



September 2025

State of Children and Youth Report

Stories Beyond Statistics: Understanding
Children and Youth in Oceanside

Prepared by

Oceanside Child and Youth Wellness Action Group

Territorial Acknowledgement

We are grateful to work in the traditional, unceded territory of the Snaw'naw'as and Qualicum First Nations who have lived here and cared for these lands and waterways since time immemorial. We respectfully honour the traditions and teachings that are shared with us while we walk together with First Nations, Metis and Inuit relatives who live here.

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Oceanside Child and Youth Wellness Action Group

Who Are We?

The **Oceanside Child and Youth Wellness Action Group (CYWAG)**, an action table of the Naut'sa mawt Oceanside Wellness Network, brings together community partners to address the wellness of children, youth, and their families in the region.

The **First 2000 Days and Beyond** is an Oceanside collaborative that began in 2019, following a community convening focused on food security and mental health. To achieve long-term impacts on upstream social determinants of health and improve child wellness, a collective impact approach is necessary to effect systems-level change at the population level. Working groups, in collaboration with Island Health, developed the **Nourishing the First 2000 Days and Beyond** initiative. This initiative is supported by the Child Wellness Action Group (Naut'sa mawt Oceanside Wellness Network), Building Learning Together Early Years Table and the Oceanside Community Response Committee (OCRC).

The CYWAG continues to work to improve child and youth outcomes across Oceanside. To learn more, visit the NOW Network website www.nownetwork.ca.

Our Mission

To collaboratively promote well-being by cultivating learning about healthy child and youth development and by fostering compassionate responses to all those impacted by poverty, mental health conditions, trauma, and substance use, focusing on upstream prevention strategies.

Our Vision

A healthy, informed, and resilient Oceanside community.

Purpose of the Report

The **2025 Oceanside State of Children and Youth Report** provides population data, conditions, and concerns affecting children (0-12 yrs), youth (13-19 yrs), and their families in the Oceanside region. Designed to foster a shared understanding of their current realities, the report identifies both successes and gaps, aiming to inform, engage, and mobilize decision makers and community members across all sectors. It offers key insights to support policy changes, program development, partner engagement, education, and training. The report also promotes shared knowledge, equity, reconciliation, and strong community partnerships, ultimately working toward healthier outcomes and more resilient communities.

About Oceanside

Oceanside is located on the traditional lands of the Qualicum First Nation and Snaw'naw'as Mustimuxw. The region includes the municipalities of Parksville and Qualicum Beach, and four electoral areas of the Regional District of Nanaimo. The geographic area spans 834 km², encompassing two urban centres and several small waterfront and rural communities stretching from Nanoose Bay, Errington/Coombs to Deep Bay/Bowser.

The Oceanside region is aligned with the boundaries of Qualicum School District and Local Health Area 425. The total population of this region is 53,809 residents [1,2]. It has one of the oldest populations in the province, with a **median age of 61 years** - much higher than the Island Health median age of 46 [1,2]. In 2023, the population of children and youth (ages 0–19) in Oceanside was 6,729 [1,2].

Indigenous Language, Culture, & Identity

“Promoting well-being in our children and youth, begins with a strong, authentic, holistic and safe foundation. This environment ensures a child will continue to flourish with a well-balanced and empathetic lens, to lead them on a never ending learning journey”

- Chief Councillor Michael Recalma, Qualicum First Nation

The **Qualicum First Nation** and **Snaw'naw'as Mustimuxw** have lived in reciprocity with the lands since time immemorial. Nearly 5% of the Oceanside community identifies as Indigenous [1,3].

The Qualicum First Nation is actively working to reawaken and reclaim the **pentl'ach language**, which was once considered to be extinct. Based on a vision from Chief Michael Recalma, this revitalization work is rooted in the belief that language is not truly extinct and that carrying on the ancestral language strengthens connections to the community and its heritage [4,5].

The pentl'ach Language Reawakening project began formally in 2017. Since then, Indigenous youth in Central Vancouver Island have been actively reclaiming their culture through language revitalization, with 37% now able to speak some Indigenous language in 2023 - up significantly from 10% in 2013 [6].

