
Centering Evidence Based Management and Early Childhood Health Promotion in Canada A Comprehensive Systems Oriented Analysis of Nutrition Physical Activity and Social Mobility

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Abstract

The early years of life constitute one of the most powerful periods for shaping long term human health, social mobility, and economic productivity. A growing body of research demonstrates that patterns of nutrition, physical activity, sedentary behavior, sleep, and family environment established during early childhood persist across the life course and influence not only individual well being but also population level outcomes in health, education, and social cohesion. At the same time, health systems and public health institutions are under increasing pressure to demonstrate that their decisions are guided by credible evidence rather than tradition, political expediency, or managerial intuition. This article integrates two streams of scholarship that are rarely examined together in depth: research on early childhood health behaviors and social mobility in Canada, and the theory and practice of evidence based management in health and public services. Drawing on Canadian policy documents, population surveys, and international literature on evidence based decision making, the study develops a conceptual and analytical framework showing how evidence based management can be used to strengthen early childhood nutrition and movement policies, thereby contributing to improved social mobility and long term health equity. Using Waldfogel's analysis of social mobility and early life conditions, along with national guidance from Health Canada, the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology, Statistics Canada, and Participaction, the article argues that early childhood health is not merely a matter of individual parental choice but is deeply shaped by policy environments, organizational decisions, and resource allocation within health and social systems. Evidence based management is presented as a crucial bridge between research knowledge and practical policy action, enabling health service managers, public health leaders, and policymakers to make more transparent, accountable, and effective decisions. The methodology consists of an integrative, theory driven analysis of the provided references, synthesizing empirical findings, policy frameworks, and management theory into a coherent interpretive model. Results indicate that when evidence is systematically gathered, appraised, and applied, health organizations are better able to design interventions that align with children's developmental needs and reduce socioeconomic disparities in nutrition and physical activity. The discussion explores the implications of these findings for health system governance, professional practice, and intersectoral collaboration, while also acknowledging the political, cultural, and organizational barriers that limit the full realization of evidence based management. The article concludes that embedding evidence based management within early childhood health promotion is a critical pathway toward more equitable social mobility and more sustainable public health systems in Canada and similar contexts.

Keywords: Early childhood health, evidence based management, nutrition policy, physical activity, social mobility, health system governance.

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1. Introduction

The early years of human life have long been recognized as a foundational period for physical growth, cognitive development, emotional regulation, and social integration. Over the past several decades, research across disciplines such as economics, sociology, public health, and developmental psychology has converged on the conclusion that experiences and conditions in early childhood have enduring consequences for life chances, educational attainment, health trajectories, and intergenerational mobility. Waldfogel's work on social mobility and life changes in the early years provides a powerful synthesis of this evidence, demonstrating that family resources, parental education, health behaviors, and access to supportive services in early childhood strongly shape later outcomes in schooling, income, and health (Waldfogel, 2004). From this perspective, early childhood is not simply a biological stage but a social and institutional one, in which policy choices and organizational practices either reinforce or mitigate inequality.

In Canada, as in many high income countries, the early years have become a focal point of health and social policy. National institutions such as Health Canada, Statistics Canada, the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology, and Participaction have developed extensive guidance and monitoring systems aimed at improving nutrition, physical activity, and overall well being among young children. Health Canada's food guides articulate evidence informed recommendations for balanced diets, emphasizing fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and appropriate portion sizes as key to healthy growth (Health Canada, 2016). The Canadian 24 hour movement guidelines for the early years integrate physical activity, sedentary behavior, and sleep into a single framework, reflecting the understanding that these behaviors interact in complex ways to influence development (CSEP, 2017). Statistics Canada's surveys on Canadians' eating habits provide population level data on dietary patterns, highlighting socioeconomic gradients and cultural differences in food consumption (Statistics Canada, 2004). Participaction's report cards track trends in physical activity and sedentary behavior among children and youth, revealing persistent challenges in meeting recommended activity levels (Participaction, 2018).

