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How can we build communities that better support children and their parents?

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As I listened to the news in the last week I am alarmed to hear two separate news reports of parents being charged with harming or causing the death of their young children. My initial reaction is a sense of dread and sorrow for the children followed by empathy for the families. One might be tempted to solely blame the parents for these tragedies, however I also feel a sense of collective responsibility.

Don't get me wrong; I am not excusing the actions of these parents. Having said that, I find myself taking a pause to reflect upon my own role as a parent. While I am equipped with knowledge and experience related to early child development and psychology, I recall all too well how overwhelming it is to be a first time parent. I placed enormous expectations on myself to be perfect which sometimes meant incredible stress when I realized I was not. My almost 26 year old son has grown into a wonderful young man who will be embarking on his chosen career path in a matter of weeks so clearly things turned out well.

Fortunately my son's father and I were able to co-parent well with the support of family, friends and even to an extent community. We lived in a community with many young families with local parks, schools, accessible programs and services tailored for children such as 'mom's & tots', and all manners of early learning and care programs. Apart from my employment in the sector, I was introduced to other new parents in my community through a wonderful public health nurse who led a 6-week mother's group. It was there that I also forged lasting relationships with other mothers and their partners. In turn, my son continues to maintain a relationship with the children who are now young adults.

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This network of supports without a doubt contributed to my success as a parent. There was a range of opportunities available in my neighbourhood to help me enjoy my role as a parent amongst this sense of community. I was fortunate that my community had quality accessible programs and services for young children, which included great childcare programs. Yet I can't help but feel disheartened as I hear about parents experiencing very serious struggles.

Does any of this have to do with what appears to be a shift in priorities for our society? Daily living seems to have become increasingly pressurized with the fast pace, extended families living far and wide and often spread thin. Is society preoccupied with issues other than children and families? As noted by my colleagues Kerry McCuaig and Emis Akbari in the [Early Childhood Education Report 2014](#), there has certainly been an increase in investments made by provincial governments in the preschool years, however we need to see continued and increased financial investments from all levels of government. While initiatives such as Poverty Reduction and the development of Community Hubs are being led by government policy makers; what are citizens doing to contribute to the success of parents in our communities? We need to rally around parents to provide much needed resources, support and a sense of hope to improve the outcomes for their children. It really does take a village! Quality childcare and parent resource programs are a couple of places we can ensure children receive a head start in life.

As parents, and even grandparents, there are a few activities we can engage in to promote the wellbeing of our children;

1. Reach out to parents, offer words of encouragement instead of criticism; parenting can be very challenging, even for the best of us.
2. Investigate what resources for children and families are available in your community so that you might be able to share information with a parent or participate yourself.
3. Elect government representatives that will make sound investments in young children and families.

4. Get involved with your community to pressure your local, provincial and federal government representatives to invest in the short and long term future of children and their families. You can help by signing the Open Letter (Empowering the Future: Best Evidence for Investing in Early Childhood Education in Canada): ECinCanada.ca
5. Join us at the [12th Annual Summer Institute on Early Childhood Development](#), which will focus on Wellbeing in an Integrated Workforce.
6. Subscribe to the Atkinson Centre listserv for the latest information on early childhood research, policy and practice. (email atkinson.centre@utoronto.ca with your consent)

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