Local governments, Qualicum School District, Island Health, social agencies, businesses, and citizens are engaged in learning about the history of colonization and working to build healthy communities where everyone belongs.

Family, Community & Identity

Shifting family structures, evolving community dynamics, and emerging understandings of identity all shape the environment in which children and youth grow up. These influences are deeply interconnected. Healthy relationships, inclusive communities, and responsive systems provide the scaffolding for young people to grow, thrive, and feel that they belong.

Family & Support Systems

Families today look different than they did a generation ago. In Oceanside, 10% of children live in single-parent households [1,3]. As caregiving roles change and stressors increase, the presence of trusted adults is critical. Encouragingly, more youth report having supportive adults they can turn to in times of need [6,7].

However, caregiving responsibilities are also shifting on to young people themselves. In 2023:

- **23%** of youth in Oceanside reported **caring for a relative** on an average school day [7].
- **10%** of youth lived with grandparents (up from 2018) [6,7].
- **21%** of youth missed 1-2 days of school for family responsibilities in one month [7].

Community & Demographics

The Oceanside region is changing in both age and cultural makeup. A growing number of youth have been born outside Canada, adding to the region's diversity.

- **4%** of the population identified as a **visible minority** [3].
- **17%** of residents were **immigrants** [3].
- Nearly **13%** of the population was **aged 0-19** (vs 17% in Island Health) [1].

In the next 10 years, the 0-19 age group is projected to see a decline of 8%, whereas the 75+ age group is expected to grow by 43% [1].



As resources stretch to meet the needs of older adults, it becomes increasingly important to ensure that children, youth, and families are not left behind in local planning and investments.

Identity & Inclusion

Youth identities are diversifying and shifting in meaningful ways:

- **93%** of youth's gender matched their sex assigned at birth [7],
- **70%** of youth identify their sexual orientation as heterosexual [7],
- Males are more likely to identify as heterosexual compared to females [6],
- Since 2018, more youth identify as part of sexual and gender minorities [6,7].

Non-binary youth report the poorest outcomes across nearly every domain, including mental health, self-harm, service access, and overall happiness [6]. These findings highlight the urgent need for inclusive, affirming support that recognizes and celebrates the full spectrum of identity.

Structural Factors Affecting Children & Youth

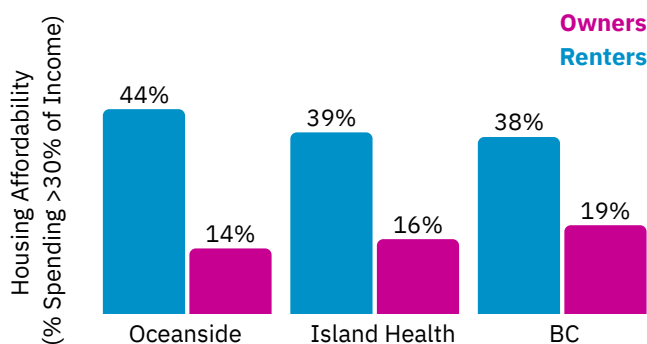
Beyond individual behaviours, structural factors such as housing, food security, poverty and early childhood support play a critical role in child and youth health. Addressing these upstream factors through community programs, policies, and cross-sector collaboration can significantly improve developmental, health, and educational outcomes.

Every statistic represents a real child and a family navigating pregnancy, school, and the daily challenges of parenting in a rapidly changing world. In Oceanside, these challenges are shaped by rural living (56% of the population) and a high proportion of older adults (median age 61). A child's well-being is influenced by housing, income, food access, and early learning—often before birth. Without these supports, impacts can last a lifetime.

Housing Crisis

The lack of affordable housing remains one of the most pressing challenges for families:

- **44% of renters** and **14% of homeowners** in Oceanside are **experiencing housing unaffordability**. This proportion among renters is higher than Island Health and BC [1].
- Rising costs make it harder for families to remain in the region.
- Increased housing costs reduce household stability and add chronic stress for families, impacting children and youth.



Service providers report increasing concern about the impact of rising living costs on family well-being, including among families who have not previously experienced hardship.

