I walked. My mother had given me the freedom of the streets as soon as I could say our telephone number. I walked and memorized the neighborhood. I made a mental map and located myself upon it.

– Annie Dillard, from *An American Childhood*

6. From Micro to Macro: Community Vitality and Children
Healthy and vital communities are in some sense a macrocosm of healthy families. Society needs to invest in the well-being of individuals in order to create sustainable, healthy communities, and investing in the well-being of children is fundamental. Research demonstrates that children growing up in healthy, supportive families and communities are more likely to be healthy and stable in adulthood, and according to the Child and Youth Well-Being Index (CWI), children’s level of well-being directly reflects the strength of our institutions. It is affected by the built environment and the quality of the family’s residential neighbourhood, family income, education, family stability and emotional support, a family’s access to social capital and the quality of interactions with others. It follows, then, that investing in the things that support the well-being of children will not only increase the quality of children’s lives, but will also help to increase the vitality of their community as a whole.

In Canada, the prevalence of poverty among children is perhaps surprisingly high: over the past decade the poverty rate for Canada’s children has risen to one in five. Families who experience poverty are likely to experience hunger and live in poor-quality neighbourhoods, dramatically affecting the well-being of families and children. Furthermore, research illustrates that family economic conditions are tied to educational achievement, with children from low-income families at greater risk of low test scores in childhood, grade failing, disengagement with learning, and dropping out of school. Let’s begin with the issue of hunger:

A survey of children and youth conducted in 1994 discusses the prevalence of hunger among Canadian children and looks at the coping strategies used by families. Hunger, it shows, is more prevalent among single-parent families, families relying on social assistance, and off-reserve Aboriginal families. The study also revealed that it is common for parents to deprive themselves of food in order to feed their children, and for children living in poor conditions to skip meals or eat less. Other coping strategies can include seeking support from relatives or from food banks. However, food banks are reported to be a poor source of nutrition as they are often difficult to access, and the food is low in nutritional quality and of variable supply. Parents experiencing hunger are more likely than other primary caregivers to report daily cigarette use as a means to reduce stress and suppress appetite. However, alcohol use is reported to be significantly higher among primary caregivers who do not experience family hunger. Poverty often begets poverty, trapping people inside a vicious cycle, and it is in government’s interest to ensure that social policies and support systems are in place to assist families potentially at risk of experiencing hunger.
The quality of neighbourhoods and the built environment can impact the well-being of children on multiple levels. Research has demonstrated that lower-quality neighbourhoods can be connected to poorer outcomes for children.¹⁶⁷ They generally have fewer public parks and green space, lower-quality public schools (in terms of access to resources), fewer recreational facilities and fewer after-school programs, as well as higher unemployment, poverty and crime. Unsafe community conditions can create stress or anxiety for parents and parental stress can have a negative impact on the well-being of the child,¹⁶⁸ perpetuating the issue. Safer neighbourhoods have been correlated with fewer emotional and behavioural disorders among children. Within the inner-city context, contact with nature and green space may increase children’s self-discipline¹⁶⁹ and may positively affect their performance at school. Municipal planners need to design communities equitably, ensuring that poor and/or culturally diverse neighbourhoods are treated equally with regards to municipal investment in public facilities, community centres, parks, play areas, public transportation, farmers’ markets, public art and public spaces – all features of vital communities.

Turning to education, studies have illustrated that the income and socioeconomic status of our parents correlates with measures of child and, later, adult achievement.¹⁷⁰ The relationship between family economic conditions and achievement is especially strong among children in low-income families. Furthermore, conditions in early childhood can prove key when it comes to children finishing their schooling. According to a study published in the American Sociological Review “early cognitive and physical development suggest that family income in the first five years of life is a powerful correlate of developmental outcomes in early and middle childhood”.¹⁷¹ Low family income and chronic poverty relates to children's health, in particular intellectual functioning, academic achievement, social behaviour, and psychological well-being, as well as to adult educational and economic attainment down the road.¹⁷²

A family’s socioeconomic conditions can be quite significantly impacted by events such as divorce and unemployment.¹⁷³ Unemployment in general increases stress, and this is especially the case for single mothers whose income often drops more than their partners’ following separation and divorce. Studies have demonstrated that low family income can create economic stress that leads to conflict between parents,¹⁷⁴ and stress experienced by parents can impact the entire family, negatively affecting the vitality of children. Government-funded after-school programs can be a way to reduce stress for low-income parents. Moreover, programs that provide cognitive stimulation and supportive interactions with adults can increase academic performance and result in lower levels of behavioural problems for
participating children.\textsuperscript{175} This is particularly relevant for children without adult supervision during out-of-school hours, especially if they live in low-income, unsafe neighbourhoods.\textsuperscript{176} Anti-poverty programs that provide support for combining work and family responsibilities can greatly benefit the development of school-age children,\textsuperscript{177} and social policies that focus on the importance of increasing the incomes of poor families can also enhance the abilities and achievements of children. “[M]ost important appears to be the elimination of deep and persistent poverty during a child’s early years”.\textsuperscript{178}

\textbf{Vital communities are places} where people feel safe. A community’s vitality may well rest on how safe its most vulnerable inhabitants – the elderly and the young – feel. The young are especially vulnerable, as the following childhood sexual abuse statistics reveal:

