

# The AstraZeneca Young Health Program

The Young Health Program is about helping young people in need around the world deal with the health issues they face, so that they can improve their chances of living a better life. In Canada, the AstraZeneca Young Health Program is working in partnership with three leading Canadian charitable organizations to improve the mental and emotional wellbeing of youth ages 10–19. The Young Health Program supports the advocacy efforts of PHE Canada to ensure that teachers are equipped with the skills to project a positive mindset and to teach the skills that lead to positive mental health for Canadian youth. **For more information please visit [www.younghealth.ca](http://www.younghealth.ca).**

## About Physical and Health Education Canada

Physical & Health Education Canada (PHE Canada) is the national voice for physical and health education. We work with educators and on-the-ground professionals to develop the resources, understanding, and networks to ensure that all children have the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to lead healthy, physically active lives, now and in their future. The foundation of our work is advocating for strong health and physical education curriculum, and providing the support to ensure its delivery by qualified educators supported by engaged administrators. We strive to achieve our vision by fostering healthy school communities where all students can develop the resiliency to be the citizens of our future. **Learn more about us at [www.phecanada.ca](http://www.phecanada.ca).**

# Reading, Writing, Resiliency:

**In every classroom in Canada, students are grappling with mental health issues. And at the front of these classes are teachers contending with the stress of helping students who are struggling.**

Seventy per cent of mental illnesses have their onset during childhood or adolescence (Government of Canada, 2006). From anxiety and depression to severe emotional disorder and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, one in five Canadians under the age of 18 suffers from at least one mental health problem or illness. Yet, only 1 in 6 children or youth receive professional help for mental health issues. For those who do receive help, services are often inadequate. (Canadian Psychiatric Association, 2012; Koller & Bertel, 2006).

Addressing youth mental health requires a two-pronged approach. Those currently confronting a mental health issue or illness need prompt access to appropriate professional support.

## ▶ Equipping Teachers to Promote Positive Mental Health

Additionally, all children and youth must be taught the skills that will help them achieve and maintain positive mental health so that, in the face of future challenges, they possess the resiliency to thrive.

Teachers cannot be expected to diagnose a mental illness. But in the life of a struggling student, they are a caring and supportive member of the young person’s community. Teachers need the training and skills to understand how a student’s mental health impacts their learning, how to find supports and resources locally, how to connect with families, and how to take care of their own well-being.

Despite this role at the forefront of child and youth mental health, teachers feel inadequately prepared (Rothi, Leavey & Best, 2008), but are keen to learn more (Gowers, Thomas & Deeley, 2004). Without support, however, teachers will burn out. For instance, 13 per cent of Ontario’s teachers reported feeling stressed all the time, compared to only 7 per cent of the general public work force (Ontario College of Teachers’, 2006; Jamieson, 2006). In the United States, approximately 50 per cent of American teachers quit their job within the first 5 years of employment (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004). Teachers who are trained to foster positive mental health will be better prepared to help students who are struggling or in crisis to face life’s challenges with strength and resilience.



1 in 5 youth under the age of 18 suffers from at least one mental health issue, but only 1 of 6 receive professional help. That means a teacher can expect to have at least four students in their class who need extra mental health support.



# What Canadians Expect

According to public opinion research commissioned by Physical and Health Education Canada, Canadians look to teachers to be able to recognize when a student may be facing a mental health issue. Only parents and a family doctor rank higher in this regard. Yet, **while Canadian teachers have this responsibility, only 38 per cent of Canadians believe that they are adequately prepared to do so.** When parents are asked whether their child’s school is doing enough when it comes to students’ mental health, only 45 per cent agree.

Issues related to children and youth mental health, such as bullying and behavior issues, are top of mind among Canadians and parents. When asked to name the top issue facing children and youth, forms of abuse including bullying ranked higher than any other option.

**Strong majorities of Canadians recognize that good mental health positively impacts academic performance, leadership, and engagement in school, while also encouraging healthy growth and development.**

Parents place a high level of responsibility on school staff to provide mental health support, and while many agree that schools are making efforts the majority feel that more could be done.