Poverty

Poverty extends beyond financial hardship, encompassing food insecurity, unstable housing, social exclusion, and reduced access to the resources and supports that promote healthy development and lifelong well-being.

- The proportion of Oceanside children and youth living in low-income households is nearly **3% higher** than Island Health and BC [1].
- **Lone-parent families**, often mother-led, carry a disproportionate burden [9].
- **7%** of youth reported cutting or **skipping meals due to lack of money** [7].
- Moreover, **11%** of youth reported **going to bed hungry** at least sometimes [7].
- In 2024, 75 families in Oceanside accessed the Backpack Program for food support.
- **46%** of Oceanside residents reported finding it more **difficult to meet financial needs** over the past year [10].

Structural Factors Affecting Children & Youth

Early Childhood Development

The overall percentage of **vulnerable kindergarten children** (mean age 5-6) **declined** from 32% in 2004-07 to 28% in 2019-22 [8]. Parksville had the highest percentage of vulnerable children (32%), followed by Oceanside Rural (31%), Nanoose-Craig Bay (27%) and Qualicum Beach (21%). Children with early vulnerabilities are more likely to experience ongoing challenges throughout school and life.

The **Early Development Instrument (EDI)**, collected by Qualicum School District teachers through the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP), monitors five key areas of development: Physical Health & Well-being, Social Competence, Emotional Maturity, Language & Cognitive Development, and Communication Skills & General Knowledge.

Developmental Area	% Vulnerable Qualicum School District [8]	% At Risk Qualicum School District [8]	Long term Change in Vulnerability [8]	Short Term Change in Vulnerability [8]
Social Competence	12.6	17.8	Meaningful decrease	Meaningful decrease
Emotional Maturity	16.7	17.0	Meaningful increase	Stable trend
Physical Health and Well-being	14.1	15.0	Stable trend	Meaningful decrease
Language and Cognitive Development	8.8	13.8	Stable trend	Stable trend
Communication Skills and General Knowledge	8.1	11.2	Stable trend	Meaningful decrease

The CYWAG is proud to join the **CORE Lab Project: Connecting the Disconnected** which aims to improve access to early childhood social-emotional supports, especially for families in equity-priority groups. **Our goals include:** (1) identifying key barriers families face in accessing services, (2) mapping existing supports for children aged 0-8, (3) understanding how families and service providers navigate and collaborate within the system, (4) co-creating a community specific framework to improve access to coordinated services, and (5) developing a tailored toolkit with maps, barriers, and strategies for each community.

Structural Factors Affecting Children & Youth

Pregnancy & Childbirth

Pregnancy and birth outcomes are deeply influenced by income, race, ethnicity, age, and overall health. These outcomes shape early life trajectories for both the child and the parent. Oceanside has some services for pre- or post-natal care. These include Public Health Nursing Services, Midwifery Care, Family Physicians, Nurse Practitioners

and community programs that support families health and wellness. If a family is choosing to deliver their baby in a hospital setting they will need to travel outside of the community. Perinatal and pediatric medical care is available in Nanaimo (NRGH), Port Alberni (West Coast General Hospital) or Comox Valley (North Island Hospital).

Local Childcare Access & Affordability

High-quality childcare is essential to healthy child development and family well-being. In Oceanside, however, many families continue to face barriers to accessing licensed care due to limited spaces, staffing shortages, and funding gaps. While provincial and federal initiatives such as the \$10aDay program and the Child Care Fee Reduction Initiative have helped lower costs for some families, the availability of these programs in Oceanside remains limited.

As of Summer 2025, one centre offers \$10aDay childcare, and while others benefit from partial subsidies, funding often falls short of covering the true cost of operations and adequate wages. These constraints are particularly acute for children with higher care needs, who are disproportionately affected by the lack of appropriate supports. Greater investment and strategic coordination are needed to expand access to affordable, inclusive, and quality childcare across the region.

Take Home Messages:

- Quality childcare supports both child development and early education, and parental employment.
- Oceanside families face **limited access to licensed care**, especially for children with higher care needs.
- Existing funding models **do not fully cover operating costs** or **adequately address staffing shortages** in the sector.



