



MIDDLE YEARS MATTER

The middle years for children are ages **6 to 12**. This is a very critical time in their development. It is defined as a period of significant change, with children becoming more independent, having rapidly adapting brains, experiencing many physical changes, and beginning to have a more outward view of the world.

We recognize that we need to work together to ensure children in their middle years have what they need to become independent, healthy, community-minded and successful adults. This special report explores the issue and invites further discussion around potential solutions.



The current state

There are over **1 million** children in their middle years in Ontario alone and this number is expected to grow to **1.26 million** within **20 years**.¹

“Middle childhood is a prime period to impact future change in a child’s life. The investments made during this period can yield favourable outcomes in the areas of future health, intelligence, social and emotional well-being.”²

— Dr. Kandace Mah and Dr. Lee Ford-Jones, Department of Pediatrics, Sick Kids Hospital

Lack of supports during this important life stage leads to poorer long-term outcomes. Providing the right opportunities during this time leads to better outcomes.

They are also called ‘**The Seven Years of Warning**’³ because challenging behavioural patterns or mental health issues not supported or addressed during this time can lead to a lifetime of issues.

Our discussions with numerous community-based organizations, educators, community leaders, parents and families demonstrate to us that more needs to be done for children in their middle years.

What do Ontarians think?

To broaden our understanding of what people’s views are about this important life stage, we surveyed over 1,000 young adults and parents of young children in Ontario to get their input*.

NEARLY 3/4 know that this is an important stage in a child’s development

“The middle years more broadly have tended to be **NEGLECTED IN POLICY AND RESEARCH** with the focus directed towards the early years and later adolescence.”⁴

—Murdoch Children’s Research Institute

These years are also called ‘The Forgotten Years’ because of the lack of research available⁵. What we do have clearly points to the middle years being an important life stage.

Setting them up for success

What we do now for children in their middle years will define who they become as adults. Their ability to make thoughtful decisions, regulate their emotions and build empathy and compassion for others is highly formed during these years and will impact their future success and outcomes. While it’s important to set the stage for future success, most respondents to our survey don’t agree that we are doing a good enough job in investing in and supporting children in their middle years.

64% don’t believe that we are giving them the skills and experiences they need to prosper as adults

64% don’t believe that we are preparing them to become ethical, moral and kind adults

Presence of supportive adults

One very important success factor is the presence of positive adult influences, especially outside of the home. Teachers, mentors, and community leaders all play a role in this. However, our survey shows that people don’t think there are enough of these important people present in the lives of children in their middle years.

60% don’t believe that these children have enough positive adult influences in their lives

Access to opportunities

Access to meaningful experiences and opportunities outside of school that are not related to academics help children broaden their perspective, meet other people, gain confidence, and build new skills. Typically there is reduced access to these types of opportunities in underserved communities, and our survey respondents agree.

NEARLY  three quarters don’t believe that lower income areas have sufficient access to extra-curricular and out of school activities

Our survey results showed that people agree – middle years matter.

* We conducted a survey using Google Surveys methodology with residents of Ontario ages 25 – 34 with over 1,000 respondents per question asked. Over 40% of respondents were parents.

What can be done?

Interventions of various kinds are needed to support children in their middle years. There isn't one answer or one solution. It will take everyone in our community rallied together to create a space for these children to succeed and flourish.

Three key pillars during this important life stage are to:



We have found that a highly effective way to accomplish all 3 of these is to get children leading and involved in community service projects.

Opportunities for community involvement

Parents who responded to our survey agreed that getting children involved in programs and initiatives where they are actively giving back to their communities are important, but that most weren't aware of the existence of these opportunities.

84%

of parents believe that getting children involved in giving back in their communities can affect their development in a positive way

87%

of parents believe that opportunities for community involvement will lead to increased leadership and confidence.

However, there is a lack of such programming in the communities that we currently serve.

ONLY 39%

of parents are aware of opportunities for children to participate actively in their communities

Below represents the words our survey respondents used when asked what the most important life skill that a 6 to 12 year old child needs to learn to succeed in the future. The larger the word, the more often it was used. More of these words relate to increased understanding and thoughtfulness for others than any other area.



Involving Kids in community change builds them up!

In our recent program year, consistent with results from prior years, we see that children in their middle years doing good in their community with support from encouraging adults creates remarkable change:

88%

of children built stronger social networks

23%

of children felt more comfortable expressing themselves

Kids feeling strong about their problem solving skills grew from

23% to 38%

Kids feeling strong about their goal setting skills grew from

34% to 49%

Kids believing strongly that they can do anything when they focus grew from

40% to 55%

What we're doing about it

We focus on getting young people actively involved in a tangible way in making their communities stronger, and in the process building their own leadership, confidence, life skills and networks. For children in their middle years to thrive, we believe that they need to grow up in **Possibility Neighbourhoods**, which are defined by 3 components:



Kid-Centered Community: Young people are valued and heard, and help to develop solutions for the issues affecting their neighbourhoods

Barriers to access are removed: Every child has access to high-impact opportunities to learn, grow and succeed

Encouraging allies and resources: Community agencies, companies, schools and residents are enabling children to become civically active

REFERENCES:

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2. Mah, V.K. & Ford-Jones, E. L. (2012). *Spotlight on middle childhood: Rejuvenating the 'forgotten years'*. *Paediatrics & Child Health*, 2012 Feb; 17(2): 81-83 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3299351/>
3. Augimeri, L., Walsh, M., Woods, S., & Jiang, D. (2012). *Risk Assessment*

To support the development of Possibility Neighbourhoods and children in their middle years, we are:

- Aiming to double our programs which provide the space for children to be involved in their community
- Using our voice and reach to raise awareness about the importance of the middle years
- Seeking collaborations and partnerships which will strengthen our shared impact
- Advocating for more research to help us better understand this important age group
- Speaking to community influencers to invite them to champion this issue

What we invite you to do

We can't do this alone. This is a broad and complex issue which needs everyone on board to support. We've shared what we are doing, here is what you can do:

- Support and raise awareness about the importance of the middle years by sharing this document with others
- Volunteer and join groups working towards supporting children in their middle years
- Donate to initiatives and groups aiming to close the gap through program delivery, community outreach and research
- Advocate for policies and practices which support children in their middle years

and *Clinical Risk Management for Young Antisocial Children: The Forgotten Group*. *Universitas Psychologica*, 11(4), 1147-1156.

4. Evans-Whipp, T., Mundy, L., Canterford, L. & Patton, G. (2017). Student Wellbeing, Engagement and Learning across the Middle Years. The Centre for Adolescent Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute. https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/middeyears wellbeing_with_isbn.pdf
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