



# SMILE Canada - 2024 Showcase

# What makes this model different?

## A brief introduction

SMILE Canada - Support Services is a charity focused on helping racialized children and youth with disabilities and critical illnesses and their families. Their goal is to make sure all children and youth can thrive and be happy by providing support through programs and services that are culturally safe and meet the needs of the families they serve.

# Culturally sensitive support

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SMILE Canada's service navigators go above and beyond to ensure the families they support receive culturally safe and inclusive services. By tailoring their approach to the unique cultural needs of each family, they ensure that people feel seen, understood, and respected.

For example, they might refer a South Asian family to the South Asian Autism Awareness Centre (SAAAC), recognizing the importance of connecting families with culturally specific resources.

SMILE specifically focuses on racialized individuals needing support, as this is a population that tends to fall through the cracks with the system not being designed to support them.

# Holistic support for families

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The SMILE service navigation team does more than just give families referrals. The service navigators take an active role, helping families fill out applications and connecting them directly to the resources and services they need.

The navigators also step in to advocate for families when they face challenges with outside agencies, like schools or child protective services.

This advocacy makes sure that families' voices are heard and their needs are addressed, especially in situations where they might find it hard to navigate the system on their own.

“Families from diverse backgrounds may face both cultural and systemic barriers in accessing services for their children with disabilities. Our Service Navigators actively work to dismantle these barriers.”

## Multi-language services

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The service navigation team at SMILE offers support in many languages, including English, Urdu, Hindi, Farsi, Arabic, Somali, Dari, and Pashto. By providing help in multiple languages, the organization makes sure that families can communicate in the language they are most comfortable with, making it easier for them to understand the services and express their needs.

The navigators themselves speak different languages, but if a specific language isn't covered by a navigator, they work alongside interpreters to ensure understanding and support is provided holistically. This level of language accessibility is a major strength of the organization, especially for serving immigrant and newcomer communities.

## Flexible, ongoing engagement

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SMILE's service navigation program is built to be flexible and adapt to the changing needs of the families they support. The organization offers ongoing help, with service navigators regularly checking in with families and staying connected over time. How often the navigator checks in depends on the family's needs.

For families with lower needs, the navigator might check in every few weeks. For families with higher needs, the navigator might follow up several times a week. This approach ensures that families receive continuous support as their situations change, rather than just getting help once. It also makes sure that families never feel like they're alone on their journey.

“Even if families don't reach out, we reach out to them to ensure that everything's going smoothly and if they need any additional support.”

# **An overview**

# Overview of the navigator program

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SMILE Canada Support Services mainly provides service navigation support to support to children and youth with disabilities, and they have various programs and services that cater to families' needs and interests as well (support groups, wellness program, etc.). SMILE's focus in its inclusion criteria is to support individuals with disabilities/long-term conditions (and their families) where these needs intersect with ethnic backgrounds and places of origin that face unique challenges. So far, the service navigation program has helped more than 900 families nationwide access important services and resources. A big part of their work is helping families get provincial financial supports like:

- Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities (ACSD)
- Special Services at Home (SSAH)
- Ontario Autism Program

The service navigators help families with many different needs, such as filling out forms for financial aid, finding educational services, and connecting them to culturally safe programs. Families can access the service navigation program through a referral or by directly contacting the team. After they fill out an intake form on the website, they are placed on a waitlist. The intake form is available in many languages, and the team can also support families in filling it out. The team regularly conducts needs assessments, and families are moved off the waitlist based on how urgent their needs are.

The service navigation program is flexible, offering support through phone calls, emails, and virtual meetings. There is no set time limit for using their services—families can stay in the program as long as they want to. The team checks in with families occasionally, depending on their level of need.

While the organization offers broad support, there are some things they can't help with directly, like housing or legal issues. However, the navigators work hard to connect families to the right external organizations that can provide this help.

The service navigators at SMILE Canada Support Services have backgrounds in social services, psychology, or are individuals with lived experience. Each navigator typically supports over 100 families, which can be challenging, but they manage through teamwork and by carefully prioritizing each family's needs.

# Funding

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The service navigation program at SMILE Canada Support Services is funded by a mix of small grants and money raised by the organization. While the program works hard to meet the needs of all the families it serves, limited funding does affect what the navigators can do. For example, because there are many families for each navigator to support, it can take longer for families to get help, especially if their needs are less urgent. The current wait time is 4-8 weeks for less urgent cases. With more funding, the organization could hire more navigators, which would shorten wait times and make sure every family gets the help they need more quickly. The funding limitations also limit the programs they are able to offer.

Right now, the funding supports a team of 8 service navigators, 3 of whom work full-time.

# Limitations

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While SMILE Canada Support Services offers important support to many families, there are some limits to what the program can do. One major challenge is the lack of funding, which affects how many service navigators are available. Because there are so many families needing help, navigators often have to focus on the most urgent cases first. This can mean longer wait times for other families.

Families needing support may also struggle to access SMILE's services due to lack of available transportation, difficulty navigating new cities, and lack of time available in between appointments and procedures.

Even with these challenges, SMILE is committed to connecting families with the help they need, and do their best to do that with the resources and budget they have available.



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