

# Early Career Section Member Highlight

Dr. Katie Birnie



*Written by Lucas Walters (Ottawa)*

Dr. Katie Birnie is a Clinical Psychologist and Assistant Professor in the Department of Anesthesiology, Perioperative and Pain Medicine at the University of Calgary where she leads the Partnering For Pain program. She is the Assistant Scientific Director of Solutions for Kids in Pain (SKIP), a national knowledge mobilization network, and provides clinical care at Alberta Children's Hospital.



Dr. Birnie completed her PhD in Clinical Psychology at Dalhousie University in 2016, including a predoctoral residency in Pediatric Health Psychology at the IWK Health Centre. She completed a CIHR-funded postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Toronto and The Hospital for Sick Children. Dr. Birnie is a recognized leader in pain research and patient partnership, for which she has received a number of national and international accolades.

Dr. Birnie has more than [65 peer reviewed publications](#). Her research integrates patient and family partnership and multi-stakeholder engagement to improve the prevention, assessment, and management of pain experienced by children and their families. Dr. Birnie's work spans the knowledge-to-action continuum including creating new knowledge, synthesizing existing evidence, and mobilizing knowledge to inform health practice and policy. She holds research funds from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Canadian Pain Society, the Ontario SPOR SUPPORT Unit, and the Chronic Pain Network. Dr. Birnie is a strong advocate for the partnership of patients and families in health research, health care delivery, and health systems design.

I recently had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Birnie to learn more about her career path, experiences, research, and insights. Here's what she had to say!

## **What elements of your background shaped your career path the most?**

This list would be long if I shared them all! One pivotal moment was a first-year undergraduate class called "Mind-Body Medicine" where I learned that stress makes you more likely to catch the common cold. This simple idea hooked me and started my unwavering passion for health psychology. A second powerful influence on my career path has been my mentors. Some are psychologists, some are other healthcare professionals and researchers, some are people with lived experience, and some lead provincial and national organizations. They have created opportunities, provided guidance and support, and changed how I think and understand the world.

## **What is the current focus and scope of your research?**

I lead Partnering For Pain, a patient-oriented research program focused on improving the prevention, assessment, and management of pain experienced by children and their families

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([www.partneringforpain.com](http://www.partneringforpain.com)). We partner with youth, families, healthcare professionals, decision-makers, and organizations in the community in new clinical research studies, knowledge synthesis, and mobilization of research evidence to inform health practice and policy. Many of our current research projects action the Top 10 priorities for pediatric chronic pain identified by youth, family members, and healthcare professionals in a national James Lind Alliance Priority Setting Partnership I led a few years ago. Current projects are focused on virtual care for chronic pain, co-designing new health services to prevent pediatric chronic postsurgical pain, pain assessment in youth with brain-based developmental disabilities, and psychological interventions to address the intergenerational transmission of chronic pain in families. I am also Associate Scientific Director of Solutions for Kids in Pain (SKIP), a national knowledge mobilization network on a mission to mobilize evidence-based solutions for children's pain management through coordination and collaboration ([www.kidsinpain.ca](http://www.kidsinpain.ca)), and a Medical Psychologist at Alberta Children's Hospital.

### What are some of the most important lessons you've learned so far in your career?

Some lessons I've picked up from mentors and through my own experience so far:

- (1) **Do good work** and continue to do good work. This is foundational.
- (2) **Be opportunistic and strategic**. Say yes to new and different opportunities to broaden your skills, experiences, and network, but also learn when to say no to opportunities that don't serve your goals or align with your values.
- (3) **Put yourself out there** and be willing to fail. Some of my greatest successes and most meaningful experiences have happened when I've taken chances with something new and been willing to feel uncomfortable.
- (4) **Diversify your mentorship**. Talk to other psychologists and non-psychologists for guidance.
- (5) Make sure the big decisions (life and career) are **connected to your values**. This makes it easier to navigate life's inevitable hardships. Others might have ideas about what you "should" do, but only you get to choose what matters most.
- (6) Find **people who will fiercely support you** but who will also challenge you. Life and work will have setbacks and it helps to have those you can trust.

### What advice would you have for those earlier in their career path who aspire to be much like you?

Throw out the myth that there are only two career paths for psychologists (research or clinical) and that you must choose.

### What does the future have in store for you?

My honest answer is that I don't know! I love what I'm doing right now with professional roles that include academia/research, clinical care, and leadership and advocacy. I feel very lucky and privileged to have such a dynamic career with the opportunity to interact with so many kinds of people and organizations working to improve the lives of people with pain in Canada. I am inspired by more senior psychologists who I have seen change roles and reinvent their careers over time. I'm working to stay present and not worry about what comes ahead, while also being open to all sorts of possibilities in the future!