

Child care after the coronavirus pandemic should be more inclusive of children with disabilities ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Across Canada, some provinces have either opened or are looking at opening their child-care centres again following pandemic closures. But all families do not have the same opportunity to participate in early childhood education and care. To simply expand what we now have would not serve all families equally.

The early years system, including child care, has a role to play in equitable economic as well as socially inclusive participation for children and families.

Advocates have been calling for universal child care for years, resulting in public policy that calls for inclusive, accessible and high-quality childcare spaces.

Our research examines childhood disability and family experiences interacting with the early years system. We have learned that we must stop thinking about child care as a standalone service and start seeing it as a component of a complex system of services.

Our research suggests that families must work extensively to access the early years system. Many must navigate, seek diagnostic information and participate in a system that may not fit with their worldview of disability or childhood.

Childhood and disability

Disability is the experience of exclusion or discrimination on the basis of perceived impairment.

Perceptions of impairment are rampant in the early years because of society's fixation on normative childhood development. The lack of universal access or the recognition of child care as part of a bigger system of critical services creates risk for families as well as perpetuates ableism and inequality.

These risks include intersectional discrimination, where childhood disability is blamed on families rather than recognized as a natural part of human diversity or the product of social inequality. Specifically, Indigenous worldviews of childhood and disability and Black disabled experiences with the early years system are not well represented in mainstream policy or practice.

The myth of inclusion in child care

Child care is not a universal service in Canada. There have never been enough child-care spaces for the number of children who need them. Child care is also not well-designed for parents who are precariously employed, who work shifts or those with non-traditional hours.

The response to COVID-19 has led to new understanding of the need for more flexible child care. Most children did not have access to child care prior to the pandemic. As new social distancing measures are put in place, fewer will have access afterwards.

Many provinces have put child care at the centre of their early years inclusion strategies. However, formal child care should not be at the centre of community inclusion strategies until it is accessible for all.

Building inclusive systems

In this context, low-cost or free recreation, playgroups and family support programs should be made a priority. These programs are often connected to and reflective of the communities they serve and should be recognized as central to inclusive early childhood systems.

Programs like these are also low-threshold, meaning they have few barriers to participation. Unlike formal child care, many of these programs do not require an extensive registration process.

These programs are generally accessible and would be appropriate sites to increase access to early intervention and therapeutic services.

Integrating services into more community-oriented programs enables flexibility in programming, such as in EarlyON programs, community centres, recreation and programs, where children are cared for by grandparents, siblings and others. This move would also promote

culturally appropriate and responsive support for the intersecting identities of disabled children and families.

Ableism in child care and school

In addition to shortages, many child-care spaces are not designed for all children. Structural issues such as operation hours, staffing and professional role definition have contributed to the exclusion of disabled children.

Child-care programs often do not know about or take into account the demands on families and children who are accessing early intervention or health-care programs.

Similar issues arise in school-based early childhood programs. In our research, we found structural issues as well as direct discriminatory attitudes resulted in children's exclusion from full-day kindergarten. Some families were asked to keep their children at home until Grade 1. Others were asked to have their children remain in child care or to opt for therapeutic environments instead of kindergarten.

In both child care and school settings, we found that enrolled children were often asked to participate for only a portion of the day. At times, they were asked to attend alternate programs altogether. In this way, disabled children are excluded from opportunities afforded to others.

This situation is likely to be exacerbated by the coronavirus-related closure of programs serving parents with young children, and a reduction in the number of child-care spaces available.

While the pandemic is disproportionately affecting disabled, racialized and poor families, it also provides an opportunity to improve access and address systemic challenges to participation.

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