

CONSEIL
SUPÉRIEUR
DE L'ÉDUCATION

Children's well-being at school: Let's do our homework

Summary

June 2020



Québec 

To read the full brief (in French), visit www.cse.gouv.qc.ca or, to request a copy, contact the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation:

- By telephone: 418 643-3851 (voice mail)
- By email: conseil@cse.gouv.qc.ca
- By mail:
1175, avenue Lavigerie, bureau 180
Québec (Québec) G1V 5B2

How to cite this document:

Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (2020). *Children's well-being at school: Let's do our homework: summary*, Québec, Le Conseil, 16 p.

Children's well-being is a fundamental human right protected by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations in November 1989.

In this brief, Children's well-being at school: Let's do our homework, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation studies the factors that influence the mental health and well-being of preschool and elementary school children. After describing the situation and children's needs, it looks at what levers schools can use to help children grow, learn and fulfill their potential within a compassionate school setting and throughout their lives.



« My ideal school. »
Basma, 5th grade

Why is children’s well-being at school important?

The Conseil wished to answer this question from the onset by providing an overview of children’s lives, starting with an illustration of the heavy demands placed on children each day. Descriptive data offer a portrait of the diversity of children and their needs and put into perspective certain vulnerability factors (children with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties; children from disadvantaged or immigrant backgrounds; Indigenous children, etc.). Moreover, studies carried out in Québec and in Canada show that while most children are doing well, others are in psychological distress.

Well-being and compassion

Well-being is closely tied to mental health; in a way, it represents its positive component. Well-being is multifactorial and multidimensional, and includes emotional, psychological and social aspects.

Compassion is considered a means to ensure the child’s well-being.

Because every child is unique, the Conseil firmly believes that we must pay attention to the mental health and well-being of all children enrolled in Québec’s elementary schools. By adopting a universal, preventive approach, schools will be able to take action to ensure the well-being of all children.

An ecological systems view of well-being at school

The literature on well-being at school is unequivocal on the multifactorial, multidimensional and systemic nature of well-being. With this in view, the Conseil used an ecological systems approach to gain an overall picture of children’s well-being in Québec elementary schools, taking into account the various factors that are in dynamic interaction with the environments where children live and grow. This allows for a better understanding of the impact of these factors on children, their classroom and their school. These various environments are described according to the research and to observations in the field. Their analysis serves to highlight what initiatives to pursue as well as the obstacles to be overcome.

The following figure is a simplified version of the diagram that forms the core of this brief. It illustrates the Conseil’s vision of well-being at school and presents the different environments that were examined.

Children’s well-being is a responsibility to be shared by all school staff, the family, the community and the decision-making bodies at the different levels of the education system and within government.

Children’s well-being at school (simplified version¹)



1 To see the full version of the diagram on children’s well-being at school, visit www.cse.gouv.qc.ca/en/childrens-well-being-toolkit.

Social and emotional competence—a powerful protective factor

At the centre of the diagram are children's and adults' social and emotional competencies. These competencies provide children with the tools they need to protect and assert themselves, manage their emotions, become responsible citizens and succeed in school. Because they are developed mainly through experience, school is an ideal place to learn and practise these skills. Development of social and emotional skills begins in early childhood and continues throughout life. For adults, these competencies form the foundation for compassionate interventions. For children, they constitute a protective factor.

Individual characteristics

Children's cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses are shaped by their cognitive capacities, aptitudes and stage of development. Therefore, whether in the classroom, at daycare or at home, interventions should be adapted to the child's level of maturity in these different developmental areas.

Aside from social and emotional competencies, positive mental health is a protective factor that enables children to approach life situations with confidence and to grow in a healthy way. In the scientific literature, resilience is often considered to play a preventive role in the area of mental health. A sense of personal efficacy allows children to approach school and other learning with confidence and realism. Finally, children with healthy lifestyle habits will be in a better position to learn, manage their stress and feel comfortable at school. In this regard, the Conseil documented three factors in particular: sleep, physical activity and a healthy diet. The use of digital devices is also discussed as a lifestyle habit that raises many questions.

