



PRIMARY CARE PATHWAYS

Connecting primary care and community-based mental health services

The Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions (the Knowledge Institute) is helping primary care providers connect their clients to the community-based mental health and addictions services they need.

The challenge

Disconnects in child and youth mental health and addictions care make it difficult for Ontario families to know where to find help. The system is complex and services are spread out among various providers and community organizations.

Most families turn first to their primary care providers. But even physicians struggle to help children and young people access the care they need. Many report feeling ill-equipped to screen and manage child and youth mental health and addictions concerns and still more feel uninformed about the services available in their community.

Limited communication and poor continuity of care between primary care and community-based mental health settings contribute to confusion, access challenges, delayed intervention and other care inconsistencies.

76% of families say it is very or extremely difficult to know where to find mental health help for their kids.

62% of families say they first attempted to access child and youth mental health care through their family doctor.

A (path)way forward

Primary care providers have a unique opportunity to identify and begin to address the mental health and addictions challenges of children and young people because they have regular and ongoing contact with clients and their families – and evidence shows that families are already turning to them for mental health and addictions support.

This is why the Knowledge Institute developed the primary care pathways demonstration project. Working with providers in different care settings, we aim to address the challenges that underlie disconnects in care. The project has three components: creating organizational structures and practices that support inter-provider communication, developing standardized clinical pathways and piloting the integration of standardized tools, such as [HEADS-ED](#), in primary care practices.

What does the pathway look like in practice?

Primary care providers complete HEADS-ED while meeting with the child or young person. They send this with their referral to a community-based mental health agency to help communicate the client's level of need and ensure they're connected to the right services. Agencies close the loop by reporting service outcomes back to the primary care provider.

What is HEADS-ED?

Reliable pathways require valid and reliable tools, like HEADS-ED. This brief, easy-to-use mental health screening tool, for ages six and above, looks at and scores seven areas of an individual's thought, behaviour and surrounding social environment. It helps guide assessment, aids with decision making and continuity of care, and help providers connect clients with community services.

	0 No action needed	1 Needs action but not immediate/moderate functional impairment	2 Needs immediate action/severe functional impairment
H ome	Supportive	Conflicts	Chaotic/dysfunctional
E ducation, employment	On track	Grades droppin or absenteeism	Failing/not attending
A ctivities and peers	No change	Reduction in activities/increased peer conflicts	Increasingly to fully withdrawn/significant peer conflicts
D rugs and Alcohol	None or infrequent	Occasional	Frequent/daily
S uicidality	No thoughts	Ideation	Plan or gesture
E motions, behaviours, thought disturbance	Mildly anxious/sad/acting out	Moderately anxious/sad/acting out	Significantly distressed/unable to function/out of control/bizarre thoughts/significant change in functioning
D ischarge or current resources	Ongoing/well connected	Some/not meeting needs	None/on wait list/non-compliant

Putting pathways to the test

We first piloted the primary care pathways demonstration project with two agencies in 2019 and then expanded to include implementation sites in six regions across Ontario.

We're pleased by what we're seeing in the early data: most families who received referrals using this pathway believe they were connected to the appropriate service to meet their needs, and they're satisfied with both the wait times and ease of access to mental health and addictions services.

The project has been extended through December 2022, so final evaluations are still a way off, but we look forward to sharing our results with you!

Implementation sites

- Algoma (Algoma Family Services)
- Essex (Hôtel Dieu Grace Healthcare - Regional Children's Centre)
- Hastings, Prince Edward & Northumberland (Children's Mental Health Services)
- Elgin/Oxford (Wellkin Child & Youth Mental Wellness)
- Pembroke/Renfrew County (The Phoenix Centre for Children and Families)
- Toronto (Strides Toronto)

For more information about primary care pathways or the HEADS-ED tool, please contact Mario Cappelli, senior child and youth mental health clinician-scientist

cappelli@cymha.ca