



## For the optimal development of children living in vulnerable conditions: early intervention and parental support

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### What is the importance of supporting families facing vulnerable living conditions?

There is a consensus on the importance of early childhood development and the relevance of early intervention, particularly among children living in vulnerable conditions. Compared to an advantaged child, a child who experiences poverty in the first five years of life is at a greater risk for developing health and behavioural problems, having decreased levels of school readiness, and experiencing difficulties in the classroom. Without intervention, this gap tends to widen over time. Early childhood experiences can cause long-term effects on academic performance and psychosocial adjustment.

Given that the first 5 years of children's lives are crucial for their future well-being, the *Avis scientifique sur les interventions efficaces en promotion de la santé mentale et en prévention des troubles mentaux* (Science advisory report on effective interventions to promote mental health and prevent mental disorders) (Desjardins et al., 2008) recommends strengthening measures such as home visits and preschool interventions for children and families. These measures are included in the Québec Public Health Program and they are the focus of the program *Services intégrés en périnatalité et pour la petite enfance* (SIPPE) (Integrated Perinatal and Early Childhood Services).

### What do we know about the effectiveness of these interventions?

The effectiveness of home visits and early childhood education was examined in a scientific review to be published on interventions comparable to SIPPE.

This review shows that home visits meet several SIPPE objectives, particularly with regards to the development of children in families living in vulnerable conditions (young mothers under 20 and mothers 20 or older living in poverty). However, research lacks on families facing particular difficulties. They seem to require interventions adapted to their needs, whether it's abuse, neglect, mental health problems, substance abuse or intellectual disability. All the same, they require parenting support and assistance regarding the quality of their relationship with their young children.

In addition, programs targeting families facing vulnerable living conditions and combining *early childhood education* with home visits or group meetings with parents, also achieve certain SIPPE objectives. The most beneficial effects are observed in children's global development and school readiness. Furthermore, several longitudinal studies report a positive medium and long-term impact on the use of special education or grade retention, behaviour and socio-professional integration.



### What does SIPPE consist of?

SIPPE offers support to pregnant women, mothers and father and their young children, ages 0 to 5 years old. They target families with young mothers under 20 years old and mothers 20 years or older living in poverty. All the health and social services centres (CSSS) in Quebec offer these services, which have three main objectives:

- Reduce mortality and morbidity in unborn babies, children, pregnant women and their partners;
- Encourage optimal child development;
- Improve living conditions for families facing vulnerability.

Strategies used include family assistance through home visits and supporting the creation of environments conducive to health and well-being through local, regional and national intersectoral action.



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**What are the conditions associated to the effectiveness of these interventions?**

Scientific evidence does not precisely indicate the conditions required to maximize the effectiveness of interventions similar to SIPPE. However, several authors and national and international organizations note that intervention produces better results when it is intensive and is initiated in early childhood or even during pregnancy. Duration is also linked to effectiveness. It is recommended that interventions act on several fronts by combining a variety of services.

Furthermore, in the case of early childhood education, the quality of service is associated with effectiveness. Home visits are more effective when based on a curriculum and when service providers are trained and supervised. Finally, the collaboration of all stakeholders (parents, community, health and education sectors) ensures the consistency of services while also contributing to their effectiveness.

**Conclusion**

Early intervention programs and parental support have the potential to be effective in fostering the development of children living in vulnerable conditions and promoting their well-being in the medium and long-term. It is important, however, to pursue research to better understand the conditions related to intervention effectiveness in order to maximize positive effects.



**Bibliography**

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