



Early learning and child care: How does Canada measure up?

International comparisons using data from *Starting Strong II*
(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006)

This BRIEFing NOTE situates early learning and child care in Canada in the international context using the work of the OECD's Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care¹. It first presents an overview of the review's eight year project. Second, it examines the review's final recommendations in *Starting Strong II*. Third, it presents data from *Starting Strong II* to situate Canada internationally. The Thematic Review's documents are available online at http://www.oecd.org/document/63/0,2340,en_2649_34511_37416703_1_1_1_1,00.html

The OECD and early learning and child care

Early learning and child care: Foundation of lifelong learning

The Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) was launched by the Education Committee of the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1998. It was motivated by a 1996 meeting of the OECD Education Ministers on the topic "Making Lifelong Learning a Reality for All". With the aim of strengthening the foundations of lifelong learning, the ministers set a goal of improving access to and quality in early childhood education and care and recommended conducting a Thematic Review (a cross-national study) (OECD, 1996).

Starting Strong, the project's 2001 first summary report observed that

Early childhood education and care has experienced a surge of policy attention in OECD countries over the past decade. Policy makers have recognized that equitable access to quality early childhood education and care can strengthen the foundations of lifelong learning for all children and support the broad educational

and social needs of families. There is a need to strengthen knowledge of the range of approaches adopted by different countries, along with the successes and challenges encountered (2001:7)

The process of the Thematic Review

Through national Education Ministries, OECD member countries were invited to participate. By the end of the project, twenty countries² had participated in the review's two rounds. Early in the review process, country representatives agreed upon the framework, scope and process of the review, and identified the major policy issues³ for investigation. Each country agreed to prepare or commission a Background Report to provide contextual/demographic information and respond to a set of questions about its provision of ELCC programs and family policy. Each country was then visited by a four member international expert team that met with ELCC officials and community groups and visited ELCC programs. The team then prepared for the OECD a Country Note presenting an analysis of the country's ELCC issues. The OECD also held a series of international workshops on key topics (curricula and pedagogies; financing; ECEC for children from low income families; data), commissioning a paper on each topic.

Starting Strong, a summary report based on the first round of 12 country reviews, was released at an international conference in Stockholm, June 13-15, 2001. Following a second round of eight country reviews (including Canada⁴), *Starting Strong II* was prepared by the OECD and was released at a conference in Reggio Emilia in northern Italy, September 21-22, 2006.

¹ Note that the terms "early childhood education and care" and "early learning and child care" have the same meaning.

² Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States

³ The two main policy issues identified were quality and access.

⁴ The two Canada reports were released in 2004.

The 2001 report

The 50 reports that make up the OECD's Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care comprise the largest body of comparative analytic literature to date in the field. They provide an opportunity not only to compare how well countries are "doing" using common criteria but also offer a unique opportunity to draw conclusions about best practices in ECEC policy and practice.

In 2001, *Starting Strong* identified eight key policy elements that the analyses showed are likely to promote equitable access to high quality ECEC:

1. A systemic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation;
2. A strong and equal partnership with the education system;
3. A universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support;
4. Substantial public investment in services and the infrastructure;
5. A participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance;
6. Appropriate training and working conditions for staff;
7. Systematic attention to monitoring and data collection;
8. A stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation.

These eight elements were intended to be

broad and inclusive so that they can be considered in the light of diverse country contexts and circumstances, values, and beliefs. They should form a part of a wider multi-stakeholder effort to reduce child poverty, promote gender equity, improve education systems, value diversity, and increase the quality of life for parents and children (2006:11).

The report commented that

Countries that have adopted some or all of these elements of successful policy share a strong public commitment to young children and their families. In different ways, these countries have made efforts to ensure that access is inclusive of all children, and have initiated special efforts for those in need of special support. Quality is high on the agenda as a means to ensure that children not only have equal opportunities to participate in ECEC but also to benefit from these experiences in ways that promote their development and learning (2006:12).

What Starting Strong II concluded

The Thematic Review's final comparative report, *Starting Strong II* (2006) identified the key reasons - in addition to the recognized educational advantages for children - that are motivating widespread governmental interest in investing in ECEC:

...the wish to increase women's labour force participation; to reconcile work and family responsibilities on a basis more equitable for women; to confront the demographic changes faced by OECD countries, in particular falling fertility rates and the general ageing of populations; and the need to address issues of child poverty and educational disadvantage (2006: 12).

