

How early childhood education helped a mother in Peel^[1]

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Excerpts

When Nisha came to Canada, she didn't know where to put her young son while she looked for work in the Mississauga and Brampton area.

It was a difficult and perplexing time in her life, rife with many questions – Where do I leave him? How do I find a job? How do I build my career to give him a better life?

“There was no support system in this country for us, we didn't have family or friends when we came,” Nisha says.

The thing that ultimately saved her from a lot of stress and confusion: Discovering that there was a child care centre in her building.

There, she was able to leave her son in an environment that was welcoming, stimulating, and educational. And although he didn't understand English very well, the inclusive and experienced early childhood professionals helped him work through this barrier so he could communicate with the other kids and staff.

Many years later, Nisha is still grateful to the child care centre that played a big role in her building a successful life for herself and her family.

“I could go search for a job, find a job, move up in my career with ease, just because of this one facility that was available for me,” she says.

“If it wasn't there, I don't think I'd be where I am today.”

Nisha's story is heartwarming, and she's far from the only one with such an experience.

Last year, over 17,000 parents, caregivers and children in total benefited from EarlyON programs, and over 47,000 licensed child care spaces were available in Peel Region, encompassing Mississauga, Brampton and Caledon.

With over 5,100 early childhood professionals in child care and EarlyON programs, Peel has one of the largest early childhood workforces in all of Ontario.

That's why, to thank child care professionals for all they've done and continue to do, Peel is celebrating Early Childhood Educator (ECE) Appreciation Day today, October 18th.

What many people don't know about early childhood education

Most of us understand on a basic level why early childhood professionals are important, but few know just how much goes into the process.

Early childhood education plays a very critical role in helping children grow and thrive, according to Suzanne Finn, Director of Early Years and Child Care Services at Peel Region.

“Research shows that in the first few years of life, an infant's brain makes one million neural connections per second,” Finn says.

“Positive relationships between early childhood professionals, children and families help build these neural connections in a child's brain and sets them up for success beyond childhood.”

For early childhood professionals, the goal is to design play-based learning and engaging spaces that support exploration, play and inquiry – all of which have a positive long-term impact on children's development, well-being, and capacity to learn.

Of course, there's also the economic aspect: Early childhood professionals strengthen the economy by allowing parents like Nisha to work away from home, knowing their children are safe and being cared for.

Never was this clearer than during the COVID-19 pandemic. When schools were forced to shut down and the world seemingly came to a halt, early childhood professionals were crucial to ensure frontline workers (such as first responders and those working in healthcare) could continue to work away from home.

During school closures as a result of COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, the Region partnered with licensed child care providers to deliver free emergency child care to many frontline workers – with some centres going as far as offering child care 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

We've come a long way since then, but the effects of the pandemic are still felt by early childhood professionals. COVID-19 impacted the recruitment and retention of professionals in the sector, which had already been an issue before the pandemic.

"The child care sector will need to hire more than 2,200 Early Childhood Educators to meet current demand and even more to meet the expected demand for child care resulting from the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care plan," says Finn.

To address these challenges, the Region has developed a workforce strategy including partnering with some GTA colleges to offer fast-track Early Childhood Education programs and tuition grants for residents, so there are more qualified educators to fill current shortages and meet future demand.

Additionally, new funding will offer more learning opportunities for the sector through professional learning days in 2022 and 2023, as well as the development of a mentorship program to help current early childhood professionals grow their skills and achieve their career goals.

What is ECE Appreciation Day?

This year marks the 22nd annual Child Care Worker and Early Childhood Educator Appreciation Day: A yearly initiative celebrated by hundreds of home child care agencies, child care centres, EarlyON Child and Family Centres, and Special Needs Resourcing Agencies in Peel.

To show its appreciation, the Region has launched a public campaign which includes sending thank you banners to licensed child care and EarlyON providers in Peel, and inviting children, families and staff to write a message of gratitude for their early childhood professionals.

Residents who take transit or drive past a billboard in Peel might also see a thank you message for our early childhood professionals!

An exciting time for early childhood professionals and educators

Despite the hurdles of these past few years, the future is looking bright for early childhood professionals in Peel.

As the Region currently puts into place lower fees for licensed child care (as part of the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care plan), it's expected that more families will begin accessing these services. That means early childhood professionals joining the workforce will have no shortage of job opportunities ahead of them.

Right now, Peel's 5,100+ early childhood professionals are working in a variety of settings, such as licensed child care, home child care, and EarlyON programs.

Early childhood professionals can also work as resource consultants to support children with special needs to have positive and inclusive child care and early years experiences.

And of course, early childhood professionals entering the field can feel good knowing they're making a difference – not just for the children themselves, but the rest of the community, too.

"Research clearly shows that a strong early years and child care system has a ripple effect throughout all aspects of our community," says Finn.

"Early childhood professionals are a key element of a strong early years and child care system. They should be acknowledged for their impact on children, families and communities on Child Care Worker and Early Childhood Educator Appreciation Day and throughout the year."

So if you know anyone who works in the early years and child care sector, reach out to them today and say thanks – a little appreciation goes a long way!

And if you're currently searching for licensed child care or an EarlyON Centre for your kids, be sure to visit infopeel.ca.

Those who are interested in becoming Early Childhood Educators themselves should check out the Region of Peel's website for more information on how to get started.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: mothers' labour force participation ^[4]

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