

## Inclusion BC Advocacy Brief

### Priorities for Vulnerable BC Children & Families during COVID-19

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**To:** Government, community partners, families, & service providers

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Vulnerable BC children, youth, and families primarily access provincial supports through their schools, childcare, and community programs. Most of these have abruptly closed or severely limited operations due to COVID-19. This has cut off critical family lifelines, supports, and connections, placing an extraordinary 24/7 burden on families already struggling with other major socioeconomic, health, and mental health stresses. Impacts include health and safety risks, further exclusion, marginalization, and social isolation.

The concerns we hear from families require immediate, targeted interim relief measures, along with clear messaging that more help is on the way while we work through more complex solutions.

**It is critical that we take the time to understand each family's unique situation to tailor a response that meets their current and future needs through this crisis. Families need continuity of existing supports and/or access to changing supports depending on how they are impacted by the pandemic and COVID-19 measures. Families are looking for clear simple answers, support, resources, help navigating a rapidly shifting context, and connection.**

While our inclusion mandate focuses on intellectual disability, we know this sudden support void threatens all vulnerable BC families, youth, and children. We therefore urge a broad-based approach using the lens of child and family vulnerability to prioritize urgent health and safety needs.

**Inclusion BC has identified 3 priorities that require cross-ministerial collaboration:**

**#1 Priority - Health & Safety:** Identify and prioritize ways to replace critical supports lost due to school, program, and service closures, and to mitigate new risks due to COVID-19 health measures (24/7 home confinement) and broader socioeconomic disruptions.

- Urgent need for respite, support for families struggling to care 24/7 for children with high/complex care needs, including behaviour supports, and for families/caregivers marginalized due to poverty, disability, indigeneity, mental health, children in care, language, and other barriers. Prioritize respite and childcare for such families along with essential workers.

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- Critical health & safety supports include direct behavioural and mental health supports and medical equipment/supplies for families of children with complex health/support needs.
- Strengthen school, social worker outreach and flexibility to support urgent emerging needs.

**#2 Priority - Inclusive Learning:** Home schooling and distance teaching are challenging at any time, but especially so for students with learning differences, who face added barriers, and for parents/educators with less training, support, and resources.

- With expectations for extended school closures, BC needs a robust plan with supports that ensure equitable access to learning and prioritize the needs of all vulnerable students and families and that is both safe and sustainable for students, families, and educators.

**#3 Priority - Social Connections:** Schools, daycares, and community programs play an especially critical role in providing socialization opportunities for children with disabilities and other vulnerable groups who are often excluded from informal community activities.

- Cross-ministerial solutions should include supporting social connection for vulnerable children and families, such as intentional and facilitated virtual gatherings, safe out-of-home activities, and messaging reminding communities about the importance of considering inclusion in their plans and activities to ensure we #LeaveNoOneBehind.

We recognize this is just a start and want to work with families, communities, and government to ensure all BC children, youth, and families are safe and supported through these difficult times.