

OH CANADA!

TOO MANY CHILDREN IN POVERTY FOR TOO LONG

CANADA'S RECORD ON CHILD AND FAMILY POVERTY IS WORSE NOW THAN IT WAS WHEN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS' COMMITMENT WAS UNDERTAKEN IN 1989, DESPITE ECONOMIC GROWTH AND STRONG JOB CREATION.

CANADA FACES STEEP YET SURMOUNTABLE CHALLENGES in its efforts to significantly reduce child and family poverty. Most recent data indicate that more than one million Canadian children and their families live in low-income households. Although the House of Commons unanimously resolved to "seek to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000", almost one child out of every six still lives in poverty.

The impact of poverty goes beyond material deprivation and contributes to social exclusion. As Grade 4 & 5 students in North Bay told us, poverty is:

- "feeling ashamed when my dad can't get a job";
- "pretending that you forgot your lunch";
- "being afraid to tell your Mom you need gym shoes";
- "not buying books at the book fair";
- "not getting to go on school trips".¹

Campaign 2000 contends that poverty and income inequality are major barriers to the academic achievement and the healthy development of children, the cohesion of our communities and, ultimately, to the social and economic well-being of Canada.

Teachers and schools are essential partners in improving life chances for low-income students. As daily mentors in children's lives, teachers experience directly the impact of poverty upon children. Recently teachers in Ontario shared their observations as part of a popular education strategy to mark October 17, the U.N.-designated day for the Elimination of Poverty. They wrote about:

- students who move and change schools frequently during the school year because the family does not have enough money to pay the rent;
- students who shrink from shame or lash out from anger and who feel the stigma of poverty;
- students who continue to suffer from low self-esteem and low confidence which grows in high school; and
- students who sometimes lose hope that life can be any better.²

Research confirms that the prevalence of poverty among children and families is closely related to skills acquisition. While Canadian 15-year-old students overall show solid knowledge and skills on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in comparison to students in other countries, students who lack family advantages are much more likely to perform poorly as is the case in most other countries. The PISA results show that students in lower socio-economic status are less likely to have adequate literary skills than students in more privileged families. Specifically, a student in the lowest 5 percent is likely to be more than one and one-half literacy levels behind students in the highest 5 percent of family income.³

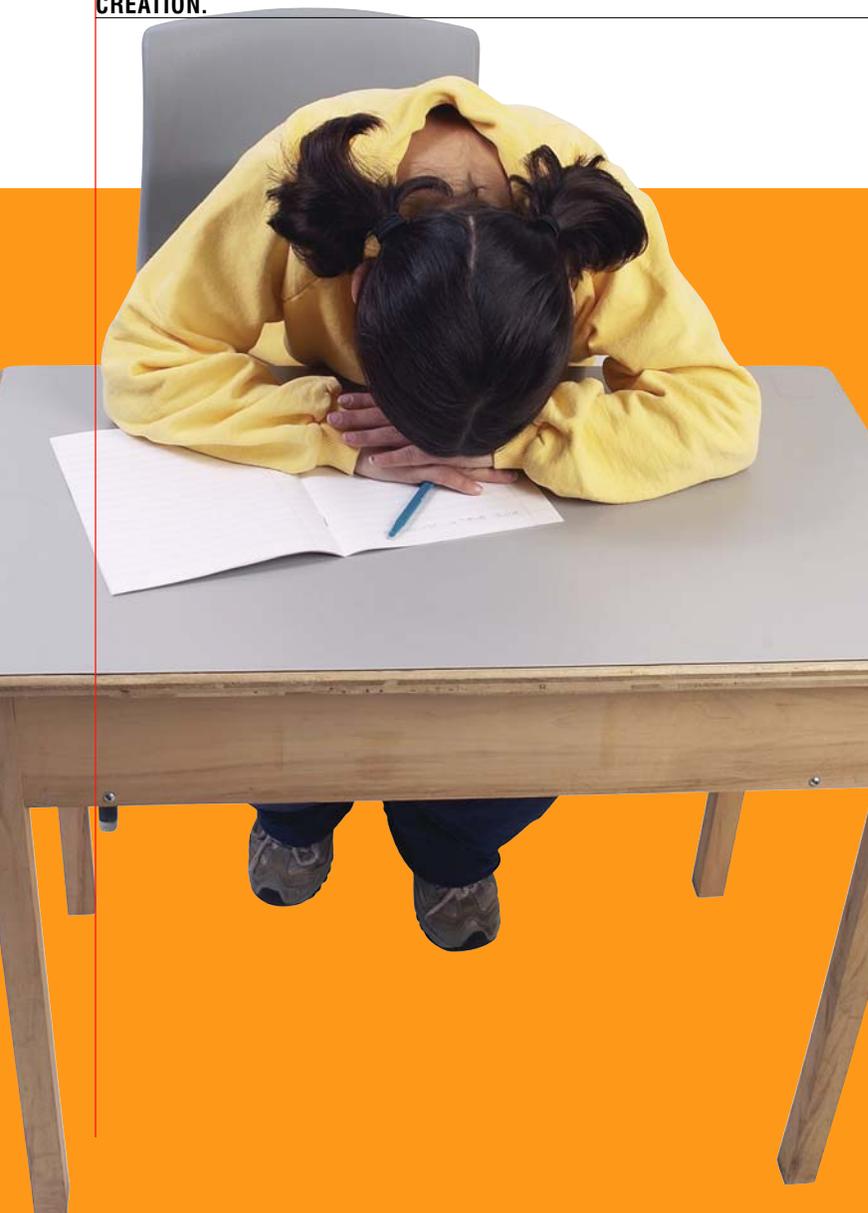
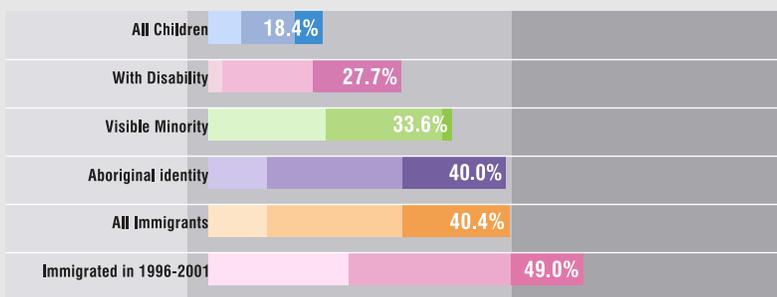


