

Children's Services 2020–2021 annual report ^[1]

Author: Children's Services, Government of Alberta


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AVAILABILITY

Access full report [PDF] ^[2]

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Excerpted from Discussion and Analysis of Results

Outcome Two: The growth and development of children are supported through accessible, affordable and quality child care

Children, youth and families are supported to engage fully in their communities, which includes parents' ability to pursue post-secondary education and take part in the workforce. The ministry is committed to maintaining access to affordable, quality child care programs, and promoting culturally appropriate community-based early childhood services, parenting resources and supports.

Key Objectives

2.1 Improve access to child care by supporting initiatives that encourage affordability and quality in the child care system.

This past year has brought unprecedented challenges for families, child care programs and child care educators. At the onset of the pandemic, public health orders required licensed daycare, out-of-school care and preschool programs to close. Many working parents were able to transition to "work from home" arrangements; others, particularly women, had to choose between employment and taking care of their families. Child care programs had to shut down operations and they faced a period of uncertainty, creating instability for families and their operations for the foreseeable future.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how critical accessible, affordable, inclusive, and high-quality child care is for families, children, and our economy. Children's Services has taken action to support parents and licensed child care providers to sustain a strong and stable child care sector that keeps children as safe as possible and helps parents get back to work and stay at work.

Supporting Alberta's Workers and Families during COVID-19

On March 16, 2020, a public health order required all licensed child care programs to close, significantly impacting children, families, and staff and program operators. Shortly after the mandatory closure, the ministry supported some child care providers to reopen for essential workers. Safe child care was key to getting many Albertans back to work. The ministry worked to ensure child care was not a barrier for those who were doing the work required to maintain the critical services for Albertans, including healthcare practitioners, critical infrastructure workers, and first responders.

Between March 23 and May 14, 2020, approximately 200 daycare and out-of-school care programs were approved to reopen a limited number of child care spaces to essential service workers, offering approximately 4,500 spaces to qualifying families in 33 communities.

Preparing to make child care spaces available for essential workers during the early days of the pandemic came with uncertainty for child care operators. For this reason, Children's Services provided operators with Vacant Spaces Grants, which paid up to \$41 per day for each unfilled daycare space and \$31 per day for each unfilled out-of-school care space, in addition to \$500 for the purchase of cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment. A total of \$4.7 million was spent to support the essential services child care initiative.

On May 14, 2020, licensed child care operators were approved to reopen under Alberta's Relaunch Plan provided they adhered to the requirements set by the Chief Medical Officer of Health. Children's Services supported operators of licensed child care centres to implement these guidelines within their programs to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 among children, parents, guardians, staff and volunteers. Over the course of the pandemic, Children's Services in partnership with the federal government, spent approximately \$130 million in relief funding to support child care providers, including:

- \$30.0 million through the Child Care Relief Program which provided support to Child Care Operators to ensure a safe reopening;
- \$72.9 million through the provincial/federal Safe Restart Agreement distributed to eligible programs between mid-October and mid-November;
- \$11.1 million in surplus funding from the 2019-20 Bilateral Agreement in February 2021; and

- \$15.7 million through a one-time Critical Worker Benefit payment, recognizing the front-line work and risk taken by certified Early Childhood Educators to provide safe, high-quality, critical child care

Accessible Child Care

Access to safe and reliable child care plays a key role in the economic recovery of Alberta by enabling parents to stay working or return to work. On May 14, 2020, all child care programs were allowed to re-open.

Throughout 2020-21, Children's Services worked to improve access to child care. This included renegotiating the bilateral agreement with the federal government, updating the subsidy model to make child care more affordable, investing funds to create new spaces where they are needed most, enhancing inclusion initiatives, and supporting child care programs to reopen and stay open through the challenges brought on by the pandemic.

Space Creation and Overnight Care

The ministry recognizes parents need the right child care space in the right place – whether it is in their community or close to their work or school, day time hours or overnight. Some communities in Alberta have a shortage of licensed high-quality child-care spaces, leading to child care “hot spots” or ‘deserts’.

