

# Beyond baby steps: Planning for a national child care system<sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Prentice, Susan; White, Linda & Friendly, Martha

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## AVAILABILITY

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## Introduction

Justin Trudeau's government has made big promises to Canadian families. In the federal budget of 2016, it declared that "high-quality, affordable child care is more than a convenience-it's a necessity." The government will be taking action, as the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development and the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs develop agreements with provinces, territories and Indigenous communities to fulfill election commitments on child care.

It was back in 2005 that a Liberal government was last in a position to act on child care. Ken Dryden, Paul Martin's Minister of Social Development, promised \$5 billion over five years and finalized bilateral agreements with all provinces/territories. The Martin government came to the intergovernmental table with a child care policy based on four principles - quality, universality, accessibility, and developmental services ("QUAD"), but there were few implementation mechanisms in place when the new Conservative government cancelled the agreements in 2006.

Since 2006, early childhood education and care (ECEC) has evolved to some degree; for example, by September 2016, 8 of the 13 provinces/territories will offer full-day kindergarten for all five-year-olds. As well, 2001 changes to parental leave enable some parents to take year-long partly remunerated maternity/parental leave.

Nevertheless, huge gaps remain in ECEC services. While kindergarten is welcomed by parents, it serves only five-year-olds and doesn't always match parents' work schedules, which means it doesn't function as child care. Fewer than half of all families are eligible for federally paid parental leave, which is paid at only 55 percent of wages or less. Child care spaces are scarce and expensive, and their quality is too often too low to be considered "developmental."

While Canadian family policy is not very generous for most families, it is especially limited for Indigenous children. ECEC services for Indigenous children are chronically underdeveloped and underfunded. This led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission called for culturally appropriate Indigenous early childhood education as part of healing and reconciliation.

In the 2015 election, the Liberal government committed to take action on child care as part of "supporting economic security for middle class Canadian families, and those working hard to join them." But child care is a complex issue that is ideologically contested - there are still a few voices who protest its very existence.

Constitutionally, the provinces have the main responsibility for child care. Since the 1970s, federal governments have made several attempts to advance child care, but a comprehensive national plan has never become a reality. Each province/territory has instead developed its own policies to address ECEC, in ways that are quite similar but often less than effective. Today, no province or territory has a comprehensive plan based on the best evidence, although they all recognize that more needs to be done to support children's development and families' needs for care.

The OECD has noted that in all provinces/territories except for Quebec, child care funding relies too heavily on parental fees and outdated "inefficient" fee subsidies. It also states that the funding is not adequate to ensure that affordable quality services are available when and where they're needed. The almost entirely female workforce of early childhood educators is exploited - their training, pay, and working conditions are insufficient everywhere in Canada. This compromises the quality for the children.

Finally, there is a general lack of planning. As a result, in many places there are no infant or school-age spaces; there are few services for families who work nonstandard hours, and for rural and northern families; there are too few programs designed for and by Indigenous communities; and inclusion of children with disabilities is unpredictable.

**Region:** Canada<sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** affordability<sup>[4]</sup>

funding<sup>[5]</sup>

quality<sup>[6]</sup>

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