As the OECD's media release (September 19, 2006) said

Starting Strong II provides a comparative analysis of policy developments and issues, highlighting innovative approaches and proposing policy options that can be adapted to different national contexts.

Among other things, it notes:

- a growing consensus – based on research from a wide range of countries covering demographics, social change and cost-benefit analyses – that governments must invest in and regulate early childhood education and care;
- a trend towards integrating early childhood policy and administration under one ministry, often education;
- moves towards greater contact between early childhood centres and schools, and growing use of national curricular frameworks in the early childhood sector;
- the provision of at least two years of kindergarten before children enter compulsory schooling;
- growing, but still insufficient, government investment in services;
- more participatory approaches to quality improvement, based on wide consultation of stakeholders and the engagement of professional staff in documentation and research;
- clearer ideas at government level of the qualifications needed by staff to engage with rapidly changing social and family conditions;
- an increase in university chairs in early childhood education and care policy;
- and a recognition of the need for more country research and data collection in the field (OECD, retrieved October 16, 2006 at www.oecd.org/document/61/0,2340,en_2649_201185_37426685_1_1_1_1,00.html).

Using the eight elements of successful policy identified in 2001, *Starting Strong II* examined progress made in the 20 countries reviewed. A summary of the key data shows:

- Re: Access/coverage

For under-threes: Coverage for this age group is limited in most countries but there is considerable variability of provision. In several countries, a majority of under-threes are in unregulated family day care for at least part of the day. Access for under-threes is highest in Denmark and Sweden. Under-threes have a legal right to attend free school-based ELCC in Belgium.

For threes and up: Access changes significantly at age three. There is less variability and coverage is high in most countries. Close to 100% of three year olds are in regulated ECEC services in Italy, France, and Belgium. In Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the U.K., coverage is more than 50% at age three. However, it is “negligible” in Canada, Greece, Ireland, Korea, Mexico, Switzerland and Turkey. Most European countries provide all children with at least two years of free, publicly-funded provision before they begin primary school.

Disadvantaged population: Some countries have a significant percentage of young children living in poverty. In the U.S., only 45% of 3-5 years olds from low income groups have access to ECEC programs compared to 75 % from high income groups. In Canada, only 20% of lone parents and 5% of disadvantaged groups are covered.

Children with special needs: Provision is generally poor.

- Re: Expenditures (public funding)

Public spending for ELCC ranges between 0.2% to 2% of GDP for 0-6 years. Canada is the lowest spender, 14th out of the 14 countries for which these data are provided, followed by Australia and the Netherlands. Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland are highest. The U.S. ranks 9th of the 14 countries. In European countries, 25-30% of costs are paid by parents (this is higher in those that rely more on the non-public sector for provision).

- Re: Quality

There is considerable variation by type of program and country. Younger children and – in some countries – children from poor families are especially likely to be in poor pedagogical settings with low standards. Staff in programs operated as part of the social welfare sector (as opposed to the education sector) have low status and training, especially in family day care. In a number of countries, a majority of children under three years are cared for by unregulated providers. (*Starting Strong II*. Presentation made at Dissemination Conference, retrieved October 20, 2006 at www.childcarecanada.org/res/papers/ReggioEmiliaPresentati onSept06.pdf).

Recommendations from Starting Strong II

In concluding the eight year Thematic Review, *Starting Strong II* made ten recommendations for “consideration by government policy makers and ECEC stakeholders”, urging them:

1. To attend to the social context of early childhood development [by organizing services to support parents in child rearing, provide opportunity for women to work, and help include low income and immigrant families in the community and society];
2. To place well-being, early development and learning at the core of ECEC work, while respecting the child’s agency and natural learning strategies;
3. To create the governance structures necessary for system accountability and quality assurance;
4. To develop with the stakeholders broad guidelines and curricular standards for all ECEC services;
5. To base public funding estimates on achieving quality pedagogical goals;
6. To reduce child poverty and exclusion through upstream fiscal, social and labour policies, and to increase resources within universal programmes for children with diverse learning rights;
7. To encourage family and community involvement in early childhood services;
8. To improve the working conditions and professional education of ECEC staff;
9. To provide autonomy, funding and support to early childhood services;
10. To aspire to ECEC systems that support broad learning, participation and democracy (OECD, 2006:16-17).