In partnership with the Government of Canada in 2020-21, Children's Services directed \$10.3 million in grants to increase the number of spaces in many areas of need, and to provide more child care options that are culturally or linguistically diverse or offered outside of regular hours, including new overnight child care spaces.

On January 25, 2021, the ministry released the Child Care Capacity Building Expression of Interest (EOI), offering one time funding to qualified existing family day home agencies and new and existing daycare programs to expand their services. The Child Care Capacity Building EOI sought proposals to create new child care spaces in communities with limited or no licensed child care options, create overnight child care spaces in communities where there is a high demand for this service, and implement one or more program improvements to better support the needs of children and families. A total of \$10.3 million was awarded in 44 one-time grants to create up to 1,600 spaces in daycares and family day homes.

Child Care Resources for Parents

Every family is different and has different child care needs. Many families access licensed child care programs, while others choose unlicensed day homes or enter into private child care arrangements with family, friends or neighbours. To help parents make informed decisions, Children's Services updated the Choosing Child Care in Alberta Guide about the types of child care available in Alberta. The guide includes a checklist of questions parents can ask and lists what to look for when considering their child care options.

Affordable Child Care through Subsidies

The Alberta government is committed to supporting families most in need to access child care. To achieve this, Children's Services assists eligible families with children from birth to 12 years of age and not yet in grade seven to pay for child care costs for children enrolled in licensed facility-based programs and licensed family day home agencies. The Alberta Child Care Subsidy program provides full subsidy for eligible families earning up to \$50,000 per year, and partial subsidy for those earning up to \$75,000 per year. This is one of the most generous thresholds in Canada.

In 2020-21, the ministry provided a subsidy to 22,967 children (as at March 2021), 68 per cent of whom received a full subsidy. Although the pandemic reduced enrolment by 20 per cent compared to 2019-20, the proportion of children enrolled in licensed child care who received subsidy has remained stable with 26 per cent of children receiving subsidy in 2019-20 and 27 per cent of children receiving subsidy in 2020-21. Data shows that 66 per cent are children of single parents.

Children's Services subsidizes infant care costs through the Infant Care Incentive Program, paying a universal grant of \$150 per month to licensed daycares and approved family day home agencies to offset the higher cost associated with caring for infants under 18 months of age. In 2020-21, the ministry supported nearly 4,100 infant spaces under this program.

Changes to the child care subsidy model and rates came into effect August 1, 2020. The new subsidy model is simpler and easier to understand, with clear eligibility criteria and straightforward income threshold calculation. It provides a higher benefit to families most in need. They can feel more comfortable accepting new opportunities at work, knowing that a raise in income won't necessarily result in all of their new income paying the difference for child care, as the new step model provides transparent rates with gradual subsidy decreases as incomes grow.

This means a fully subsidized:

- infant is supported with \$741/month (previously \$628/month)
- toddler is supported with \$644/month (previously \$546/month)
- school-age child is supported with \$366/month (previously \$310/month).

Under the new subsidy model, approximately 21,000 children receive child care for \$25-a-day or less, with parent fees of \$13 per day or less for 12,749 of these children. Compared to January 2020, under the new subsidy program, parents receiving full subsidy in January 2021 pay:

- 16 per cent less for daycare;

- 21 per cent less for family day home; and
- 12 per cent less for out-of-school care.

In July and August 2020, subsidy rates for children attending out-of-school care programs were increased to match daycare subsidy rates to better assist families to pay their higher full-time summer fees. As a result, fully subsidized children in grades 1 through 6 received \$644 in subsidy in both July and August instead of the regular school age rate of \$366 in those months.

Working Parent Benefit – Relief Supports During Pandemic

Working families have faced additional pressure and costs because of the pandemic. Some have lost their jobs, some are working fewer hours, and all families have experienced more anxiety and stress. As a result, fewer families used licensed child care, which has meant that child care subsidy needs were met at a lower cost.

