



Dr. Gilles Julien

MAKING CHILDREN SMILE AGAIN

Right after high school, Gilles Julien decided he wanted to become a pediatrician. His determination has given rise to social pediatrics, a remarkable approach that helps families to help themselves, and best of all, puts a smile back on kids' faces!

His dream to lend support to children gradually began to take shape in different forms — his work in private practice, hospitals, international development, work with the Inuit peoples of Northern Québec, public health, CLSCs (centre local de services communautaires) — to end up starting over near the end of the '80s and biking from one home visit to another in an impoverished area of Montréal. "That was more like what I wanted to do, but I had no support at all," he remembers, "except from volunteers from a retired nursing community."

AN APPROACH KNOWN THE WORLD OVER

Although his field work with children at risk was originally marginalized by the health and social services authorities, it has flourished to become a social pediatrics business, receiving worldwide recognition. It is labeled a "business" because it draws on innovation and the entrepreneurial spirit of the milieu, and because both of his centres for child services are independent and funded exclusively by donations from the general public, other businesses and foundations. "I do this by choice, because government grants are limiting and don't support a holistic approach," states Dr. Julien, who is today an undeniable reference, as much for ministers of health as for faculties of medicine around the world.

The success of Dr. Julien's comprehensive approach is such that for the last two years, residents in pediatrics at McGill University and Université de Montréal have been required to complete internships in one of the Montréal centres he has co-founded, whether at *Assistance d'enfants en difficulté* in the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve area or the *Centre de services préventifs à l'enfance* in Côte-des-Neiges.

"Giving power back to families and their children is what social pediatrics does best."

What exactly is Dr. Julien's approach? "Our primary tool is the 'child's protective circle,' which means that we call upon the family, we find solutions together and give them the power to help themselves with the support of our professionals and partners, such as the school, the DPJ (Direction de la protection de la jeunesse), neighbours, and the extended family," he explains.

Last year, for example, the centre developed a project nicknamed "Operation baby kangaroos" which meant strengthening the bond between a dozen babies and their parents, more than half of whom were selected by the DPJ and thought to be at great risk of losing custody of their child. "Twelve months later, not one single baby was being considered for foster care," confirms Dr. Julien. "Today these parents are extremely proud. For the first time they feel like real people. It is just about making them more confident. Giving power back to families and their children is what social pediatrics does best. That is what our approach is all about."

In Côte-des-Neiges, where more than 80 cultures live side by side, problems scarcely resemble those he comes across in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve: "They are worlds apart, and we've got to adapt the way

we do things for each neighbourhood. The basics are still the same, though: we need to adopt an approach where proximity, partnership and empowerment are emphasized, as well as combining our strengths, for the sake of the child's future."

FURTHERING COMPREHENSIVE DEVELOPMENT

Even if children at risk are first brought to our attention due to medical reasons, both the existing social pediatrics centres also offer many services which further children's overall development (help with homework, group outings, meals, infant stimulation activities, etc.). "We don't let anyone fall through the cracks," insists the pediatrician, who devotes four days of each week to clinical consultations as well as numerous teaching and fundraising activities, and other activities promoting social pediatrics. "I see every child who comes to our two centres. This really grounds me and helps me keep going."

The Hochelaga-Maisonneuve centre alone opens its doors each year to 1,500 children under 12 with social problems: developmental delays, behavioural, physical or mental problems. The centre employs 25 professionals (a social pediatrician, a nurse, social workers, psychoeducators, teachers, art therapists) and welcomes hundreds of volunteers.

"We act as an interface with the hospitals, the schools and the DPJ, so we are able to direct our clients in a much more logical manner through these big systems that too often work in isolation with no communication between them. We are trying to revolutionize how kids are cared for in Québec. The method is working — the way we work brings our costs down substantially, i.e. we spend approximately \$1 million per year for services offered seven days a week to an extremely vulnerable population."

The business could hardly respond to this demand, though, since a community-based social pediatrics centre has its limits: children must be able to get there on foot.

"As it stands, one in three children in Québec lives in poverty," Dr. Julien reminds us. "If we also take into account those suffering from a handicap, who often have to wait two years before getting an appointment with a specialist for a simple evaluation, then one out of two kids would be in immediate need of services like ours!"

PROBLEMS ARE GETTING MORE SERIOUS

Since he began his practice 30 years ago, the number and seriousness of problems he sees have also gone up: "Now, kids in elementary school have access to drugs; we're always hearing about people who are stressed with post-traumatic disorders or from being displaced and we see practically two cases of autism a week," explains the pediatrician.

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"But we only see a small number of the kids who are in difficulty," he adds sadly. "The rest will end up with much more serious problems later on. I don't mean just failing school; the global consequences this will have on society will be enormous! Something must be done. Today we have the tools to spot kids who are heading for trouble right from kindergarten or grade one. The good news is that even then it is not too late; we can still make a change. But, if we don't do anything, our society will just get worse and worse."

This has prompted Dr. Julien to act: he is currently trying to reach an agreement with the Québec ministries for health, education, leisure and sport, justice and family, as well as with the federations for specialists and generalists, to secure their support over the next five years for approximately 200 independent local social pediatric centres in targeted sectors with a very large number of children at risk.

"But the initiative must come from local groups," insists Dr. Julien, calling for action. Groups from all over Québec are already stirring: in Trois-Rivières, a community-based organization is converting a centre for social pediatrics; in Gatineau, it's pediatricians and the DPJ who are leading the project, while in Québec City and Montréal those acting are, respectively, a woman who helps run the shelter for families, and a woman who will soon be opening a daycare where these initiatives will be test run. "Anywhere else it just takes a group of citizens or an entrepreneur who believes in our approach," he affirms.

The magnitude of the work does not discourage him. "It is not just me working alone anymore," he rejoices. "I used to keep telling myself that my dream was crazy, but at the same time I never thought we would get to where we are today." **D**

Tribute to family and children

Ces enfants que nous aimons tant (The children we love so much), a book by photographer Pascale Charland, is a collection of photos of 20 or so personalities who accepted to pose with their children for Dr. Julien's cause. The album also contains photos of families cared for by the social pediatrician. "I wanted to show that even if these families aren't rich, they've still got beautiful kids with tons of potential," he confides.

Profits from the book will go towards the Fondation pour la promotion de la pédiatrie sociale. Books can be ordered from the Fondation's Web site, ordered by phone at 1-877-327-3777, or purchased at participating Jean Coutu pharmacies and in some independent bookstores.

"I dreamt of supporting kids on a global basis through local work."



Fondation pour la promotion de la pédiatrie sociale (FPPS):
www.pediatriesociale.org

Assistance d'enfants en difficulté (ADE):
<http://www.aed-hm.org>

Centre de services préventifs
à l'enfance de Côte-des-Neiges:
<http://www.cspe-cdn.org>