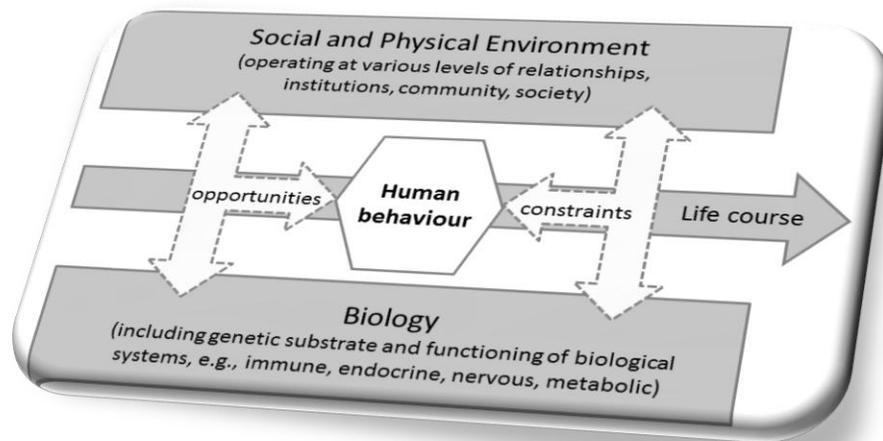

Comprehensive School Health - The Frog in the Pond

If the frogs in a pond started behaving strangely, our first reaction would not be to punish them or even to treat them. Instinctively, we'd wonder what was going on in the pond. We need to take this same ecological approach when considering school health.

A **socio-ecological model** helps us step back and look at the whole picture or the “ecosystem” in which people function. This model suggests that a range of influences from personal characteristics to broad social factors shape human behaviours, including behaviours related to substance use. Each person is influenced by a unique set of opportunities and constraints shaped by a complex interaction of biological, social and environmental factors that play out over a life course.



Comprehensive school health is an ecological approach that addresses a variety of protective factors that help build resilience, the ability to bounce back from adversity. Comprehensive school health programs do not focus simply on "fixing" students but aim to change the school environment and actively engage students in the learning process. For instance, rather than relying solely on a drug education program to teach children how to make healthy choices, the whole-school approach encourages the school itself—its structures, policies, procedures and staff—to operate in a healthy way and thereby both model and promote “health.” Although many comprehensive school health programs have components that address individual competence, their focus is on changing the culture of the school to encourage greater school attachment and involvement, both of which have been shown to reduce alienation from the school and from the values of the larger society.

Creating a school that enhances the health and well-being of students and staff requires applying a health lens to all of the school’s structures, policies, and programs. Becoming more intentional and considering the effect any action will have on school health is an important step in implementing comprehensive school health. For instance, when developing a new policy, key questions to consider would include:

- Will this policy increase or decrease school connectedness?
- What impact will it have on the healthy development of students?

Comprehensive school health involves attention to three interconnected areas for action that address students' needs: a healthy environment in which to learn and grow; healthy relationships and connections with peers, teachers and other school staff; and exposure to learning opportunities that help them gain the knowledge and skills required to maximize their health and well-being.



This requires attention to:

- Policies, procedures, management practices and decision-making processes that promote health and positive physical and social environments
- A continuum of school- and community-based services that support and promote student and staff health and well-being
- A culture of partnership between schools, families and the community
- Well-trained and supported teachers who can facilitate learning environments that engage students as active learners

A school is a social ecosystem in which a variety of factors interact to influence the health of the environment and the people who live, work and play within it. A **socio-ecological model** grounded in a **comprehensive school health** approach offers a way to articulate the various levels and domains of action needed to act on influences and so change outcomes. Interventions can be made at a variety of points to have an effect on opportunities and constraints that influence behaviour and the results. Complementary activity on several fronts can produce greater combined benefit than initiatives concentrated only on one level or area.

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