The Working Parents Benefit provided a one-time payment of \$561 per child to working parents who paid for and used child care so they could continue working or going to school during the pandemic. The benefit was available to low and middle-income families with an annual household income up to \$100,000 who had paid at least \$561 per child for child care for three or more months between April 1 and December 31, 2020. The Working Parents Benefit helped about 21,000 families and 30,200 children.

Professional Development, Certification and Training

Children's Services recognizes the shared responsibility in building the capacity of the child care sector and helping programs to operate under the licensing requirements. The ministry provided funding for coaching and mentoring support designed to meet the specific business needs of child care programs and ensure their long-term sustainability.

In 2020-21, 80 licensed child care programs received a total of 699 hours of Leading Improvement Nurturing Knowledge (LINK) support to enhance their ability to meet licensing requirements in five key areas, including staffing and ratios, supervision, child discipline and meeting the developmental needs of children. An additional 291 licensed programs received coaching and mentoring from Alberta Childcare Ventures in the areas of financial management, business and strategic planning, setting business policies and procedures, human resources, marketing and advertising, customer service and parent relations.

Research demonstrates that early childhood educators are critically important to creating highquality learning environments and influencing the experiences that shape child development. Child care professionals with educational backgrounds in early childhood development have specialized knowledge to support the healthy development and well-being of children.

Under the provincial certification process, the ministry assesses post-secondary early childhood education training at one of the three levels of certification. More than 2,000 child care staff completed the Alberta Child Care Orientation Course that leads to certification as a Level 1 early childhood educator. This course is offered at no cost to child care staff that enter the field with no formal education in early learning and child care.

The new *Early Learning and Child Care Act* changed the names of the three certification levels, moving from Child Development Worker, Assistant and Supervisor to Level 1, 2 and 3 respectively. As of March 2021, there were approximately 14,984 early childhood educators working in licensed daycare centres, out-of-school care programs and family day home agencies. Approximately 59 per cent of these educators were certified as Level 2 and Level 3, holding at least a one- or two-year educational credential in early learning and child care or equivalent.

In March 2021, there were:

- 6,079 early childhood educators certified as Level 1 (formerly referred to as Child Development Worker);
- 2,360 early childhood educators certified as Level 2 (formerly Child Development Assistant); and
- 6,545 early childhood educators certified as Level 3 (formerly Child Development Supervisor).

A well-trained and highly skilled early childhood workforce provides enriched environments and promotes positive brain development, learning, and long-term outcomes for children. That is why the ministry continued to support licensed programs to recruit and retain qualified early childhood educators by providing \$78 million for wage top ups (up to \$6.62 per hour) and \$679,000 for professional development (up to \$1,700 per year). All certified educators working in licensed daycare centres, out-of-school care programs and family day home agencies had access to this funding.

Improving training to address the whole child (physical, social, emotional, cognitive and communication/language) and having learning expectations for each supports child care educators to observe children and adapt activities to best meet their needs. The curricula serve additional purposes, such as promoting standards of quality across programs and facilitating communication between parents and staff.

Children's Services continues to engage and collaborate with external stakeholders to implement the expansion of the Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Curriculum Framework, the evidence-based practice framework that helps guide early learning and child care educators for young children. In 2020-21, 1,091 students completed the 22-week advanced-level Flight course with 1,051 completing the basic introductory training through ministry grants.

Through the renegotiated 2020-21 bilateral agreement with the federal government, Children's Services directed \$4.7 million to further expand the curriculum across all child care programs in the province during the next two years. The investments will focus on the development and delivery of a new Intermediate level professional learning online workshop series for 3,000 students per year, offer the existing basic level workshop series to a higher number of students and ensure that the advanced level Flight course continues to be

delivered to 1,000 students per year.

Related link: Alberta lost one in five licensed early childhood educators during 1st year of pandemic, data shows [4]

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