FIGURE 1: Percentage of Children in Low Income and Annual GDP Change, 2004



FIGURE 2: Child Poverty Rates Among Selected Social Groups, 2001



ONE IN FOUR CHILDREN IN FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES LIVES IN POVERTY.⁶

- One in eight First Nations children is disabled – double the rate among all children in Canada;
- More than four in ten First Nations children (43 percent) need basic dental maintenance; those in more isolated communities are more likely to need dental care.
- Overcrowding is double the Canadian rate.
- Mould contaminates almost half of all First Nations households.
- Nearly 100 First Nations communities must boil their water.

URBAN ABORIGINAL CHILDREN ARE CHALLENGED TO ACHIEVE SOCIAL INCLUSION⁷

- Almost half (46 percent) of Aboriginal children under 15 years old live with a lone parent.
- Forty percent of off-reserve Aboriginal children live in poverty.

Given the clearly demonstrated link between poverty and learning, educators need to be aware of the breadth and depth of the problem and become advocates for strategies to address it.

THE TENACITY OF CHILD AND FAMILY POVERTY

Canada's record on child and family poverty is worse now than it was when the House of Commons' commitment was undertaken in 1989, despite economic growth and strong job creation. Figure 1 shows that the incidence of poverty among children under 18 from 1980 through 2004 is virtually unchanged (from 16.2 percent to 17.7 percent).⁴ Despite cyclical variations, the rate of one in six can be considered the structural rate of child and family poverty, rooted in the social and economic inequality in Canada. This figure does not include the shameful situation of First Nations communities where one in every four children is growing up in poverty.

SOCIAL AND GEOGRAPHIC INEQUITIES

Child poverty rates are disproportionately high among vulnerable social groups. Approximately half (52 percent) of low income children in Canada live in female lone parent families. According to the 2001 census, 49 percent of children in recent immigrant families and 34 percent of children in racialized families are poor. Children with disabilities are also at greater risk; the poverty rate for these children is 28 percent.

Factors behind these high rates include: an over-representation of racialized groups in low-paying jobs, market failure to recognize international work experience and credentials, and racial discrimination in employment.⁵ Within a broad poverty reduction strategy, specific policies and investments are needed to address systemic sources of disadvantage and promote greater equity in our communities. (See Figure 2.)

Among our First Nations and Aboriginal communities, the persistence of poverty is particularly acute. Statistics Canada reports that 40 percent of off-reserve Aboriginal children live in poverty, and data collected separately for First Nations communities show a similarly bleak picture.