Despite the availability of this rich evidence base, translating knowledge into effective and equitable policy and practice remains a major challenge. Health systems, public health agencies, and social service organizations operate within complex institutional environments characterized by competing priorities, budget constraints,

political pressures, and professional cultures. Decisions about resource allocation, program design, and service delivery are often influenced as much by tradition, habit, and organizational power dynamics as by scientific evidence. This gap between what is known and what is done has given rise to the field of evidence based management, which seeks to apply the principles of evidence based medicine and evidence based policy to the realm of organizational and managerial decision making. Scholars such as Shortell, Axelsson, Hewison, Walshe, Rundall, Finkler, Ward, Adily, Howard, Mitton, Lomas, Sheldon, Hemsley Brown, Kelemen, Bansal, Farmer, and Chesson have developed theoretical and empirical analyses of how evidence can and should inform management in health and public services (Shortell, 2006; Axelsson, 1998; Hewison, 2004; Walshe and Rundall, 2001; Finkler and Ward, 2003; Adily and Ward, 2005; Howard et al., 2009; Mitton and Patten, 2004; Lomas et al., 2005; Sheldon, 2005; Hemsley Brown and Sharp, 2003; Kelemen and Bansal, 2002; Farmer and Chesson, 2001).

The central argument of this article is that early childhood health promotion in Canada cannot achieve its full potential without a robust commitment to evidence based management at all levels of the health and social system. While much attention has been paid to generating scientific evidence on nutrition, physical activity, and development, less attention has been devoted to how organizations actually use this evidence in their everyday decisions. As a result, even well designed guidelines and policies may fail to produce meaningful change if they are not embedded in management practices that prioritize data, critical appraisal, and continuous learning. By integrating insights from early childhood health research with the literature on evidence based management, this article seeks to fill an important gap in both fields.

The problem that motivates this analysis is the persistent inequality in early childhood health outcomes and the limited impact of existing policies in reducing these disparities. Waldfogel's analysis of social mobility highlights how children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience poor nutrition, lower levels of physical activity, and higher exposure to stress, all of which undermine their long term prospects (Waldfogel, 2004). Canadian surveys confirm that socioeconomic status is strongly associated with dietary quality and activity levels, with children from lower income families more likely to consume energy dense, nutrient poor foods and less likely to engage in regular physical activity (Statistics Canada, 2004; Participaction, 2018). These patterns are not simply

the result of individual choices but reflect broader structural factors such as food pricing, neighborhood environments, childcare quality, and access to recreational facilities.

The literature gap addressed in this article lies in the limited integration of early childhood health research with management theory and practice. While health promotion scholars have documented the importance of evidence based guidelines, and management scholars have explored the challenges of evidence based decision making, few studies have examined how these two domains intersect in the specific context of early childhood health policy. By drawing on the provided references, this article develops a comprehensive and theoretically grounded analysis of how evidence based management can enhance the design, implementation, and evaluation of early childhood nutrition and physical activity programs in Canada.

2. Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is a comprehensive integrative literature analysis based strictly on the provided reference list. Rather than conducting new empirical data collection, the study synthesizes and critically interprets existing theoretical, policy, and empirical work to construct a coherent analytical framework. This approach is particularly appropriate given the objective of linking two bodies of literature that are often treated separately: early childhood health and evidence based management. The method follows principles of qualitative synthesis and conceptual analysis, emphasizing depth of interpretation, theoretical integration, and critical reflection.

The first stage of the methodology involved a detailed reading and thematic coding of the early childhood and public health references. Waldfogel's analysis of social mobility and early life conditions was examined to identify key mechanisms through which early childhood environments influence long term outcomes (Waldfogel, 2004). Health Canada's food guides were analyzed to extract the underlying nutritional principles and policy rationales that guide national dietary recommendations (Health Canada, 2016). The Canadian 24 hour movement guidelines were reviewed to understand how physical activity, sedentary behavior, and sleep are conceptualized as an integrated system (CSEP, 2017). Statistics Canada's survey of Canadians' eating habits provided empirical context regarding population level dietary patterns and inequalities (Statistics Canada, 2004). Participaction's report card was used to identify trends and gaps in physical activity among children and youth (Participaction, 2018).

The second stage involved a parallel analysis of the evidence based management literature. Key concepts such as the definition of evidence, the process of evidence appraisal, and the organizational conditions that support or hinder evidence use were identified from works by Shortell, Axelsson, Hewison, Walshe and Rundall, Finkler and Ward, Adily and Ward, Howard and colleagues, Mitton and Patten, Lomas and colleagues, Sheldon, Hemsley Brown and Sharp, Kelemen and Bansal, and Farmer and Chesson. This stage focused on understanding how evidence is conceptualized in management contexts, how decisions are made in practice, and what barriers exist to the uptake of research findings (Shortell, 2006; Axelsson, 1998; Hewison, 2004; Walshe and Rundall, 2001; Finkler and Ward, 2003; Adily and Ward, 2005; Howard et al., 2009; Mitton and Patten, 2004; Lomas et al., 2005; Sheldon, 2005; Hemsley Brown and Sharp, 2003; Kelemen and Bansal, 2002; Farmer and Chesson, 2001).

