The Alberta Family Wellness Initiative:
Where Science Meets Real Life
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THE ALBERTA FAMILY WELLNESS INITIATIVE

• Created in 2007 by the Palix (formerly Norlien) Foundation

• Mobilizes the core story of brain development to better understand how early childhood experiences impact on health and well being throughout life, with a particular focus on mental health and addiction

• Funds and initiates many activities to bring about positive change in policy and practice for the benefit of all children and families based on this knowledge

• Catalyst, broker, model, platform for cross-sector engagement - academia, health, human services, justice, education
What is the knowledge base?

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child – synthesized body of knowledge

The core story of child development:
- Brain architecture
- Serve and return
- Toxic stress
- Air traffic control

FrameWorks Institute
AFWI Is Using an Emergent Strategy to Catalyze Systems Change

**AFWI’s work:**

• Seeks to influence multiple complex systems (health, education, human services, justice) at many levels

• Engages the systems on multiple levels

• Employs an opportunistic and adaptive strategy

• Prominently features two approaches: knowledge translation and mobilization and relationship-building “change management”*

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The following terms appear throughout these findings:

1. “The knowledge” refers to the synthesis of brain science (e.g., core story and quality addiction treatment) created, curated, or shared via AFWI activities

2. “Systems” refers to the configuration of interacting, interdependent parts (e.g., individuals, organizations, and institutions across multiple sectors) with which Albertans interact when seeking improved health and wellness, particularly in the early childhood development and addiction/mental health spaces

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1. Understanding how the brain works and develops will overcome existing misperceptions and underlying beliefs and will support changes in individual behavior and systems related to ECD & A/MH*

2. Change agents identified by AFWI will act as drivers of systems change by spreading knowledge throughout systems ("ripple effect")

**Assumptions**

**Knowledge mobilization activities**
- Research on ECD & A/MH*
- Presentations & convenings
  - Symposia
- Program development
- Education & training
- Media & communications
  - Networking
  - Relationship building
- Start of change agents
  - Relationships
  - Narrative & language
  - Understanding & beliefs
  - Behaviors & practices

**Δ in systems**
- Resource allocation
- Institutions & organizations
- Government policy
- Professional practice

**Δ in change agents**
- Relationships
- Narrative & language
- Understanding & beliefs
- Behaviors & practices

**Improved health & wellness outcomes for children & families**

**Broad adoption of approaches to ECD & A/MH* rooted in the knowledge**

* Early Childhood Development & Addiction/Mental Health
The Alberta Family Wellness Initiative:
Theory of Philanthropy

Knowledge Mobilization

Cross-Boundary Connections

Better Performing Public Systems

Better Outcomes for Families
(Addiction and mental health)

Knowledge Entrepreneur

Catalytic Convenor

Partner on Learning Journey for Public Systems
AFWI Is Contributing to Changes in Individuals, Organizations and Systems

**Individual Change**
- **Some Change**
  - Efficacy and role in creating change
  - Forming or deepening relationships
  - Increasing understanding
- **Significant Change**
  - Changing behaviors
  - Increasing conversations

**Organizational Change**
- **Some Change**
  - Increasing sense of priority
  - Adopting new practices
  - Changing in activities
  - Institutionalizing the core story
- **Significant Change**
  - Increasing conversation
  - Discussing changes to activities
  - Sharing the core story

**Systems Change**
- **Some Change**
  - Ownership over policy implementation
  - Approving high-visibility policy documents
  - Increasing cross-sector work
- **Significant Change**
  - Funding reallocation
  - Increasing cross-sector dialogue
A Decade of Science Informing Policy

The Story of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child

Center on the Developing Child | HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Extending the Impact Globally

Even though the Council has focused explicitly on policies at the state level, the impact of its work has also reached outside US borders. Nancy Martin, former and chair of the Alberta, Canada-based Nettin Foundation, found the Council's work to be exactly what she had been searching for to help stop cycles of disadvantage and poor mental health. She has invited many Council members to speak in Alberta, and the Council's publications have been influential throughout Canadian policy development, influencing brand services and child development across the province. Following the Council’s lead, Martin also asked Terry Seidell, a rural researcher and mental health advocate in Alberta, to help create a “rural-urban” knowledge base with a new understanding.

"We believe that there was a commitment between childhood experiences and future health outcomes, but we were scarce on evidence that," Martin said. "When we found this work, it was a tremendous piece of information." In 2007, the Nettin Foundation awarded the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative (MAYO), which is working to integrate neuroscience into Canadian policy and practice. As shown in the Network’s work, multiple cities in Canada are also developing such initiatives, and the Centre for Social Innovation and the Centre for Social Innovation (CSID) are working to produce their own evidence. Several programs have been found to enhance the impact of interventions, including education and training for teachers and mentors.

Further examples of the influence of the developmental sciences and interventions on policies in the present include the CanChild Research Institute, which provides evidence on social policy frameworks, and a report from Alberta’s chief medical officer of health, Dr. Auld, about the early years of the world which describes the principles of “science and policy” and “science and policy.”

Creating Connections: Alberta’s Addictions and Mental Health Strategy offers another example from the Health Ministry that states the importance of developing such policies to address the needs of young people and their families.

Experiences have a profound impact on shaping who we are and how we think and feel. This is particularly true for young children, who are developing rapidly and are highly vulnerable. Early experiences lay the foundation for healthy adult outcomes, and evidence from the Council’s work highlights the importance of addressing these early years to support children’s development.
Alberta policy documents integrate the core story

• Creating Connections

• Let’s Talk About the Early Years

• Together We Raise Tomorrow

• Valuing Mental Health
Alberta Ministry of Human Services Contract requirements integrate the core story
Conclusions

• Impact would not be possible without the core story of brain development and investments in learning how to “use” it

• Critical ingredient in the AFWI Theory of Change

• Creates a common framework of understanding and common language to bridge different world views and catalyze social change