Op Ed #1

As a family physician, I have the distinct honor of meeting Alberta’s future every day in my office. I see newborn babies, preschool and school-age children, and adolescents on the brink of adulthood. Regardless of their age or life stage, when I look into their eyes, I see how we are all inter-connected. That’s because our future is inextricably tied to how we, as adult citizens, work to foster the health and well-being of the next generation who will, in turn, take over our work and shepherd our communities. Some communities have implemented innovative programs and policies that can work toward ensuring this future, but these have not been brought to scale throughout the province. Doing so requires us to figure out how to bring more communities on line to these innovations. [Begins with Values of Interdependence and Ingenuity]

Thirty years of practice have taught me many lessons, but one lesson that is reinforced time and again is this: What we offer to children almost always comes back to us three-fold. What do I mean by this? When we fully attend to all of the domains of children’s development — cognitive, physical, and social/emotional — we can expect to see children who grow up to be productive workers and responsible citizens who participate in civic life. When we fail to support the developmental domains of childhood, we all pay the price of a less robust society. [Explains development with “Can’t Do One Without the Other” and reinforces Value of Interdependence]
Recent discoveries in the neurosciences confirm this important life lesson. We now know that the early years of life matter because early experiences affect the architecture of the developing brain. As it emerges, the quality of that architecture establishes either a sturdy or fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follows — and getting things right the first time is easier than trying to fix them later. [Explains what develops using Brain Architecture]

Just like a building, brains are built from the bottom up. This means that positive early experiences are essential to what comes next. When early experiences are defined by chronic and extreme stress, such as poverty, abuse, or severe maternal depression, a toxic stress reaction occurs in children’s brains that thwarts the building process, and the probability of poor outcomes increases. It is important to distinguish among three kinds of stress: positive, tolerable, and toxic. We do not need to worry about positive stress (which is short-lived stress, like getting an immunization in my office!). Another kind of stress occurs during the inevitable challenges of life, such as the death of a loved one that is made tolerable by the presence of supportive relationships. But toxic stress lasts longer; happens without consistent supportive relationships; and leads to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health. In fact, new research shows that children exposed to highly detrimental environments can develop an exaggerated stress response that, over time, weakens their defense system against diseases, from heart disease to diabetes and depression. That exaggerated response never goes away, with lifelong health consequences. [Explains what harms development using Toxic Stress]

How do we create conditions in our communities that build healthy brain architecture by reducing and buffering exposure to toxic stress? Again the research is clear: all children need to live in an environment of healthy relationships with family members, with caregivers, and with members of the community. Like the process of serve and return in games such as tennis and volleyball, children naturally reach out for interaction. For our youngest children, it may be through babbling and facial expressions shared with their parents or other caregivers; for older children, it is through conversation and positive attention. If adults do not respond by getting in sync and offering back the same level of engagement, the child’s learning process is incomplete. This also has huge negative implications for later learning as well as physical and mental health. [Explains how development happens using Serve and Return]
Think of it this way: the mental health of children is like the levelness of a piece of furniture, such as a table. In order to function properly, the table needs to be level, or else you end up with broken plates and cups on the floor. In the same way, children need regular doses of “Serve and Return” to create stability and good functioning in their brains, and a level environment that buffers stress.

The Kids Come First coalition is working to ensure that all children, from the time they come into the world until they are launched into adulthood, have the opportunities and supports they need to support their healthy brain development. We are working to increase support for policies and programs that support environments of healthy relationships by creating high-quality child care environments for all children, improving economic environments for all families, and making sure all children have access to programs that support good mental health. [Introduces policy solutions] As a society, we now have a diagnosis. It’s time to come together to provide the treatment that we know works. [Closes with the Value of Ingenuity]

Op-Ed #2

The Alberta we wish to create requires that all of our children share in the opportunity to develop to their fullest potential. Their healthy development supports our well-being as an entire province. The Better Futures for Children project has just released a report calling for better evaluation of programs for children with mental health problems, because the province cannot simply leave some children’s development to undermine their and our future stability. [Begins with Value of Interdependence]

As the report Future Directions in Children’s Mental Health notes, children’s early experiences shape the developing architecture of the brain, providing either a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behavior and health that follows. When this architecture is supported, children can experience good mental health. One way to think of children’s mental health is that it’s like the levelness of a piece of furniture, such as a table. The levelness of a table is what makes it usable and able to function, just like the mental health of children is what enables them to function well in many environments. Some children’s brains develop on floors that are level. These children have access to good nutrition and health care, and have healthy, supportive relationships with
caring adults. Other children’s brains develop on more sloped or slanted floors. Perhaps they are exposed to abuse or violence, have unreliable or unsupportive relationships, and don’t have access to key programs and resources. For these children, the emotional or behavioral issues that result frequently require mental health services. [Explains mental health using Levelness]

We have many opportunities in Alberta to provide this levelness in the conditions and environments to which our children are exposed, by working to stabilize the environment of relationships and experiences that form the contexts of children’s development. For some, this means removing them from situations in which continued exposure to toxic stress erodes their levelness. For others, it means providing the safe, secure and reliable back and forth that puts a child on a level ground. For many, this means making sure children and their families have access to comprehensive, integrated, quality services, either before a mental health problem becomes serious or once a mental illness develops. Contrary to this practical ideal, however, the report found that the mental health services infrastructure in Alberta continues to be fragmented and services are not reaching every child that needs them. [Introduces solutions]

This new report is important for what it can tell MLAs, ministers, and other policy makers as they make funding decisions about children’s mental health programs. There are dozens of initiatives and programs, some of which appear to have good results. But we need to measure the effectiveness and evaluate the outcomes of all mental health services for children, so that we can expand and replicate the most effective programs and develop a comprehensive system that really supports the levelness in a child’s developing foundation. By identifying the effectiveness factors that make programs successful, Better Futures for Children has done a great service with this report. It’s a welcome voice toward Alberta becoming a leader in addressing children’s mental health. [Discusses what supports development using Effectiveness Factors; closes with Value of Ingenuity]