



Ontario
Association of
Children's
Rehabilitation
Services

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Ontario Association of Children's Rehabilitation Services
150 Kilgour Rd.
Toronto, Ontario M4G 1R8
www.oacrs.com

Childhood is about growing, learning, developing and becoming the person we are each destined to be – a tall order for any child and their parents. For children and youth with special needs and their families, the challenges can be more profound, yet so are the moments of success.

For 2015-2016, OACRS recommends an investment of **\$3M** in the core rehabilitation services of **social work, therapeutic recreation and psychology services**. Investments in these critical services contribute to the overall health, development, learning, quality of life, participation and community inclusion of children and their families. This investment would increase access to services that build family resiliency, strengthen family function and prevent family breakdown.

The government of Ontario has demonstrated leadership by the recent announcement of the Special Needs Strategy. When fully implemented, every child and youth with special needs in Ontario will be identified as early as possible, will benefit from seamless integration of speech and language services, occupational therapy and physiotherapy and, for those with complex and/or multiple needs, have the coordinated support they need.

To meet the changing and intertwined needs of children and youth, their family members and the community around them, a full spectrum of rehabilitation services must be available. In addition to physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech and language services, the scope of rehabilitation services must include access to social work, therapeutic recreation and psychology services. These services support the rehabilitation process and promote overall health and quality of life for both the child and the family. Social work services work with families to develop strategies to adjust to change, or cope with difficult life situations. Social workers facilitate seamless communication across providers to support all families, including blended families, extended families and those affected by separation and divorce. Therapeutic recreation fosters greater community involvement and increases confidence and self esteem. Psychology services can produce the evidence needed to support accommodations in the education or work environment to allow children and youth to succeed.

Families have many different priorities as their child's needs change over time. For parents of very young children, it is often information about their condition and/or diagnosis, and their child's physical

Therapeutic Recreation professionals help children with special needs to

- improve physical and cognitive abilities
- increase confidence and self-esteem
- foster greater involvement in the community
- strengthen interpersonal skills and relationships
- improve coping and adaptation skills
- enhance wellbeing
- encourage a greater sense of accomplishment

Social Workers work with children, youth and families to

- assess clients' needs, situations, strengths and support networks to determine their goals
- develop strategies to adjust to changes or cope with difficult life situations
- research and make connections to community resources
- advocate for and help clients get resources that would improve their well-being

Psychologists

- provide diagnostic testing that can identify delays in development, challenges in behaviour and problems across the lifespan
- provide assessments which produce the evidence needed to support accommodations in the education or work environment to allow children and youth to succeed
- help families to overcome learning problems, address parenting issues, or manage the effects of a chronic illness

development and learning that is important. For older children and their parents, priorities might be school, relationships with friends and participating in activities. For youth and their parents, priorities may include preparing to leave school, work opportunities, post-secondary education and moving out of the home.

Children and youth with disabilities are at risk for lower community participation and social isolation. Often, they do not experience the widening social world of most teens. When youth transition from childhood into adolescence their activities tend to become more socially focused and complex. For many youth with disabilities, “independence” will be a blend of interdependence and self-determination. Youth with disabilities may give up more social activities at school as they get older because of lack of supports and confidence. The impact on self-esteem, self-concept and belonging can be enormous. As a result, their health and well-being is affected not only by their health condition, but also by external or environmental conditions and the balance between opportunities and limitations.

Ontario families need a full spectrum of services that can support this complex journey at any point along the way. The 2013-2014 investment of \$3.25M in speech and language services, occupational therapy and physiotherapy produced the following results:

- **9%** increase in the number of children receiving speech and language services, for a total of **17,971** children receiving services in 2013-14
- **8%** increase in the number of children receiving occupational therapy, resulting in **18,460** children receiving services in 2013-14
- **2%** increase in the number of children receiving physiotherapy, resulting in **13,796** children receiving services in 2013-14

This success will be compromised without access to other core services that facilitate community participation and link families to a broad range of community services and supports. A modest investment of **\$3M** will allow more families across Ontario to:

- participate in community programs that otherwise might be impossible for kids with special needs
- build resilience, independence, social and life-skills
- gain access to assessments that promote success in education and work environments

This full spectrum of services would provide a strong foundation for young people to become active and productive members of their communities.

We need to take steps to support families’ participation in all areas of life, so they thrive in their communities, rather than simply function. Investments in the core services that support social and emotional gains can lay the groundwork for improved learning in academics and functional life skills.

Evidence is mounting that youth with disabilities experience similar trajectories to their peers without disabilities through positive, developmentally appropriate life experiences and regular opportunities

with adequate supports to develop adult social roles.¹ As children and youth with disabilities and their families feel a greater sense of belonging and acceptance, they can transition more confidently from childhood into adulthood.

Like the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, OACRS and its members have a vision of an Ontario where all children and youth have the best opportunity to succeed and reach their potential. The recommendations put forward in this submission are fiscally prudent and represent investments that will pay dividends to the government, the economy, society as a whole, and most importantly, the children and families who receive these crucial services.

OACRS and its members look forward to continuing to work with the government and community partners to develop a service system that gives children the best possible start in life, prepares youth for adulthood and makes it easier for families to access the services they need at all stages of a child's development.

¹ Gorter, J. W., Stewart, D., Woodbury-Smith, M., Freeman, M., Nguyen, T., Wright, M., & King, G. (2014). Pathways toward positive psychosocial outcomes and mental health for youth with disabilities: A knowledge synthesis of developmental trajectories. *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health*, 33(1), 46-61.