The third stage of the methodology consisted of integrative synthesis, in which insights from the two bodies of literature were brought together. This involved identifying points of convergence, such as the emphasis on long term outcomes and the need for systematic data, as well as points of tension, such as the difficulty of translating population level evidence into organizational practice. Through iterative comparison and theoretical reflection, a conceptual model was developed that links evidence based management processes to early childhood health outcomes via policy design, program implementation, and organizational learning.

Throughout this process, the analysis adhered to principles of transparency and critical reflexivity. Claims were grounded in the provided references, and alternative interpretations were considered. For example, while evidence based management is often presented as a normative ideal, the literature also highlights its limitations and the potential for evidence to be selectively used or ignored due to political or organizational factors (Hewison, 2004; Kelemen and Bansal, 2002). These nuances were incorporated into the analysis to avoid an overly simplistic or technocratic view of evidence.

3. Results

The results of this integrative analysis can be organized around several interrelated themes that illuminate how evidence based management influences early childhood health promotion and, by extension, social mobility in Canada.

One major finding is that early childhood nutrition and physical activity policies in Canada are underpinned by a strong scientific consensus regarding what constitutes healthy development. Health Canada's food guides emphasize a balance of food groups, adequate intake of micronutrients, and the avoidance of excessive sugar, salt, and saturated fat, reflecting decades of nutritional research (Health Canada, 2016). The Canadian 24 hour movement guidelines similarly draw on a growing body of evidence linking physical activity, reduced sedentary behavior, and sufficient sleep to healthy growth, motor development, and cognitive functioning (CSEP, 2017). These guidelines recognize that behaviors do not occur in isolation but form an interdependent system, in which changes in one domain affect the others.

Statistics Canada's data on eating habits reveal that while these guidelines are widely disseminated, adherence varies significantly across socioeconomic groups. Children from higher income and more educated families are more likely to consume fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, while those from lower income backgrounds are more likely to consume processed and energy dense foods (Statistics Canada, 2004). Participaction's report card similarly shows that many children do not meet recommended levels of physical activity, with disparities linked to neighborhood safety, access to facilities, and parental resources (Participaction, 2018). These patterns are consistent with Waldfogel's argument that early childhood environments are shaped by social and economic conditions that influence long term mobility (Waldfogel, 2004).

A second major finding is that evidence based management offers a structured approach to addressing these disparities by improving how organizations use and apply evidence. Shortell defines evidence based management as the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of the best available evidence in making decisions about the management of organizations and services (Shortell, 2006). Axelsson similarly emphasizes that management should be informed by systematically collected data, rigorous evaluation, and critical reflection rather than intuition alone (Axelsson, 1998). In the context of early childhood health, this means that decisions about program funding, service delivery models, and community partnerships should be guided by evidence on what works to improve nutrition and physical activity among diverse populations.

The literature indicates that when evidence based management principles are applied, organizations are better able to align their activities with population needs. For example, Finkler and Ward argue that using management

research to guide cost control in hospitals can lead to more efficient allocation of resources without compromising quality (Finkler and Ward, 2003). By analogy, using evidence on early childhood interventions can help health and social service agencies invest in programs that have the greatest impact on child health and development. Adily and Ward's study of population health practice shows that staff who have access to relevant data and support for evidence use are more likely to implement effective strategies (Adily and Ward, 2005).

A third key result is that despite its potential, evidence based management faces significant barriers in practice. Hewison's analysis of the National Health Service highlights how organizational cultures, professional identities, and political pressures can limit the uptake of evidence (Hewison, 2004). Walshe and Rundall similarly note that managers often operate under conditions of uncertainty and time pressure that make it difficult to systematically search for and appraise research findings (Walshe and Rundall, 2001). Howard and colleagues' study of health service managers in Australia identifies lack of skills, limited access to relevant research, and competing demands as major obstacles to evidence based decision making (Howard et al., 2009).

These barriers are particularly salient in the early childhood sector, which involves multiple organizations across health, education, and social services. Mitton and Patten's work on evidence based priority setting shows that decision makers often struggle to balance evidence with political and ethical considerations (Mitton and Patten, 2004). Lomas and colleagues argue that different types of evidence, including research, experiential knowledge, and community values, must be combined to guide health system decisions (Lomas et al., 2005). This suggests that evidence based management in early childhood health must be flexible and inclusive, rather than narrowly focused on quantitative data.

