

Raising Canada 2021^[1]

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Access to education and child care

The Impacts of School Closures

The impacts of school and daycare closures during the pandemic on the lives of children have become apparent. These closures are a fundamental factor in exacerbating many of the top 10 threats to childhood. Experts from the UN have warned that students are facing a “generational catastrophe” as a result of COVID-19 impacts on global education.²¹³ Children have a right to education that advances various aspects of their development (Articles 28 and 29), so many scholars and advocates perceive the shift to online schooling and the associated challenges to be linked to a broad disregard for these rights.

School closures were applied unevenly across the country, resulting in varied impacts to children’s education and their mental and physical health. While all jurisdictions maintained school closures in the first wave of the pandemic, a patchwork of approaches was used in various provinces and territories in the second and third waves. Ontario closed schools for longer than any other jurisdiction in the country, for a total of 20 weeks from March 14, 2020, to May 15, 2021. Prince Edward Island had the second longest closure for 19 weeks during that same period, followed by Alberta, where secondary schools were closed for 19 weeks (primary schools closed to a lesser degree). Notably, Quebec had the fewest closures, for a total of eight weeks for both elementary and secondary schools.²¹⁴

In areas like Finland, where schools reopened during the pandemic, elevated infection risks were not witnessed. In Sweden, where daycare, primary, and elementary schools remained open throughout the pandemic, there was also no increased risk of infection observed among school or daycare staff.²¹⁵ While these studies have outlined relatively low transmission risks, other schools (such as those in British Columbia) have found that 52.5% of transmissions occurred between students and that there were clustered outbreaks in Surrey schools.²¹⁶ In Yellowknife, one school had a major outbreak where 87% of the cases were among children and youth²¹⁷. As such, these experiences are not universal.

What has been consistently established is that school closures have had a devastating impact on many children and youth, including: uneven attainment of educational opportunities; increased susceptibility to adverse effects, such as stress, poor mental health and low school connectedness; increased family stress and violence; food insecurity; and impacts on behaviours (e.g., sleeping, physical activity, eating, etc.).²¹⁵ These impacts have been experienced by all school-aged children in Canada to a greater or lesser degree, with the most acute impacts being felt by children that had other exacerbating factors, such as poverty, racism and abuse.

It is simultaneously important to consider the challenges that teachers across Canada have had to face by pivoting, sometimes several times, to different models of learning throughout the pandemic.²¹⁸ It is also crucial to consider the ways in which teacher burnout and mental distress negatively impacts students’ ability to learn effectively.²¹⁹

Some children and youth have also experienced impacts to achievement, where early analyses have shown that fewer students met reading expectations early in the 2020-2021 academic year.^{218, 220}

Child Care Impacts

Prior to the pandemic, parents and guardians faced several challenges to find child care for their children and when they did, they often had to pay high costs for care that varied in quality across providers in Canada.²³¹ Findings from January 2021 indicated that the majority of care providers are unlicensed home-based providers as opposed to licensed centre-based and home-based providers.²³² Parental and family characteristics and the age of the child also had an impact on child care use, such that lone-parent families were somewhat more

likely to report using child care for their children between the ages of one and 12 (approximately 70%) compared to partnered parents (64%).²³³ In addition, immigrant parents (53%) and non-permanent resident parents (54%) were less likely to use child care in the 12 months preceding the survey compared to Canadianborn parents (69%).²³³

While the international benchmark for government spending on early learning and child care is about 1% of a country's GDP, 2020 data revealed that Canada spent only about 0.5%.²³¹ Yet access to high-quality child care is seen as a key "countermeasure" to reducing the effects of poverty for children living at or below the poverty line.¹⁴⁹

In a Statistics Canada crowdsourcing survey from June 2020, about one-third (33.7%) of respondents indicated that their children would return to child care once services reopened and nearly nine in 10 (88%) parents indicated that child care was necessary for a return to work. However, many parents indicated various challenges in finding child care (35% of respondents), affordability of child care (48%) and finding care that met the needs of their work schedule (38%).²²² Ultimately, when child care (and schooling) are unavailable, the effects on the family, and particularly mothers, are critical.⁷⁷

In April 2021, the federal government announced a historic commitment of \$27.2 billion to be spent over the next five years to create a national child care system.²³⁴ The announcement has been widely applauded by child care advocates in addition to a wider range of stakeholders within the child health and wellbeing sectors, the private sector and beyond, given the significant ramifications – both for children as well as women's participation within the workforce. While it was widely proclaimed as a feminist victory, it also stands to be a victory for children's rights.

Recommendations

Policy and Community Recommendations

- The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us many lessons about the necessity of high-quality education and child care. Parents and students alike require assistance beyond the provision of teaching materials, which has been made evident from the proxy-educator role that most parents have had to take on. School checkins with proxy-educators would be one tool to determine where supplemental supports are required.²¹⁹ Targeted financial measures must be set aside for children experiencing poverty during the pandemic, by providing school materials, transportation or meals.²⁷ Part of recovery from COVID-19 also requires the world's 100 million teachers and educators to be given priority in vaccination campaigns according to UNESCO.²³⁸
- Implement the Roadmap for Affordable High Quality Child Care for All to ensure that all children, regardless of where they live in Canada, have access to regulated, affordable, inclusive, culturally safe, flexible, high-quality early learning and child care (ELCC) from birth to age 12.²³⁹ In order to achieve the child care movement's shared goals for ELCC, the substantial federal funds must be used to drive transformational change in ELCC with regard to public responsibility for funding, management and delivery. Transformation is necessary to replace the current market provision model with a universal public system that will make high quality, affordable, inclusive, flexible, culturally safe, regulated early learning and child care accessible to all who want it, and that properly compensates those who work in the sector. Decisions regarding a Canada-wide system of ELCC must honour and respect the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework, wherein Indigenous policies and programs are Indigenous-led, based on Indigenous knowledges, and supported by holistic and meaningful partnerships with Indigenous children and families.²³⁹

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