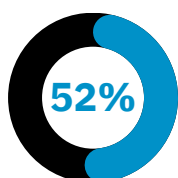
Note on Data Availability: Although Island Health provides licensing information on approved childcare facilities and potential capacity, there is no centralized or up-to-date source that captures the actual number of operating spaces, children currently enrolled, or families on waitlists in Oceanside. As such, this section draws primarily on qualitative findings and stakeholder input to illustrate current challenges in access to childcare.

Mental Health, Substance Use & Risky Behaviour

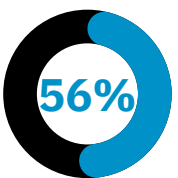
Children and youth in Oceanside are growing up in a world marked by uncertainty, stress, and social disconnection. From rising anxiety to increased screen time, shifting family dynamics, and the trauma of the toxic drug crisis, the pressures are both personal and systemic. While the overall quality of life is rated high in Oceanside, many young people are struggling to cope and the systems meant to support them are often overwhelmed or out of reach.

Youth Mental Health & Emotional Well-being

The mental health of Oceanside youth is declining in measurable ways:



of Oceanside parents reported increased stress in their children [10].



of Oceanside youth rated their mental health positively in 2023 [7].

A 2023 survey by Oceanside youth revealed that:

55% experienced some level of despair,

12% experienced extreme stress,

23% self-harmed, and

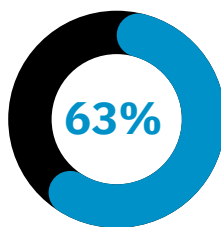
16% seriously considered suicide [7].



1 in 4 Oceanside youth **needed mental health services**, but **only 8%** were **able to access** them [7].

Family Stress & Community Mental Health

Stress is not just a youth issue - it's a community issue.



of Oceanside adults report being somewhat or extremely stressed most days [10].

- COVID-19 contributed to a surge in mental health concerns across all age groups [10].
- Between 2017 and 2023, **alcohol use** in Oceanside **increased by 8%** [1]. Increased adult substance use, which includes the use of alcohol and unregulated drugs, has been shown to negatively impact children in the home [11].
- The toxic drug crisis continues to affect local families, leaving some children and youth grieving the loss of a parent, caregiver, or other family member.

Improving mental health in children and youth requires addressing modifiable risk factors such as stress, substance use, and social disconnection. Community-based prevention and support can reduce harm, build resilience and support well-being.

Mental Health, Substance Use & Risky Behaviour

Social Connection & Belonging

Children and youth report better health and well-being when they have supportive adults in their family, school, and community [7].

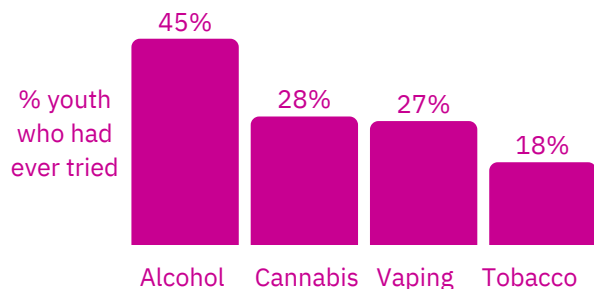
Most Oceanside youth felt connected to their family or supported by adults at home [7, 12]:

- 51%** felt their family understood them,
- 70%** felt they had fun with their family,
- 66%** felt their family paid attention to them, and
- 68%** felt their family respected them [7].

Fewer youth felt connected to their community [7,12]. Moreover, 6 in 10 youth felt that their ideas weren't valued during the activities they participated in [7].

Substance Use & Risky Behaviours

In 2023, Oceanside youth exceeded the provincial average for substance use and sexual activity [7].



Data Source: SD69 McCreary Adolescent Health Survey [7]

The proportion of youth having tried alcohol, cannabis, and mushrooms was **4-7% greater** in Oceanside compared to the province [7].

Females were more likely than males to use substances including vaping, tobacco, alcohol, and cannabis [6].

Environment & Life Outlook

Despite overall positivity reported by Oceanside youth [7, 12], concerns about climate change and screen use may reveal deeper tensions in how they experience the world.