A final result of the analysis is the identification of a virtuous cycle between evidence based management and social mobility. When organizations use evidence to design and implement effective early childhood programs, they contribute to improved nutrition, higher levels of physical activity, and better developmental outcomes among children. Over time, these improvements translate into higher educational attainment, better health, and greater economic productivity, thereby enhancing social mobility as described by Waldfogel (Waldfogel, 2004). In turn, as outcomes improve, new data become available to further refine and improve management decisions, creating a cycle of learning and adaptation.

4. Discussion

The findings of this analysis have significant implications for theory, policy, and practice. At a theoretical level, the integration of early childhood health research with evidence based management literature highlights the importance of viewing health promotion not only as a technical or clinical endeavor but also as an organizational and managerial one. Too often, debates about nutrition and physical activity focus on individual behavior change without adequately considering the institutional contexts in which programs are designed and delivered. By contrast, evidence based management draws attention to the processes through which decisions are made, resources are allocated, and accountability is enforced.

One important implication is that evidence based management provides a framework for addressing the social determinants of early childhood health. Waldfogel's analysis underscores that social mobility is shaped by a complex interplay of family resources, public policies, and institutional supports (Waldfogel, 2004). Evidence based management can help ensure that policies and programs are targeted toward those most in need by using data on socioeconomic disparities in nutrition and physical activity. For example, Statistics Canada's data on eating habits can be used to identify communities with high levels of food insecurity, while Participaction's activity reports can highlight neighborhoods lacking safe play spaces (Statistics Canada, 2004; Participaction, 2018). Managers who systematically use this evidence are better positioned to design interventions that reduce inequality.

Another important implication concerns the nature of evidence itself. The literature on evidence based management cautions against a simplistic view of evidence as synonymous with randomized controlled trials or quantitative metrics. Lomas and colleagues emphasize that policy decisions require the integration of multiple forms of evidence, including qualitative insights and stakeholder perspectives (Lomas et al., 2005). Hemsley Brown and Sharp's review of research use in professional practice shows that practitioners value evidence that is relevant, accessible, and aligned with their experiential knowledge (Hemsley Brown and Sharp, 2003). In early childhood health, this means that guidelines from Health Canada and CSEP must be complemented by local knowledge about cultural practices, parental beliefs, and community resources (Health Canada, 2016; CSEP, 2017).

The discussion also highlights the political and organizational challenges of implementing evidence based

management. Kelemen and Bansal argue that management research often fails to influence practice because it does not align with the conventions and incentives of managerial work (Kelemen and Bansal, 2002). Managers may be rewarded for short term financial performance or political responsiveness rather than long term health outcomes. Hewison notes that in public sector organizations, evidence can be selectively used to justify decisions that have already been made for political reasons (Hewison, 2004). These dynamics suggest that promoting evidence based management requires not only technical training but also changes in organizational culture and governance.

Limitations of this study must be acknowledged. Because the analysis is based on a synthesis of existing literature rather than new empirical data, it cannot directly test causal relationships between evidence based management and early childhood health outcomes. The provided references also focus primarily on Canada and similar health systems, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Nevertheless, the theoretical integration offered here provides a valuable framework for future research and practice.

Future research could build on this work by conducting empirical studies of how health and social service organizations actually use evidence in designing early childhood programs. Qualitative case studies could explore how managers navigate competing demands and how evidence is negotiated within organizations. Quantitative analyses could examine whether organizations with stronger evidence based management practices achieve better child health outcomes. Such research would further illuminate the pathways through which management practices influence social mobility and health equity.

5. Conclusion

This article has argued that early childhood health promotion and evidence based management are deeply interconnected domains that together shape the prospects for social mobility and population well being in Canada. Drawing on Waldfogel's analysis of early life conditions, national guidelines on nutrition and physical activity, and a rich body of management theory, the study demonstrates that evidence alone is not sufficient to improve outcomes. What matters equally is how evidence is used by organizations and decision makers.

Evidence based management offers a powerful set of principles and practices for bridging the gap between knowledge and action. By systematically gathering,

appraising, and applying evidence, health and social service organizations can design more effective and equitable programs for young children. At the same time, the literature reminds us that evidence based management is not a purely technical exercise but a social and political one, shaped by organizational cultures, professional identities, and power relations.

In a context where early childhood inequalities continue to threaten social cohesion and economic sustainability, investing in both high quality evidence and the managerial capacity to use it is essential. By embedding evidence based management within early childhood health promotion, Canada can move closer to realizing the promise of equal opportunity and healthy development for all children.

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