- 1 in 3 females and 1 in 6 males in Canada experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 18;
- 80\% of all child abusers are the father, foster father, stepfather or another relative or close family friend;
- in a study of imprisoned rapists, 60–80\% of offenders had been molested as children;
- in a study of prostitutes and juvenile delinquents, 80\% reported being sexually abused as children\textsuperscript{179};
- almost 40\% of women assaulted by spouses said their children witnessed the violence against them (either directly or indirectly) and in many cases the violence was severe\textsuperscript{180}; and
- children who are exposed to physical violence in their homes are more than twice as likely to be physically aggressive as those who have not.\textsuperscript{181}

What these statistics demonstrate, most broadly, is that violence is a widespread problem in our society and significant efforts are required in order to reduce it. With respect to children and youth, we need to build and support social policies, programs and after-school care programs that are committed to reducing violence and caring for those who are at risk or are experiencing violence directly. Educational practitioners need to be trained to deal with violence that occurs within the school system. Significant research and policy attention needs to be devoted to breaking the cycle illustrated in the above data.
Let’s look now at violence of a different sort. Bullying is defined as involving “an imbalance of strength (either physical or psychological); a negative physical or verbal action; a deliberate intention to hurt another; and it is repeated over time”. There is a general consensus in the literature that children experience bullying and victimization frequently.

Research on the subject has traditionally focused on overt aggression, however researchers are beginning to observe a socially oriented form of aggression and victimization. “In contrast to physical aggression, which harms others through physical damage or the threat of such damage”, examples of indirect aggression include aggression “against a peer by excluding her from one’s peer group” or “threatening to withdraw a friendship”. Sex differences are less pronounced in this more inclusive definition of aggression. We do know that girls are more likely to use indirect aggression than physical aggression, and in has been theorized that this might be due to the fact that indirect aggression damages goals that are of particular importance for girls. It is also typically more socially acceptable for boys to use physical aggression than girls.

Depression and anxiety directly connect to bullying and victimization, as do suicide rates. Anxiety results from repeated exposure to bullying and victimization that can lead to physical or psychological harm. Of particular note, indirect aggression, including personal harm or attack by others, has been found to be the most frequent and intense worry of children in grades two through six. Other worries included rejection and exclusion from group activities, being ignored by peers, and betrayal. Efforts need to be made within the school system and after-school programs to encourage compassionate interactions among children and to address bullying and victimization in order to make the educational experience more fulfilling and nourishing.

An emerging concern is cyber bullying. In the past few years in Canada there have been a number of suicides of young people, ranging from the age of ten to seventeen, understood to be the result of online forms of bullying. This insidious and covert form of bullying has been difficult to address, and demands community dialogue and political will. A community's vitality is dependent upon open dialogue and political leaders who create the space for that dialogue to occur free from fear of political correctness. It takes a community to raise a child, and when there are norms and values about the meaning of the good society, the well-being of all individuals, and particularly children, is increased.
Parents living with precarious legal status in Canada (including immigrants and not-yet-citizen refugees) face specific challenges that in turn stand to affect the well-being of their children. These families often experience high levels of stress as they navigate the uncertainties of status, rights and entitlements. “In some cases, even citizens may encounter difficulty in accessing and obtaining services and protections to which they are entitled by virtue of their citizenship. This latter situation is not uncommon, for example, among Canadian-born children whose parents have uncertain legal status. Although recognized as citizens by birth, they may face barriers in accessing education and other entitlements”. Incidents of depression, high rates of domestic violence among non-status women, lack of access to various services often due to extremely demanding job situations, unemployment, under-employment and discrimination are all common among non-status persons. Other main challenges to well-being include language barriers and the fear of accessing services due to the need to stay below the radar of government authorities. Non-status families tend to have limited access to social capital, limiting their overall support network and access to the benefits of a wider community, while increasing their vulnerability. Moreover, “families with uncertain status who have children must make difficult choices with respect to livelihood in order to be able to care for their children”.

Unfortunately, there has not been much research on the well-being of families and children living without full legal status in Canada, mainly due to the challenges of working with “invisible people” – those who want to remain unknown to government authorities. In Canada, there currently is no official statistic on this population. However, Canada is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and is therefore obliged to ensure the needs of children are being met and respected, regardless of their legal status. It is of critical importance that policies and social programs are implemented to meet the needs of families and children living without full legal status in Canada. Training programs and support needs to be provided to educators and service providers in order to ensure that they have the tools necessary to help and support non-status families and children, enabling them to gain greater autonomy and access to community services. Perhaps most importantly, policies must be put in place to address the under-employment of professionals who are admitted to this country but who, because of accreditation barriers, are not allowed to work in their professions.
Vital communities are compassionate communities that value and protect their more vulnerable members and attempt to address inequities. Communities need to ensure that investments and policy directions valuing younger people and their well-being are in place. Recognizing that the built environment and design of residential neighbourhoods has a different impact on lower and higher income families and that early education programs and family support programs need to redress differences in family income, education, and stability help ensure the long-term vitality of a community and the security of all its residents, from childhood on. Access and quality of social capital, as well as spaces that foster diverse interactions with others is another key feature of community vitality that extends to the well-being of children. Homophilic social capital networks, that is, networks that do not expose people to diverse expertise and experiences, keep people and children trapped in the vicious cycles we spoke of earlier. This tendency is particularly damaging as it limits the number of bridging ties that provide individual and group agency in our communities. Finally, communities need to be centres for dialogue if we are to actively address issues of abuse, violence, bullying and aggression towards the more vulnerable and less powerful.