- 66%** of Oceanside youth reported that they have a good life [7],
- 80%** of Oceanside youth reported that things are going well [7],
- 32%** of families reported increased screen time for children compared to one year ago [10],
- 88%** of Oceanside youth are worried that climate change is not being taken seriously [12].

Physical Health & Coping Behaviours

While most surveyed Oceanside youth rated their health as good or excellent [7, 12], physical health and body image are areas of growing concern:

- 28%** worried they had lost control over how much they ate,
- 16%** vomited on purpose after eating,
- 39%** slept for at least 8 hours (the night before the survey),
- 36%** were injured seriously enough to required medical attention, and
- 32%** used substances because they felt down, sad or stressed [7].

Community-Based Services

In Oceanside, a strong network of local programs and caring providers makes a meaningful difference for families raising children with diverse needs. When services are accessible, inclusive, and grounded in relationships, children and families thrive. Yet many parents continue to navigate a maze of complex systems while juggling everyday stress. To build a resilient, equitable community, we must ensure services are responsive, holistic, and easy to access, regardless of a diagnosis or income level.

What's Working Well

Families and youth who have successfully accessed local services describe them as **engaging, flexible, and relationship-based**. From after school programs and recreation to childcare and targeted support services, Oceanside providers are recognized for creating positive, inclusive environments. Being part of a small community allows many service providers to collaborate across organizations, share information, and creatively meet unique needs.

Community collaboration has shown strong potential. Programs like “**Pete the Cat**,” a local early years initiative, highlight how collective action can enhance child development and connect families to supportive resources. Meanwhile, volunteering, cultural engagement, and traditional practices remain meaningful sources of identity and belonging for many youth.

Strong personal connections between providers and families have proven effective in guiding people toward the right services. When flexible funding is available, it allows supports to be tailored and timely, meeting children where they're at, not just where they're diagnosed.

The ***Every Door is the Right Door...*** business card is a list of available in-person resources in Oceanside or online resources focused on child, and youth mental wellness. These are also published as business cards and are available free of charge to Oceanside area service providers.

“Our purpose, perhaps, may not be so much to teach about the natural world, but in fact to remember our instinctive connections and to guide the future generations with the knowledgeable respect to sustain all things that have been gifted from Mother Earth.” - *Cally Phillips, Family Resource Worker, Qualicum First Nation Family Programs*

The **Island Health Dental Program** focuses on preventing dental disease by providing information, support, and resources to families, health care providers, service providers, and community members working with infants and young children.

Community-Based Services

What Needs Improvement

Despite these strengths, families face several persistent challenges:

There is a lack of centralized, accessible sources of information about available community-based services.

Youth and families want more inclusive recreation options that reflect their abilities, interests, and cultural identities.

A holistic, wraparound approach, supporting children *and* the systems around them is essential to reduce family stress and increase impact.

Many supports are tied to formal diagnoses, leaving families with unmet needs, particularly for school-aged children.

Parents feel overwhelmed, often faced with coordinating specialized support and care for their child, while managing employment, finances, and the emotional toll of caregiving.

Many children go without dental care due to high costs, lack of access to care, and competing priorities. For children with complex needs, challenges are compounded by long waitlists and affordability barriers.

Greater awareness and integrated access to care are needed to ensure all children and youth receive consistent, preventative care close to home.

A coordinated, community-informed approach is essential to improve the well-being of children and youth in Oceanside. This report emphasizes the need for equitable, accessible, and culturally responsive supports and services. By focusing on prevention, early intervention, and stronger systems of care, we can create the conditions for all children, youth, and families to thrive—particularly those facing systemic barriers or complex needs. The next step is translating these insights into collective action—strengthening partnerships, addressing gaps, and shaping policies that create lasting change. Together, we can turn knowledge into action and build a healthier, more resilient future for the next generation.

Acknowledgements

The Oceanside State of the Child and Youth Report was a collaborative project produced by members of the Oceanside Child and Youth Wellness Action Group. We are grateful to all of our local organizations and at-large community members who work collaboratively to improve the health and wellbeing of children, youth and families. We also want to thank the Naut'sa mawt Oceanside Wellness (NOW) Network for their financial support.

Our Partners



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Questions? Contact us

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