



Institute of Population and Public Health



## Applied Public Health Chair Impact Case Study

### Dr. Elizabeth Saewyc: Integrating healthy development in health planning for youth



#### Research Focus

Population health planning tends to focus on preventing or reducing risk behaviours, such as smoking and injuries from accidents. But simply subtracting risks does not add up to good health. There are many positive approaches that can be taken during a child's critical developmental years to improve health over the life course.

Dr. Elizabeth Saewyc, Applied Public Health Chair, has devoted much of her career to identifying, promoting, and assessing positive factors that lead to healthy youth development. Dr. Saewyc's experience as a public health nurse and researcher in this area contributed to BC's Ministry of Health commissioning her to conduct an evidence review of population-level interventions aimed at fostering healthy development in children and youth.

The review was one of 21 commissioned to develop Core Model Program guidelines for BC's regional health authorities to use in program planning, priority setting, and evaluation over the next five years. While the other reviews dealt primarily with interventions to reduce risks, Dr. Saewyc's paradigm-shifting study focused on fostering protective factors and healthy growth and behaviours.

The guidelines that emerged from the review aim to maximize the healthy physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development of children and adolescents, aged 6 to 19. They recommend evidence-based best and promising practices in four areas: leadership and advocacy; health promotion; prevention initiatives and early identification of risk or vulnerability; and surveillance, monitoring, and program evaluation.

Endorsed by the Ministry and disseminated to health authorities across the province, this initiative has the potential to affect health programs for some half a million children and youth in BC, and to serve as a model for other parts of Canada.

#### Research Impact: Making a Difference

Dr. Saewyc's review was the result of significant efforts to increase public health and community knowledge about protective factors, risk reduction, and healthy youth development in BC, led by the non-profit McCreary Centre Society. These efforts included interdisciplinary conferences and presentations on such



areas as resilience, adolescent transitions, vulnerable youth, and rethinking risk, and the publication of a number of user-friendly research reports on the subject—most of them authored or co-authored by Dr. Saewyc, who serves as Research Director for McCreary.

The Chair also provided expertise to the Core Model Program by serving on the working group during the nine months the guidelines were under development. In addition to providing recommendations for best practices, the group was tasked with identifying appropriate indicators for evaluating progress and outcomes. This was a notable challenge, because monitoring is typically focused on reducing negative outcomes rather than achieving positive, developmental milestones. The province-wide BC Adolescent Health Survey, also led by the Chair, provided a number of useful measures for this purpose, including indicators of protective factors, such as family, school, and cultural connectedness; extracurricular activities; and peers with healthy attitudes.

A number of other ministries and agencies responsible for children and youth in BC have adopted the program's innovative focus on positive indicators and protective factors. For example, its indicators have been incorporated into the Provincial Health Officer's annual report on the state of child health in the province and form part of the monitoring approach for the latest action plan of the Ministry of Child and Family Development, as well as the province's 10-Year Mental Health Plan. The BC Representative for Children and Youth (an independent body that provides support to those dealing with the child welfare system) recently requested data on these same indicators for its *Growing Up in BC* report.

From the strong support shown by frontline caregivers during consultations to the interest generated in other ministries and organizations since its adoption, the Model Core Program for healthy development in children and youth in BC is proof that a focus on positive measures to population-health planning is long overdue.

## Want to Know More?

To learn more about the UBC Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Consortium, please visit: [www.saravyc.ubc.ca](http://www.saravyc.ubc.ca). To learn more about the McCreary Centre Society, please visit: [www.mcs.bc.ca](http://www.mcs.bc.ca)

Dr. Elizabeth Saewyc is the CIHR/PHAC Applied Public Health Chair in Building Capacity for Population-level Monitoring and Interventions for Healthy Youth

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