With a First Nations and Aboriginal population that is young, vital and rapidly expanding in both rural and urban settings, specific strategies must address the extremes of systemic and long-standing poverty. (See sidebar.)

Poverty rates among children vary considerably from province to province and among metropolitan areas as a result of differing public policies on income security and affordable housing, labour markets, and patterns of economic growth. The common thread is that no province has yet met the UNICEF challenge to reduce the poverty rate to a single digit figure.

Quebec is the only province where child poverty rates have been consistently declining since 1997. This is likely attributable in part to a package of family support benefits

LOW-INCOME FAMILIES EXPERIENCE FOOD INSECURITY AND HUNGER, CONDITIONS WHICH COMPROMISE SOUND NUTRITION DURING ESSENTIAL PERIODS OF CHILDREN'S GROWTH AND HAVE AN IMPACT ON THE ABILITY OF CHILDREN TO FOCUS IN THE CLASSROOM.

implemented in 1997, including rapid expansion of affordable early learning and child care services, an expanded child benefit, and enhanced parental leave. Even with its booming economy, Alberta's child poverty rate has fluctuated between 14 and 15 percent since 1999. Newfoundland and Labrador, with a child poverty rate of 23 percent, introduced a poverty reduction strategy in June 2006 with financial investments, a long-term plan, and commitments to measure progress. British Columbia remains the province with the highest child poverty rate at 23.5 percent; too many working poor families in BC are unable to find jobs with sufficient pay, hours and benefits to lift them above the poverty line. (See Figures 3 and 4.)

PAYING THE RENT AND FEEDING THE CHILDREN: A DAUNTING CHALLENGE

The average low-income family is living in deep poverty. Two-parent low-income families would need, on average, an additional \$10,400/year to bring them up to the Low Income Cut Off (LICO), a measure used as a proxy by most researchers in the absence of an official poverty line for Canada. The (2005) LICO for a family of four (two parents and two children) in a large city (500,000+) in Canada is \$38,610 before taxes are deducted, while the LICO for one parent and one child in a large city is \$25,867. Low income female lone parents have experienced only marginal improvement in the depth of poverty; they now fall, on average, \$9,400 below the LICO.

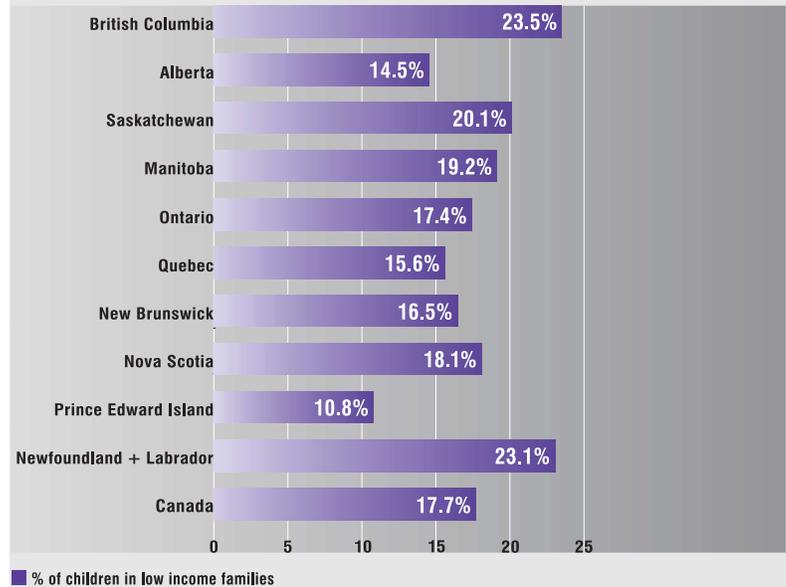
It is important to note that 37 percent (476,500 in 2005) of all children in poverty live in families that must rely on welfare incomes (provincial social assistance and other benefits combined with federal benefits such as the Canada Child Tax Benefit and the GST credit) as a result of job loss, death of a spouse, separation or divorce, or flight from an abusive relationship. Access to Employment Insurance has been reduced so that less than 40 percent of unemployed people in Canada are eligible for EI. Welfare is the last resort for vulnerable families; yet, welfare incomes have been seriously eroded in most parts of the country during the past decade, and in no province or territory do welfare incomes for families approach the poverty line.⁸

