

Up to 8 percent of Canadian children suffer from elevated blood pressure

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"We blame kids for being fat, we blame kids for being inactive, we blame kids not eating right or the families for not feeding their kids right," says Terrance Wade, the Canada Research Chair in youth and wellness at Brock University. "But a lot of these things are not based on individual choices because your life choices and such are constrained by your life chances."

Wade is completing a five-year study funded by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario to determine what social situations can lead to hypertension in [children](#) and develop strategies for children to deal with those situations in their daily lives. His work will be part of the program at the first-ever Canada Research Chairs conference in Toronto this week.

Children in disadvantaged socio-economic situations are more likely to deal with the kinds of daily stresses that can lead to hypertension at an early age.

While other studies have focused on the direct physical causes of hypertension in children, such as obesity and physical inactivity, Wade says his study is the first to his knowledge in Canada to look at social factors.

Unlike adult hypertension, the condition in children is not defined by specific blood pressure levels but is instead calculated as those children who find themselves in the 95th percentile for [high blood pressure](#).

For the first three-years of the study, Wade and his team set out to determine the prevalence of hypertension in children.

They found that 1.5 per cent to about four per cent of children have what could be classified as serious hypertension.

But 6.5 per cent to eight per cent of children have elevated blood pressure that could be a cause for concern.

[Hypertension](#) in children can lead to physical damage to the heart and [cardiovascular system](#). It also increases the prevalence of heart disease as an adult and brings about a great risk of getting heart disease at a younger age.

With his study now in its fourth year, Wade and his team of experts, ranging from sociologists to cardiologists, have developed an intervention to help children and youth deal with stress and lead healthier lives.

The intervention consists of a four-step program. The first step is to focus on children's strengths and help make them aware of those strengths. The second step is to teach them to focus on positive emotions while the third step is to think about how children are spending their free time. The final step is to help them develop better strategies, both emotional and instrumental, to deal with stress in their daily lives.

The research team has set up the program in five schools in the St. Catharines (Ontario) area. They started with one-week youth leadership camp where they taught children in grades six to eight how to deal with stress. These participants then become youth leaders who bring the knowledge back to their peers at school.

Wade says the inter-disciplinary nature of the study has helped his team

get a better picture of the problems children can face and the solutions they can implement to remedy those situations.

"Life is complex, we can't stay in our own disciplines walled-off from everybody else," he says.

"We need to be able to talk to people across disciplines to get a better perspective, and a fuller perspective."

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