The OECD observed that these recommendations are based on the premise that children’s rights and well-being are fundamental and that

at the level of the [early childhood] centre, touchstones of a democratic approach will be to extend the agency of the child and to support the basic right of parents to be involved in the education of their children. In this approach, the early childhood centre becomes a space where the intrinsic value of each person is recognized, where democratic participation is promoted, as well as respect for our shared environment. *Learning to be, learning to do, learning to learn and learning to live together* should be considered as critical elements in the journey of each child toward human and social development” (2006:18)

Comparisons: Does Canada measure up?

For Canadians, a key question to be answered by this international study is: “Where does Canada fit internationally? How does Canada measure up?” Both the Canada Review (2004) and the comparative reports (2001 and 2006) provide good data and valuable analysis that will be useful to Canadians with an interest in early learning and child care.

The Canada Country Note began with an observation by the OECD’s expert team about where Canada fits, noting that

It is clear that national and provincial policy for the early education and care of young children in Canada is still in its initial stages. Care and education are still treated separately and coverage is low compared to other OECD countries. Over the coming years, significant energies and funding will need to be invested in the field to create a universal system in tune with the needs of a full employment economy, with gender equity and with new understandings of how young children develop and learn (OECD, 2004:6).

The Canada report made a series of recommendations including: substantially increased and better focused public spending; a national framework for quality; much wider access with universality as a goal; participation of parents and experts in quality frameworks; defined action plans by provincial governments; better inclusion of children with special needs; improved access for Aboriginal and disadvantaged children; improved ELCC physical environments; and better data and research.

The OECD team’s detailed comments on Canada’s early childhood situation included the following observations:

- Other than Quebec, there has been no significant expansion of the system in Canada over the past decade. Less than 20% of children aged 0-6 years find a place in a regulated service compared to, for example, Belgium 63%; Denmark 78%; France 69%; Portugal 40%; U.K. 60%.
- Long waiting lists exist in community services, including in centres catering for children with special needs;
- A general stagnation in quality across the board has been reported (although several centres that the OECD team visited were of high quality);
- Low public expenditure rates per child in child care. Public child care expenditure for children 0-12 years averaged \$386 per child, and \$3,200 per child care place compared to \$6,120 per child in kindergarten and almost \$15,000 per student at university;
- A market-determined fee structure (except Manitoba and Quebec), resulting in high parental

contributions to child care costs, ranging from 34% to 82% of costs. The average across the country, excluding Quebec, is just under 50% of costs compared to a maximum 15% parental contribution in Finland or approximately 25% across Europe;

- An inefficient subsidy system with widely varying and complex eligibility criteria, accessed by only 22% of lone parents and around 5% of married mothers from low-income families;
- Generalised under-funding in the child care sector with respect to wages, learning environments and infrastructure both physical (premises, outdoor spaces) and non-physical (the infrastructure of planning, administration, training, monitoring, evaluation, data collection). Even in those provinces/territories that are keen to develop their ECEC systems, child care services in particular are under-funded, and frequently, neither the quality nor the quantity of provision meets the aspirations of parents and professionals (OECD, 2004:8).

The cross-national data available in *Starting Strong II* provide support for these comments and the OECD’s recommendations for Canada. Below, data drawn from the report shed light on the question “How does Canada measure up?” insofar as appropriate data are available in the report.

Please note that some of the data used in the figures below are not precisely comparable (for example, years may not be consistent). Some data have been estimated or calculated using the best available information and are identified in this way. Further details can be found in *Starting Strong II*.