One disturbing consequence of poverty is evidence that low-income families experience food insecurity and hunger, conditions which compromise sound nutrition during essential periods of children's growth and have an impact on the ability of children to focus in the classroom. Four dimensions of household food insecurity have been identified: *quantitative* (not enough food); *qualitative* (unbalanced diet, reliance on a few kinds of low-cost food); *psychological* (anxiety about food supply or stress associated with trying to meet daily food needs); and *social* (having to acquire food through socially unacceptable means such as charitable assistance, buying food on credit, and, in some cases, stealing).⁹ In a one-month study of 141 single mothers with at least two children under 14 in Atlantic Canada, 78 percent confirmed that they experienced food insecurity. The mothers coped by compromising their own nutritional intake in order to feed their children.¹⁰

The persistence of food banks – begun in 1985 as an emergency response – is another clear indicator of food insecurity. At 25 percent of Canada's population, children make up 41 percent of food bank users.

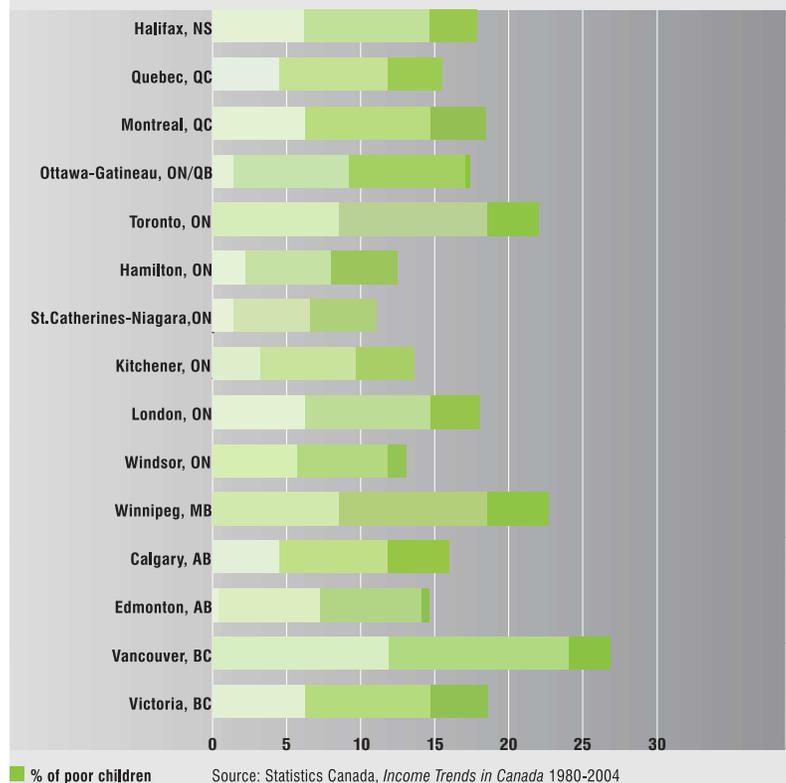
EN BREF Malgré les variations cycliques, un enfant sur six vit dans la pauvreté au Canada, une proportion qui n'a guère changé depuis 1980 – et cette statistique n'inclut pas la situation honteuse des collectivités des Premières Nations, où un enfant sur quatre vit dans la pauvreté. Le Québec est la seule province où le taux de pauvreté des enfants diminue constamment depuis 1997. Devant les obstacles posés par le choix limité de logements à prix abordable, un marché précaire de l'emploi et la diminution des taux d'aide sociale et d'invalidité au pays, il est de plus en plus difficile de payer les dépenses essentielles d'alimentation et de logement avec un revenu restreint. Compte tenu du lien clairement démontré entre la pauvreté et l'apprentissage, les éducateurs doivent être conscients de l'ampleur du problème et préconiser des stratégies pour y faire face.

FIGURE 3: Child Poverty in Canada and the Provinces, 2004



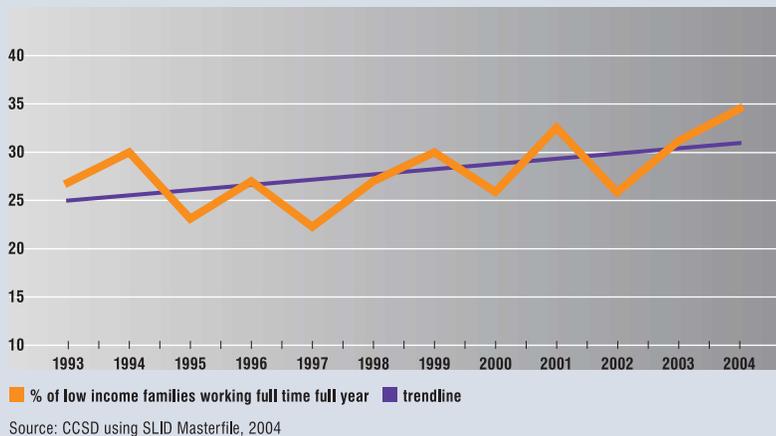
Source: Canadian Council on Social Development using Statistics Canada's Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID) masterfile, 2004.

