

Social Prescribing and Children and Youth Mental Health

The mental health of children and youth in Canada is increasingly at risk. Research across Canada shows rising levels of stress, anxiety, and loneliness among young people. In 2020, nearly one in four hospitalizations for children and youth aged 5 to 24 were related to mental health conditions, and those aged 15 to 29 consistently reported higher levels of loneliness than older age groups.¹ Loneliness is especially common among youth in rural or underserved areas, where access to safe, social spaces is limited.² Equity-deserving groups, including Indigenous, Black, rural, and 2SLGBTQI+ youth, often face systemic barriers to culturally appropriate care.³

A lack of integration between health care, education, and community services, along with long wait times, insufficient culturally safe care, and an overburdened clinical system, leaves many youth without the mental health support they need.⁴

What is Social Prescribing?

Social prescribing enables health care professionals to identify and refer children and youth to non-clinical, community-based programs and services with the support of a dedicated connector/navigator. By improving access to peer networks, mental health supports, culturally relevant activities, and other services through a co-creative and person-driven approach, social prescribing can play a vital role in supporting the mental well-being of children and youth.



Social prescribing initiatives have shown positive impacts, including:

- Program participants reported 71.4% reduction in loneliness, 55.5% experienced increased happiness, 52.4% felt more optimistic about the future, 50% reported improvements in their social networks and relationships, and 57% felt more confident in making their own decisions.⁵
- Over 80% of participants reported feeling less isolated, while more than 60% experienced improved relationships, greater resilience, and increased confidence in seeking help.⁶
- Families working with link workers reported feeling more connected to their communities, less isolated, and more confident in their ability to navigate challenges and support others facing similar experiences.⁷
- Social prescribing can result in 3,900 fewer cases of adolescent depression and 3,500 additional years of schooling completed by Canadian youth aged 15-17 experiencing depressive symptoms.⁸

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How Social Prescribing Support Children and Youth Mental Health

- ✓ **Improves access to services:** Social prescribing offers an alternative pathway to mental health support, helping to address long wait times and increasing demands.
- ✓ **Supports mental health promotion and prevention:** Person-centred social prescribing services support both short- and long-term mental well-being by addressing loneliness, stress, and mild to moderate depression and anxiety. They also help build self-confidence, self-esteem, and a stronger sense of purpose and belonging.
- ✓ **Supports mental health promotion and prevention:** Person-centred social prescribing services show both immediate and long-term benefits for mental health and well-being by addressing loneliness, stress, mild to moderate depression, and anxiety. They have also been shown to enhance self-confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of purpose and belonging.
- ✓ **Improves school attendance:** By addressing social needs and enhancing mental health support in collaboration with school services, social prescribing can help improve school attendance.
- ✓ **Addresses social determinants of health:** By connecting individuals to resources such as financial support and housing assistance, social prescribing promotes health equity and helps address the broader social factors that impact health.
- ✓ **Improve self-efficacy and personal goal achievement:** Through a tailored, co-creative approach focused on what matters most to each participant, social prescribing enhances youth's sense of control over their well-being, fosters self-efficacy, and supports long-term health self-management and resilience.



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