## Mental Health Education Did Not Come to School Today

### ABSENT FROM TEACHER EDUCATION

The training that new teachers receive in a post-secondary Bachelor of Education program provides them with the foundation needed for a career in teaching. However, according to a recent study commissioned by Physical and Health Education Canada, the country’s teacher training colleges provide very little by way of teacher education and preparation in mental health for all students. **Of 213 courses that offer some form of positive mental health education, only 2 met each of four preferred criteria determined by the researchers.**

Mental health courses are reactive and related to intervention in existing mental health conditions, and classroom management of students’ behaviour. There is a lack of proactive emphasis in university courses, and an absence of emphasis on positive mental health promotion and illness prevention. Education degree programs with a psychology focus include content on screening, assessment, diagnosis — but few describe care or support of students with mental illness. **The status quo in how teachers are prepared to promote positive mental health is not sufficient to meet the rising mental health needs of today’s students.**

### ABSENT FROM PROVINCIAL CURRICULA

In a separate study, Physical and Health Education Canada examined the curriculum of Canada’s 10 provinces and 3 territories to understand the extent and nature of expected outcomes in mental health from grades 4 to 12. While most curriculum documents had specified ‘mental’ or ‘emotional’ health units, it was just as typical for mental health concepts and skills to be woven into topics on other determinants of health such as sexual/relationship health, career development, and religion. This finding supported the case for examining mental health dynamically within the context of other health-related determinants rather than viewing it in isolation.

Mental health concerns are the most prevalent health issue for children and youth as reflected in data related to the burden of disease. **Curricula is well developed to address physical health outcomes. Mental health considerations have not achieved that same level of commitment and profile.**

There is a need for an adoption of a holistic approach to health; the concept of the whole person encompasses physical, intellectual, and emotional aspects, has a social component, and includes ethics, and frequently, religion. Interaction between all aspects must be acknowledged and addressed, and included in health curricula.

In addition, **curricula must focus on early intervention in order to counter the devastating effects of stigma and the damage caused by the proliferation of misinformation.** Positive mental health education in the school system must therefore be introduced early and integrated as soon as kindergarten. Such steps will guide young students in the development of a positive and resilient approach to facing life’s challenges.

## Recommendations for Action

### POST-SECONDARY TEACHER EDUCATION

- ▶ **All teacher candidates should be required to take at least one course that teaches skills and strategies to foster positive mental health and resiliency among students.**
- ▶ **Ensure that classroom/behaviour management courses address and reflect proactive resiliency-oriented strategies.**

While most teacher education schools offer courses on classroom management, these courses also routinely discuss how teachers could increase students’ motivation through behavioural techniques. However, few course descriptions address the impact of teachers’ attitudes and behaviours on students’ emotional health or well-being.

### MINISTRIES OF EDUCATION AND SCHOOL BOARDS/DISTRICTS

- ▶ **Provide mental health education in-service opportunities to ensure existing teachers are up-to-date on the latest strategies for promoting positive mental health and resiliency.**
- ▶ **Positive mental health and resiliency outcomes should be present in all grades from kindergarten to grade 12.**

Early education can counter the damaging effects of stigma and proliferation of misinformation. Positive mental health education starting in kindergarten and continuing through to graduation will guide students in the development of a positive and resilient approach to facing life’s challenges.

- ▶ **Provincial curricula should identify positive mental health and resiliency outcomes for health education.**

Mental health concerns are the most prevalent health issue for children and youth as reflected in data related to the burden of disease. Health education curricula must identify mental health outcomes to ensure students develop the skills and strategies that foster resiliency.

**“Like many new teachers,** I was excited and somewhat hesitant about my first classroom assignment. A couple years in I now reflect on the readiness I graduated with for preparing and teaching the content of our programs; but what I could have sure used as a new teacher was a realistic understanding about dealing with individual student emotional and mental health issues.”

**Ontario teacher**

**“From the time I was in high school,** I could see how my teachers just didn’t have the tools to deal with the emotional and mental health issues of my peers or the younger students coming behind us. My teacher cared lots — but that just didn’t cut it when I was facing the demons in my own world.”

**High school student pursuing a teaching career**