FIGURE 4: Percentage of Low Income Children in Canada by CMA (Census Metropolitan Area), 2004



Source: Statistics Canada, *Income Trends in Canada 1980-2004*

FIGURE 5: Percentage of Low Income Children in Families Working Full Time Full Year



Balancing the basic expenses of food and rent with a limited income has become increasingly difficult in the face of limited affordable housing options, the precarious labour market (with growth in part-time, low wage and contract jobs), and shrinking social assistance and disability rates across the country. Among low-income families with children, 66 percent live in unaffordable housing (defined as shelter costs which are more than 30 percent of total income). Families are also the fastest growing group of users of emergency housing (shelters and hostels).

The lack of access to extended health benefits that can assist in paying for eye-glasses, prescription drugs and dental care is another major barrier that many low income families face, in particular those in low paid, insecure jobs.

These income, food insecurity, and housing affordability indicators are abstract representations of daily realities that too many families face in a Canada of great prosperity and economic growth – and finding a job is not necessarily the answer.

As Figure 5 shows, employment is not a guaranteed way to escape poverty. About one-third (34 percent) of families living below the poverty line are working full-time for the entire year. This percentage has risen from 27 percent in 1993. The trend shows that, despite strong economic growth and job creation, a growing proportion of families working full time full year are unable to lift themselves out of poverty.

Low wages, poor working conditions, the challenge of finding full time work with benefits and the lack of affordable early learning and child care services are key factors behind the struggle of working families who live in poverty. One in every four jobs in Canada pays less than \$10/hour, and two in every five jobs are precarious – part-time, temporary, contract or self-employed.¹¹ Research with food bank clients in Greater Toronto who are working found they were only able to get an average of 25 hours work weekly.¹²

A POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY

Government programs like the GST credit, the Canada Child Tax Benefit, and Employment Insurance do help reduce the rate of child and family poverty. Without these public investments the 2004 poverty rate of 17.7 percent for low-income families with children would have been 24 percent. But to bring child poverty rates below 5 percent, we need to follow the model of northern European countries with strong government investments in social programs and good jobs at living wages.

Canada needs a poverty reduction strategy that builds on existing initiatives in child benefits, early learning, child care services, and affordable housing. Some of these have been stalled (eg., Kelowna Accord among federal, provincial, territorial governments and First Nations) and others have been rescinded (eg., federal/provincial agreements on early learning and child care). It is time for Canada to take up the UNICEF challenge to establish credible targets and timetables in order to bring the child poverty rate well below 10 percent as other OECD nations have already done. Canada can follow the lead of the UK, which, in 1999, set out a 20-year mission to end child poverty in phases, with reductions of 25 percent by 2004 and 50 percent by 2010. Additional targets to strengthen early learning, education, affordable housing, and health services were set, as well as increases to the minimum wage and child benefits. The UK government is on track to meet these goals. The provinces of Quebec and Newfoundland & Labrador have each developed provincial poverty reduction strategies. Campaign 2000 calls on the federal government to develop a cross-Canada Poverty Reduction Strategy in conjunction with provinces, territories and First Nations.

The ultimate goal for Canada should be to create environments where children can thrive – not simply survive. This means developing the talents, skills and capacities of children to benefit from and contribute to community life and to assume a range of social responsibilities. Striving for this goal is the surest way to give all Canadians the best chance of achieving their highest level of health and well-being and assuring a strong foundation for economic growth. |

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LAUREL ROTHMAN, M.S.W., R.S.W., is the Director of Social Reform at Family Service Association of Toronto, where she coordinates Campaign 2000, a cross-Canada network of more than 120 diverse organizations, including teachers' federations, school board associations and student groups that promote strategies and solutions to end child and family poverty in Canada.