School and pedagogical environment

The school and pedagogical environment encompasses elements specific to the school, of which daycare services are an integral component. A positive and safe school climate, with shared values and where rules are applied in a fair and equitable manner, is critical. Development of a sense of belonging, reinforced through activities and interventions that foster communication and involvement, also contributes to children's well-being.

In the classroom, certain pedagogical practices can foster or hinder the development of social and emotional competencies and the child's well-being. The Conseil examined these practices to determine what enables children to feel more confident and emotionally secure when carrying out learning tasks and other activities. Factors that are conducive to learning include a sensitive teacher and interventions that support development of the whole child. In terms of obstacles, teachers note that class time is often taken up by evaluations required to produce a report card—time which could otherwise be devoted to providing learning assistance and supporting the overall development of the child.

Finally, guiding children and parents through school transitions, providing an appropriate and stimulating physical environment, and offering a variety of extracurricular activities are also protective factors on which schools have the power to act.

Support for children and school staff

Within the school and pedagogical environment, another element that is critical to ensuring mental health and well-being is support for children and school staff. Although the school network is largely responsible for the services offered, schools can also count on the contribution of services in the health and social services network, as well as resources offered by various community organizations. Through the complementary educational services departments as well as the regional support and expertise service centres (and the Inclusive Educative Service in the English-language sector), a number of resources are available to schools and school boards to support children, school staff and, indirectly, families.

In this regard, the Conseil underlines the need to optimize the use of professionals who intervene to support children's mental health (e.g. psychologists, psychoeducators, social workers), and notes that the medicalization of learning difficulties (need for a diagnosis, clinical approach) is an issue of recurrent concern in the school system. The availability of professional resources and the shortage of workers in these fields also poses a major challenge in both networks.

As well, alignment of these two government departments—the Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur and the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux—remains problematic, despite efforts made by both sides. Health and social services resources are deployed in schools according to the priorities established by the health and social services centres (CISSS or CIUSSS²), which means that practices vary

2 Centres intégrés de santé et de services sociaux (CISSS) and Centres intégrés universitaires de santé et de services sociaux (CIUSSS)

from one community to another. Actors in the school network also deplore the lack of front-line services to support psychosocial interventions for school-aged children and their families.

Finally, with a goal to highlighting the levers that exist in the current school system and in the health and social services network, this brief documents various government initiatives that aim to promote mental health and the development of social and emotional competencies. The analysis reveals that while many initiatives exist, they are poorly coordinated and sometimes not well known. Moreover, the conditions to successfully implement these initiatives are not always present.

The professional environment

Putting into practice the protective factors listed to date, whether to support children directly or to create a positive climate in the school, classroom and daycare, rests largely with school staff. The professional environment in which the school team operates has a significant impact on the quality of the interventions provided by staff members and their ability to ensure children's well-being. In this brief, the Conseil focused on five aspects of the professional environment: staff well-being; the social and emotional competencies of staff; a sense of personal and collective efficacy; professional development; and the presence of participatory, shared and compassionate leadership.

The Conseil deems that all staff members must have access to initial and continuous professional development, to help foster their social and emotional competencies and make them aware of the compassionate behaviours and attitudes to adopt toward the children and adults with whom they interact. Teachers as well as daycare educators should also be empowered to develop the competencies required to support children's social and emotional development.

The community environment

A child's educational experience in preschool and elementary school is not limited to the school and family environment. An ecological systems perspective must also consider the community in which children and their families live. Of course, each community has very distinct characteristics.

Community organizations, municipalities, recreational groups and other actors rooted in the community can play a role in the well-being of children and families. They have special ties with families and are attuned to the specific needs and challenges in their community. These actors can therefore contribute favourably by working in tandem with the school.

The family environment

The family and the school are the two primary environments that influence children's development. According to the principle of partnering with parents in education, the Conseil deems that it's important to build a relationship of mutual trust and to create a space for dialogue with the family—one that will allow for constructive discussions based on a shared understanding of the child's needs, while respecting each party's roles and abilities.

