



## ALL ABOUT HANDLE WITH CARE

- Handle with Care is a simple interactive program to help parents and caregivers, including those who work in early childhood settings, to promote the mental health of young children from birth to 6 years.
- Handle with Care is based on a number of important assumptions about mental health:
  - Mental health, or social and emotional well-being, is a precious resource for all children.
  - Mental health is part of our overall health. It's about:
    - How we feel, think, and behave
    - How we cope with the ups and downs of everyday life
    - How we feel about ourselves and our life
    - How we see ourselves and our future
    - How stress affects us
    - How we deal with negative things that happen in our life
    - Our self-esteem or confidence
  - Supporting children's mental health is an everyday aspect of health care, just as we support healthy bodies by ensuring children eat well, exercise and get enough sleep.
- Handle with Care uses a strengths-based approach that assumes every parent and caregiver has problem-solving skills, potential resources, and wants what's best for the children in their lives.
- Handle with Care is for anyone who cares for or works with children, including those in communities with particular risks or challenges. It recognizes the value of every parent, caregiver, and child.

### History of Handle with Care

#### ***Phase 1: Identifying strategies for childcare practitioners***

The Handle with Care project began in 2002 with collaboration between Bonnie Pape at the national office of the Canadian Mental Health Association and Nancy Cohen at the Hincks-Dellcrest Centre in Toronto. The initial project, funded by Human Resources and Social Development Canada, had two products: a summary of recent literature (*Handle with Care: Strategies for Promoting the Mental Health of Young Children in Community Based Child Care*) and a bilingual resource booklet for childcare practitioners, with strategies drawn from evidence-based practices, and actual examples from centres across the country.

### ***Phase 2, starting 2004: Training childcare practitioners and their trainers***

The second phase of the project involved a national training initiative under the leadership of the Hincks-Dellcrest Centre with ongoing collaboration between Nancy Cohen and Bonnie Pape. Two training programs were developed in 2007 with accompanying manuals and materials in both English and French. The training program for practitioners emphasizes their vital role in promoting children's mental health, and a train-the-trainer program prepared individuals to deliver Handle with Care training for practitioners in their own communities. The train-the-trainer program was piloted with 36 participants from all provinces and the Yukon, and many of these participants have since trained practitioners in their regions.

### ***Phase 3, completed 2011: Evaluating the training***

Phase three examined outcomes of training on practitioner knowledge and practice, and evaluated these outcomes in a controlled study in three Ontario communities (urban, suburban, and rural). This phase was funded through the Alva Foundation and the Hincks-Dellcrest *Raise a Smile Fund*.

The positive feedback, growing demand for Handle with Care materials and training, and recognition of its policy implications helped us to see how the program could have a positive impact on families as well as childcare providers, as well as those parents and caregivers living in communities with particular mental health risk factors. Therefore we seized an opportunity from the Public Health Agency of Canada to adapt the program in content and delivery style to those additional target groups, and the result is the current Handle with Care project.

### **Program Messages**

The Handle with Care philosophy is expressed in these messages to parents and caregivers:

- Young children's mental health is critically important in order for them to flourish, thrive, and grow into healthy adults.
- Parents and caregivers have an important role to play in strengthening the mental health of young children.
- Parents know their children best; every parent wants what's best for their child.
- Positive relationships between parents or caregivers and the children they care for are investments in the children's future. Five quality minutes is like money in the bank.
- Caring for children is both challenging and rewarding. It is one of the most important things a person can do.
- Parents and caregivers need to know that it's never too late to build a trusting relationship with the children in their care.
- Well-being of people who care for children is important in itself, as well as for the children.
- Both parents and caregivers benefit when they can talk to and learn from one another.
- Everyday interactions with children are rich opportunities to promote their mental health.

### **Who can use Handle with Care?**

Handle with Care can be useful to parents, caregivers such as foster parents or extended family, early childhood educators, individuals who work in early childhood settings, parent education facilitators, parent support facilitators, family support workers, home visitors, public health



professionals, and any others who work in settings that support and educate families with young children. Throughout the Handle with Care materials we use the term “parents and caregivers” to refer to the range of possible participants in the program.

## How the Program is Organized

**Topics are presented in Four Building Blocks:**

1. Building Trust and Attachment
2. Building and Enhancing Self-esteem
3. Expressing Emotions
4. Relationships with Others

Each Building Block contains the following components:

**Key Message (What?)** An overarching message about the significance of the topic, including sub-messages written from the child’s perspective.

**Research (Why?)** Information that backs up what we know about the topic and why it is important to children's mental health and development.

**Activities (How?)** Stories, videos, discussions, crafts, and games that help participants to understand the topic and convey ways to incorporate them into daily routines.

**Bringing it Home (How to use what I have learned?)** Ways to help parents and caregivers reflect on what the materials mean to them in terms of their own personal life experiences, as well as possible ways to incorporate what they are learning into their daily lives. It is important for the facilitator to be part of this reflection process.

**Bringing it Together (How are the program's components connected?)** Emphasizes and explains how all Building Block topics and activities are interconnected and how enhancing and building one area naturally strengthens the other three areas.

**Other Resources (What else?)** Options for gathering additional information and pursuing topics further.

**Summary Handout (How to summarize what I have learned?)** Each building block has a summary handout that can be distributed to participants.

## Key Themes in Handle with Care

The other key areas that are important to the delivery of the Handle with Care program are:

1. The Role of Reflection
2. The Role of Self Care
3. The Role of the Facilitator