Notes

- 1 Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition, *Our Neighbours Voices Will We Listen*. (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company Ltd., 1998).
- 2 Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association, Survey of Members (August 2006).
- 3 J. D. Willms, "Raising and Leveling the Bar," Policy Brief of the Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy, November 2004. www.unb.ca/crisp/pbrief.html.
- 4 Unless otherwise noted, child poverty data appearing in this article were prepared by the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) using Statistics Canada's *Income Trends in Canada*, 2004 and *Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID)* masterfile data (1993 to 2004), via remote access. Poor children are those living in families whose total income before taxes lies below the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) as defined by Statistics Canada. Figure 1 includes statistics based on total family income before taxes and after taxes. All other charts are based on total family income before taxes. A child is defined as a person under the age of 18 living with parent(s) or guardian(s), excluding those who are unattached individuals, those that are the major income earner or those who are the spouse or common law partner of the major income earner. Statistics Canada data excludes those on First Nations reserves; those in the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut; and children living in institutions.
- 5 Cheryl Teelucksingh and Grace Edward Galabuzi *Working Precariously: The Impact of Race and Immigrant Status on Employment Opportunities and Outcomes in Canada*. (Toronto: Canadian Race Relations Foundation, 2005).
- 6 Assembly of First Nations, *Make Poverty History for First Nations* (2006); First Nations Centre, National Aboriginal Health Organization. *First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey 2002-2003* (Ottawa: National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2005).
- 7 J. Anderson, *Aboriginal Children in Poverty in Urban Communities: Social Exclusion and the Growing Racialization of Poverty in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Council on Social Development, 2003).
- 8 National Council of Welfare: *Welfare Incomes 2005* (Minister of Public Work and Governments Services Canada. Summer 2006).
- 9 Toronto Public Health (2006). *Food Security: Implications for the Early Years – Background Paper* (Toronto: Toronto Public Health, 2006).
- 10 L. McIntyre, N. T. Glanville, K. Raine, J. Dayle, B. Anderson, and N. Battaglia, "Do Low-income Lone Mothers Compromise their Nutrition to Feed their Children? *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 168, no. 2 (2003).
- 11 Andrew Jackson, *Good Jobs in Good Workplaces: Reflections on Medium-term Labour Market Challenges* (Ottawa: Caledon Institute, 2003); Ron Saunders, *Defining Vulnerability in the Labour Market* (Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2003).
- 12 *Who's Hungry?* (Toronto: Daily Bread Food Bank, 2006).

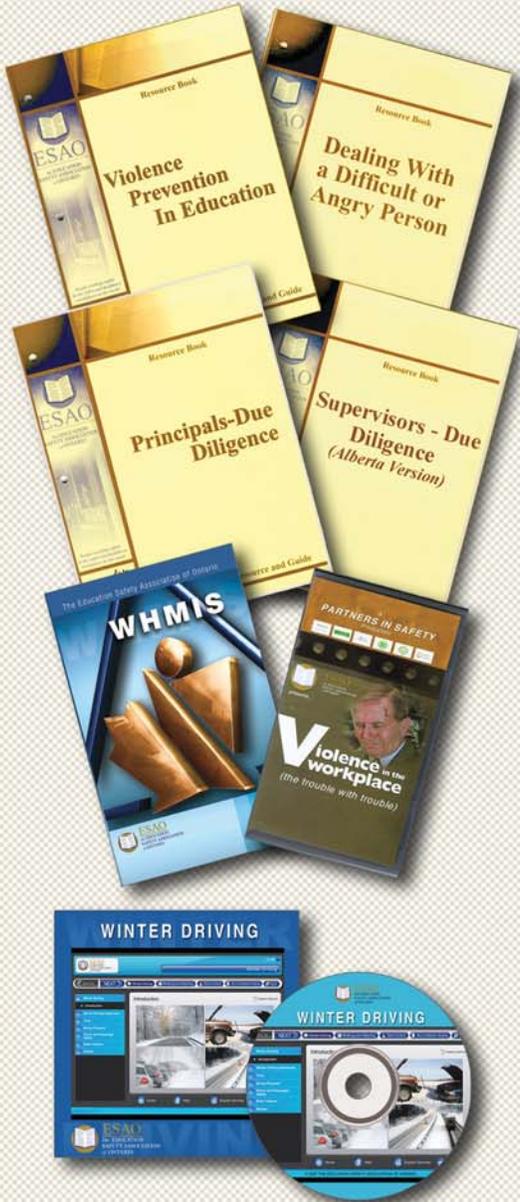


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