Challenges to collaboration and cooperation

Given the many different individuals concerned and the need to act in a consistent, complementary and concerted manner toward the children and their families, close collaboration among all actors is critical. These actors include the education network, the health and social services network, the childcare services network, community actors and, of course, the family and the children themselves.

While this collaboration is essential throughout children's paths to support the development of their full potential, to act preventively, or to react in an appropriate and concerted manner during certain periods or at precise times, it is particularly important during school transitions, and critical when the child's situation requires special services. Psychosocial support provided to assist children and their families is necessarily part of a collaborative process.

Work carried out to develop this brief shows that collaboration, with the goal of acting in a concerted and complementary manner, remains a significant challenge at all levels of the system. The Conseil observes that actions remain compartmentalized and that interventions among children and families are often carried out in silos. Moreover, interruptions in services for children can occur when roles and responsibilities are ill-defined or understood differently by those working in the two networks.

In short, collaboration and cooperation require a deeper knowledge and a clarification of roles and responsibilities as well as continuous dialogue to ensure a common understanding of the child's needs. Throughout this process, it is important to always retain the lens of promoting children's positive mental health and supporting the development of their full potential.

Recommendations

The Conseil's reflection was guided by three principles, which serve as the underpinning for its recommendations: to consider the whole child, to consider the child's well-being as society's collective duty and a shared responsibility, and that beyond being a place for academic learning, school is where children live and grow.

The following recommendations are organized around five areas of focus. They are formulated according to what the Conseil deems most important for children's well-being at school.

Focus 1

Consider children as actively involved in their own well-being

In accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, schools must give children a voice and seek their participation in decisions that concern them. Children can and must contribute to their well-being according to their abilities and maturity level.

The Conseil recommends that children:

- 1) Take their place, that is, get involved in the school according to their interests, participate actively in decision-making, and express their needs, concerns and dreams.

The Conseil recommends that school teams:

- 2) Provide children with guidance, make them aware of and help them to recognize their rights, and give them a voice when making decisions that concern them.

Focus 2

Help children develop their social and emotional competencies

Social and emotional competencies provide children with the tools to protect and assert themselves, manage their emotions, become responsible citizens and succeed in school; school, as a living environment, is an ideal place for this learning. Teaching and formative evaluation of social and emotional competencies is therefore vital to support children's development of these skills.

The Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education and Higher Education:

- 3) Make the development of children's social and emotional competencies explicit and mandatory, and consider the acquisition of these skills as know-how that is developed in all spheres of activity in the school, including in school daycares.

Focus 3

Provide accessible and universal psychosocial assistance resources on a timely basis

The question of well-being does not concern only those children with characteristics that could make them more vulnerable. Any child may need immediate help at any time (e.g. anxiety caused by a temporary situation or a one-time event). Professional resources are not always available at the time required by the situation.

In addition, children and their families have to make their way through multiple systems (e.g. perinatal services, health and social services, early educational childcare services, school). Each one has its own administrative rules and distinct way of operating, as well as its own file on the child; this makes continuity of services and educational interventions difficult.

The Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education and Higher Education:

- 4) Change the funding model for services to students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties, so as to minimize the number of administrative assessments that complementary educational services professionals are required to perform.

The Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education and Higher Education and the Minister of Health and Social Services:

- 5) Ensure that professional and technical resources are available to support school staff and to assist children directly in their environment (i.e. in the classroom and school daycare).
- 6) In collaboration with the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux, make front-line services available and easily accessible to the school, and set up flexible psychosocial intervention services that can act conscientiously with children and families, whether the children are identified or not, whether they have ongoing or one-time needs.

The Conseil recommends that school boards or the future school service centres:

- 7) Review the mandate of school psychologists and any other professionals concerned in order to release them from administrative-type assessments and, in this way, enable them to give priority to supporting children and teachers.

The Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education and Higher Education, the Minister of Health and Social Services and the Minister of Family:

- 8) Ensure that the various bodies have the means for sharing the information that is necessary to respond to children's needs and to ensure their well-being in an ethical manner while respecting the confidentiality of personal information.