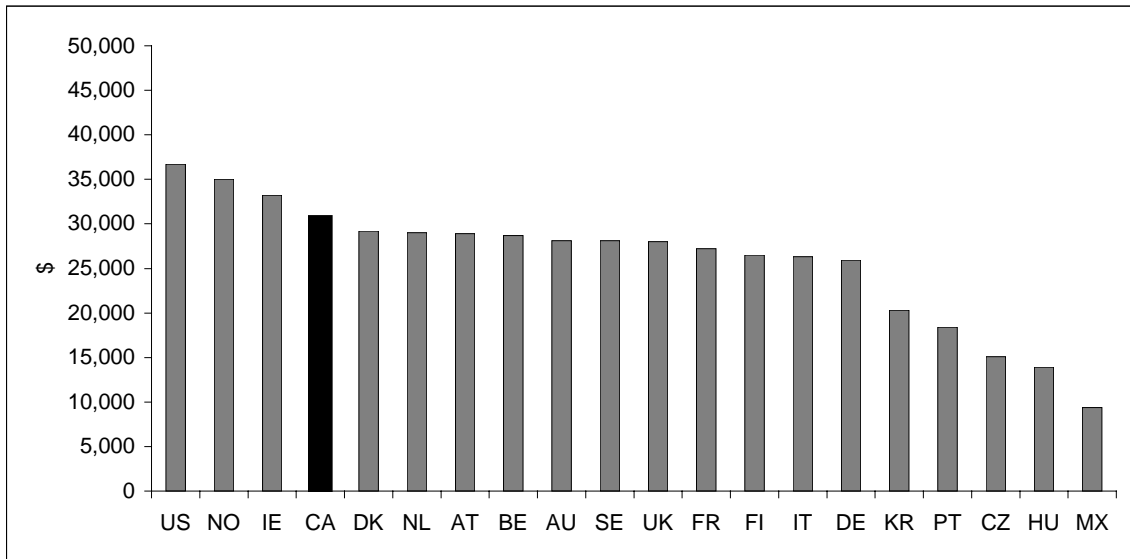
Note country abbreviations used in the figures that follow:

AT=Austria, AU=Australia, BE=Belgium, BE-Fl=Belgium (Flanders), BE-Fr=Belgium (French community), CA= Canada, CZ=Czech Republic, DE=Germany, DK=Denmark, FL=Finland, FR=France, HU=Hungary, IE=Ireland, IT=Italy, KR=Republic of Korea, MX=Mexico, NL=Netherlands, NO=Norway, PT=Portugal, SE=Sweden, UK=United Kingdom, US=United States

Context and family policy

How wealthy is Canada?

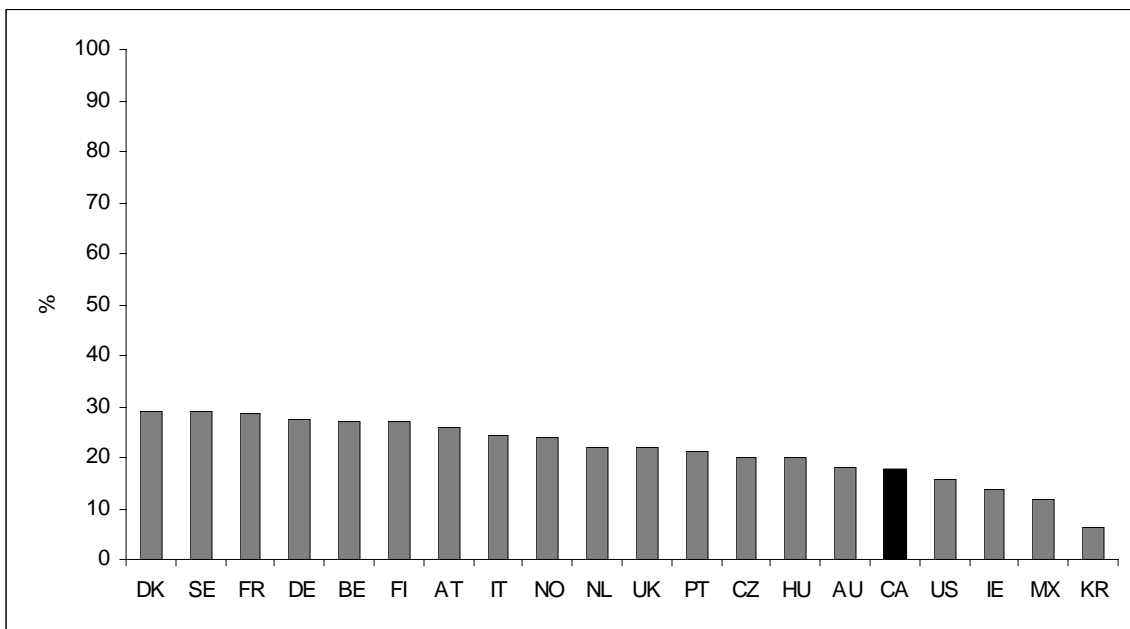
Figure 1. GDP per capita (in U.S. \$)



Data source: OECD. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care. Country Profiles.*

How do Canada's social expenditures measure up?

