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Media Release

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Advancing mental health was the theme at second Halton Knowledge Exchange Conference, hosted by Our Kids Network

Halton Region, Ontario – Professionals who work with Halton’s children and youth came together on November 2 to explore research on mental health and discuss ways to work together to enhance mental wellbeing across the community.

[Our Kids Network](#) (OKN) is a Halton-wide partnership of agencies and organizations who work together so that all children and youth thrive. As a collective impact network, Our Kids Network builds the capacity of community organizations that support children, youth and families. Executive Director Elisabeth Wells explained the value of the free, half-day conference.

“Professionals from across our network, gathered to learn from each other, discuss challenges and ways to overcome them, and turn research and data into action. We know that conference learning and conversation will transform into new approaches and enhanced services for Halton families. It’s inspiring for everyone.”

Newcomer mental health was a key topic

The keynote presenter was Dr. Amanda Sim, Assistant Professor at McMaster University. As part of her efforts in Canada to promote resiliency among refugees and immigrants, Dr. Sim launched a research project called Thriving Together. The research engaged over 100 Hamilton-area newcomer families from Syria, Iraq, and Sudan, as well as settlement workers, teachers, and other service providers.

“It was my pleasure to present what we learned about mental health in refugee families,” Sim said. “Our findings suggest ways to enhance newcomer wellbeing, including the need for more cost-of-living support. Our research also highlighted the need for culturally responsive mental health support that celebrates refugees’ strength and resiliency as we help them cope with stress and loss.”

Dr. Sim also discussed her team’s use of arts-based approaches to community engagement and knowledge sharing, and the importance of social and recreational activities to encourage connections among newcomers and established community members.

Recreational activities play a role in mental health

The role of recreational activities was featured in other conference presentations as well, including one by OKN’s Research Associate Bruna Redoschi, which focused on the relationship between youth wellbeing and access to recreation. Redoschi reflected on the role of recreation for youth mental health and wellbeing and covered highlights from OKN’s newest bulletin: Youth Wellbeing and Access to Recreation. “Access to recreation and

leisure isn't just about play; it's a lifeline to positive mental health for our youth, nurturing their happiness, resilience, and well-being." Wells added.

Dr. Jessie Gao, Data Analyst & Research Scientist for the Canadian Index of Wellbeing, & Dr. Bryan Smale, Professor Emeritus at the University of Waterloo & Director of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing discussed how opportunities to play are important to the wellbeing of youth. Dr. Smale noted it was a privilege to work with Our Kids Network and UNICEF Canada to facilitate the Youth Impact Survey, which asks young people about their experiences and feelings.

"Too often, children and youth are left out of the conversation when decisions are being made about what matters most to them and their wellbeing. Seeing what OKN is doing to mobilize knowledge gained from research with – not on – kids is really inspiring and will undoubtedly lead to higher wellbeing for all youth." Dr. Smale said.

Halton Region Public Health also had a spot on the agenda, as well as ROCK Reach Out Centre for Kids, the lead agency for child and youth mental health in Halton. ROCK's Clinical Leads & Therapists Melissa Lowe, & Sabrina Perri discussed the Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics, which helps professionals understand how trauma and relationships affect a child's developing brain.

Melissa Lowe and Sabrina Perri reiterated that early and developmentally targeted interventions that address the sequential organization of the brain coupled with relational density can help to address the functional vulnerabilities caused by early developmental trauma and extreme adversity in children and youth.

"Child and youth mental health is known to be a critical issue affecting individuals, families, and communities. Our Kids Network does a great job of bringing together different voices, and continually creating opportunities for partners to network with each other. The exchange of information and ideas enhances everyone's ability to respond to child and youth mental health needs."

For more information about OKN, visit ourkidsnetwork.ca.

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