Focus 4

Support professional development for the well-being of children and school staff

Well-being at school requires the development of social and emotional competencies among all school staff who interact with children, especially teachers, school daycare staff and school principals. Development of these competencies is achieved, in particular, through initial and ongoing professional development, and requires on-site support.

The Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education and Higher Education:

- 9) Make sure that the next competency framework for teachers contains elements targeting children's well-being and, more specifically, the development of social and emotional competencies in children and teachers.
- 10) In collaboration with the Fonds de recherche du Québec – Société et culture, support field research through the creation of a "concerted action" grant program focusing on well-being in elementary school, where staff in practice settings work directly with research teams to find innovative solutions to the problems identified.
- 11) Promote and support the trial of promising or innovative practices to foster the development of children's social and emotional competencies and evaluate measures in place with a goal to improving their well-being.

The Conseil recommends that CEGEPS and universities:

- 12) Maintain, enhance or adjust initial training and professional development programs for teachers and school daycare educators so as to place particular emphasis on the emotional nature of adult-child relationships at school and the development of social and emotional competencies in children and adults.

The Conseil recommends that school boards or the future school service centres and school principals:

- 13) Ensure that appropriate training and support measures related to social and emotional competencies are available to school staff.

The Conseil recommends that school teams:

- 14) Make well-being at school a collective responsibility where each person engages in a professional development process according to their own social and emotional competencies and those of the children.

Focus 5

Collaborate to ensure a common understanding of the child's needs and provide a concerted response

Children's well-being at school concerns everyone who works in the school, including daycare staff; a consistent, global approach is therefore required. This approach leads to certain collaboration challenges.

The Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education and Higher Education, the Minister of Health and Social Services and the local and regional actors in both networks:

- 15) Provide strong leadership to ensure there is collaboration between the networks to support the implementation of formal, simple and flexible mechanisms for working together, with a goal to allowing continuous dialogue among local actors or within a given region. Centred around the needs of children and their families, this collaborative work must result in concrete solutions to the problems encountered.

The Conseil recommends that school principals, in collaboration with school teams:

- 16) Share responsibilities and clearly define each person's role, in order to provide support that meets the needs of children in the classroom and in the school daycare.
- 17) In collaboration with parents, establish simple mechanisms for communicating and working together.
- 18) In collaboration with community organizations, establish partnerships according to the school's needs, while respecting the autonomy and mission of each party.

Conditions for implementation of these recommendations

Implementing the above recommendations will require certain favourable conditions. These include the hiring and allocation of qualified personnel, stable school teams, more flexibility in the administrative rules so that schools can adapt to their communities, optimal organization of school time, and a physical environment that offers a sufficient number of pleasing, varied and functional spaces for children and school staff.

Conclusion

Children's well-being in elementary school requires a deeper understanding of contributing actions and coordinated implementation by all school actors. Despite the efforts already made, it is clear that the school system still has a lot of work to do before schools are truly adapted to children's needs.

Based on its reflection, the Conseil believes that the first priorities are the development of the social and emotional competencies in children and staff, the availability of resources to meet the needs of all children on a timely basis, training of school staff, as well as collaboration within the school team, with the family and community, and between the education and health and social services networks.

At all times and at all levels of the system, any decision concerning the child must be taken according to the primary interest of the child. Independent of any changes made in the school system or, more broadly, in the health network, and regardless of any instabilities that may result from successive reforms, **the child's well-being must always be protected**. Children must be able to count on the support of a compassionate adult, under any circumstances.

Research conducted within the context of this brief has led to the production of three complementary publications (in French) in the Studies and Research collection of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation:

- *La santé mentale des enfants et des adolescents : données statistiques et enquêtes recensées* (Couture, 2019);
- *Les compétences sociales et émotionnelles dans les programmes éducatifs et d'enseignement de la petite enfance à la fin du primaire* (St-Louis, 2020);
- *Le bien-être des enfants à l'école primaire : un regard sur certains facteurs de risque et de protection* (Parent et St-Louis, 2020).

50-0524

**Conseil supérieur
de l'éducation**

Québec



   @csequebec
cse.gouv.qc.ca