit society as a whole.”<sup>22</sup>

Alberta has been at the forefront of the move towards the needs of children and youth requiring a collective effort. The Province has a long and proud history of strong community involvement and investment in the needs of its citizens.

Helping children build important social and emotional learning skills, such as establishing positive relationships, navigating social environments, and developing character; increases the capacity for children to navigate change and build resilience. To advance this agenda, the Government of Alberta has taken action on these trends and released a number of core documents that target a vision of flourishing children with supports and opportunities to achieve their potential.

A few relevant documents recently developed in the Government of Alberta that align with a Natural Supports approach include:

1. Well-Being and Resiliency: A Framework for Supporting Safe and Healthy Children and Families, March 2019<sup>12</sup>
2. Well-Being and Resiliency: The miyo Resource: Kâ-nâkatohkêhk miyo-ohpikinawâwasowin, March 2019<sup>23</sup>
3. Well-Being and Resiliency: Evaluation Framework, March 2019<sup>24</sup>
4. Family Resource Network (FRN): Expression of Interest, November 2019,<sup>25</sup> which includes a requirement to focus on social connections and supports in applications to the province to lead a community network to support children aged 0 to 18. This new focus on community collaboratives for service providers also supports leveraging Natural Supports to augment paid services within each community.

There is also tremendous potential to include a community Natural Supports approach in the Government of Alberta's current priority to advance a civil society agenda and the establishment of a Premier's Council on Civil Society.

At both the municipal and provincial level, some current strategies and plans for the Family and Community Support Services align with a Natural Supports agenda.

The Abundant Community Initiative, provides an example of policy directions that promote connection and social cohesion within urban communities.<sup>26</sup> The City of Edmonton has adopted this approach, referred to as Abundant Community Edmonton, in 120 communities and continues to recruit communities.<sup>27</sup> Within Calgary, the communities of Copperfield and Mahogany have adopted the Abundant Community Initiative,<sup>28</sup> and several others are in varying stages of implementation.

**Suggested reference:** Reynolds N, Tough SC, Walsh JL, Agius M. Connections First Project Overview. Document of the Connections First Max Bell Foundation and Burns Memorial Fund Policy Fellowship, April, 2020. Available at the [All Our Families](#), [Max Bell Foundation](#), and [Connections First](#) websites.

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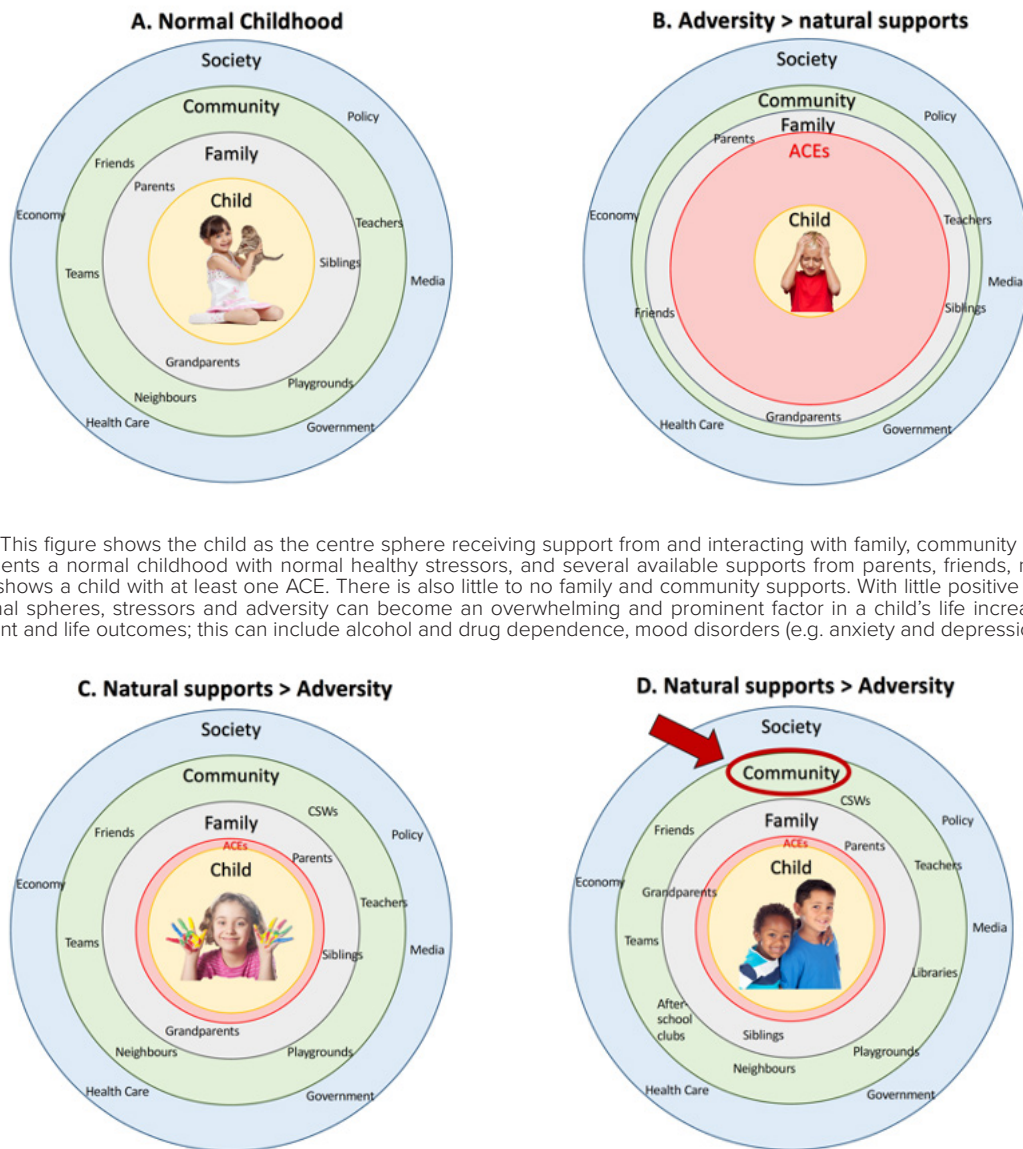
# APPENDIX A

