


NEIGHBOURHOODS & HEALTHY CHILD DEVELOPMENT.

A child's neighbourhood can play an important role in his or her physical, mental, and emotional development. Studies show that over and above individual and family-level influences, a person's neighbourhood income level in childhood can profoundly affect his or her health, performance in school, and achievement in later life⁽¹⁻³⁾. How can neighbourhoods affect child development?

FOR EXAMPLE:

- **Neighbourhoods can shape family dynamics.** For example, collective efficacy (see definition on page 2) at the neighborhood level can affect children by influencing how the family works and interacts with each other "behind closed doors"⁽⁷⁾. At the same time, highly cohesive neighborhoods appear to compensate for family problems (e.g. parental stress or hostility, family instability) by providing the child with access to services and social support^(4,8,9).
 - **Pre-term birth weight, the most important cause of infant deaths, can be linked to neighbourhood factors.** In a study comparing babies born in low- and high-income neighbourhoods in Toronto, CRICH researchers found that babies from the lowest-income neighbourhoods were more likely to be premature, and much more likely to be born underweight⁽⁵⁾.
 - **Social and economic stressors in a neighbourhood can affect children emotionally.** For example, one study found that neighbourhood children's behavior problems were connected to rates of male joblessness in the area⁽¹⁰⁾. Another study found that childhood anxiety, depression, and emotional withdrawal is higher in neighbourhoods affected by social stressors like drug dealing, gangs, and loitering⁽⁶⁾.
 - **Neighbourhood children influence one another⁽⁴⁾.** For example, children may benefit developmentally by meeting and interacting with peers who have stronger language and cognitive skills. Nearby neighbourhood clubs, playgrounds, and parks can encourage these meetings and interactions.
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- **Some adults in a neighbourhood may act as role models for young children⁽⁴⁾.** For example, some may act as enforcers, monitoring young people's behaviour and maintaining order.
 - **The availability of safe parks and playgrounds can increase children's physical activity.** Regular exercise in childhood can have far-reaching developmental, fitness, health, and emotional effects.

KEY TERM: "COLLECTIVE EFFICACY"

"Collective efficacy" in neighbourhoods refers to an active sense of engagement among residents. Trust, a sense of belonging, and a willingness to intervene for the common good contribute to collective efficacy in neighbourhoods, as do a shared expectation that residents' efforts will result in their intended goal.

For example, residents who come together and volunteer their time to build a community garden, report neighbourhood crime, or advocate for neighbours who need help are demonstrating collective efficacy. A community's collective efficacy can have a positive impact on child development, and even ameliorate some of the negative effects of poor parenting behaviours^(4,8,9)

THE BIG PICTURE: HOW DO NEIGHBOURHOODS AFFECT OUR HEALTH?

Research consistently shows that some of the strongest influences on whether we get sick or stay healthy are not individual behaviours or genetics, but the economic and social factors that affect the way we live. This means that a person's health can be affected by their income and education levels, race and ethnicity, immigration status, language, and community ties. These factors are all evident in – and often define – our neighbourhoods.

A growing body of literature shows that physical, psychological, social, and spatial neighbourhood characteristics (examples below), acting independently or interacting with individual level factors, can have a powerful influence on our health⁽¹¹⁻²⁷⁾.

Examples of neighbourhood characteristics that can affect our health include:

Social Factors:

- High unemployment rates
- Social disorder (e.g. youth violence)
- Collective action to improve neighbourhoods

Psychological factors:

- How we identify with our neighbourhood
- Sense of security and satisfaction
- Collective stress

Policy factors:

- City planning & zoning practices (e.g. access to services and resources like public transportation, parks, grocery stores, primary health care)
- Safe places to walk/bike

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Our mission is to reduce health inequities through innovative research that supports social change.