## What are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)?

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are negative, stressful, traumatizing events that occur before the age of 18, which confer health risk across the lifespan.<sup>29</sup> They include abuse, neglect and household dysfunction.<sup>4</sup>

**“Individual responses to stress vary, and children and youth who have more positive resources and Natural Supports to draw on are less likely to be impacted by adversity. Promoting positive, supportive relationships can mitigate the impact of childhood adversity and promote resilience.”<sup>6</sup>**

Below are a few figures to illustrate the aim of this Project, and how Natural Supports can help mitigate the potential effects of ACEs.



**Figure 2a:** This figure shows the child as the centre sphere receiving support from and interacting with family, community and society spheres. **A.** This represents a normal childhood with normal healthy stressors, and several available supports from parents, friends, neighbours, etc. **B.** This illustration shows a child with at least one ACE. There is also little to no family and community supports. With little positive interaction and support from external spheres, stressors and adversity can become an overwhelming and prominent factor in a child's life increasing the risk of poorer development and life outcomes; this can include alcohol and drug dependence, mood disorders (e.g. anxiety and depression), and heart disease.

**Figure 2a: C** Children with strong supportive networks and Natural Supports have mitigated and buffered effects from adversity, including ACEs, no matter the number of exposures. These supports and interactions can come from both family and community spheres. **D.** The Connections First Policy Fellowship Project looked specifically at the development and promotion of Natural Supports strategies in communities to enable positive outcomes for children and youth, and their families, particularly those who are vulnerable to adversity.

## APPENDIX B

### What We Heard<sup>20</sup>

Over the course of 2019, the Connections First team conducted a series of consultation sessions and qualitative interviews with individuals and partners interested in sharing their perspectives on Natural Supports as a prevention tool. This is what we heard:

From youth:

- How connecting with and helping others in their neighbourhood and volunteering gave them a sense of achievement and self-worth.
- Vulnerable youth who are building their Natural Supports stated that if they had started to build their Natural Supports network when they were younger some of the difficult issues they were currently facing may have been prevented.

From families:

- Most families only thought of other family members as their Natural Supports.
- Those living in vulnerable communities were most likely to state that they did not have anyone they could go to in the case of a problem outside of their immediate family.
- Many adults said they knew none of their neighbours.
- Most adults wanted to be more connected to others and to have opportunities to plan and support community events that would bring more community connection.
- Technology is playing a critical role in the development of children in the middle years. For both parents and children, the ubiquity of technology and devices in today's society is reaching dangerous levels. For example, 62% of parents in Alberta feel negatively distracted by technology and 76% of those same parents, feel as though their technology habits influence those of their children.<sup>30</sup>

From community leadership and residents:<sup>31</sup>

- Community leadership, businesses, organizations, schools, and associations should be made aware of the value of the community connector role and leverage support. Community connectors are those individuals that facilitate the creation of Natural Supports and connections between residents, families, associations, organizations, businesses, and schools. Identification of local assets would enable strategic leverage and investment. Assets refer to resources and attributes of the community and the individuals living there that can be used to promote and improve the well-being of residents and families.
- Community Associations interested in accelerating the development of social cohesion and Natural Supports may choose to review priority areas and include indicators of Natural Supports in local planning and evaluation. Partnerships with local organizations, businesses, and associations, as well as with surrounding communities will enable leverage of knowledge and resources.
- Policies and procedures, including bylaws, that address access to community spaces would benefit from comprehensive review to both manage risk and enhance use, particularly in relation to building Natural Supports strategies. Evaluation of new processes could include indicators of Natural Supports and social benefit.
- Communication about the benefits and opportunities of volunteering may increase recruitment and retention of volunteers. Volunteer coordination and volunteer recognition are required.