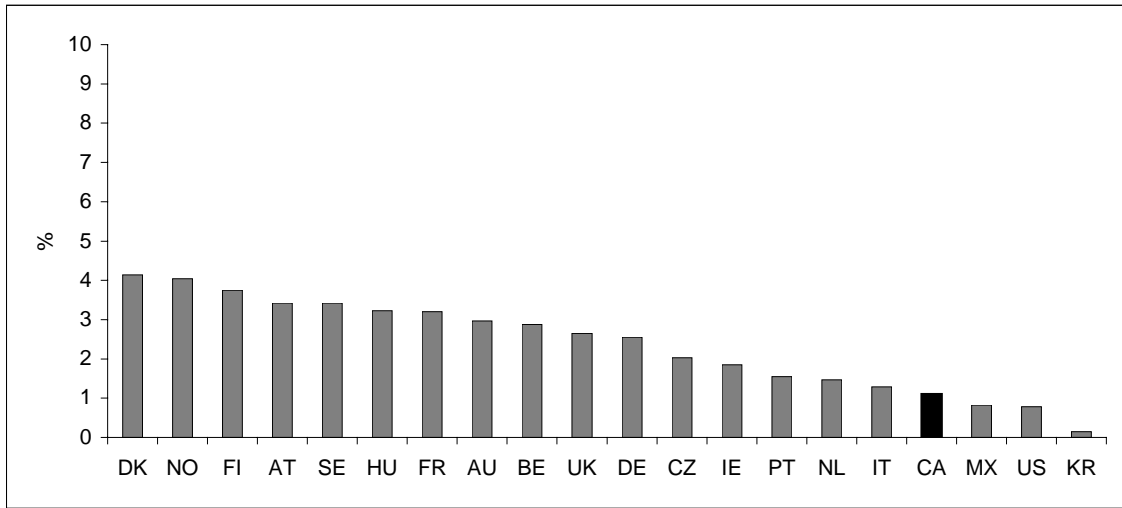
Figure 2. Social expenditures as a proportion of GDP



Data source: OECD. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care. Country Profiles.*

How does Canada's spending for families measure up?

Figure 3. Public spending on benefits/services for families/young children as a % of GDP

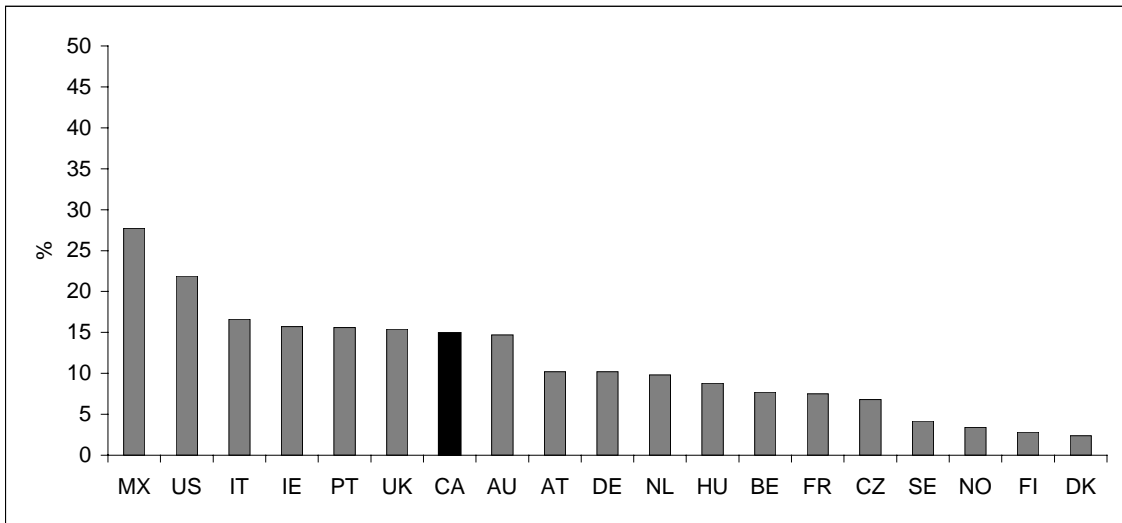


Note: Includes total cash benefits and total family services. Public expenditures based on International Standard Classification Education Level 0.

Data source: OECD. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Annex C, pg. 246.

Child poverty: Where does Canada stand?

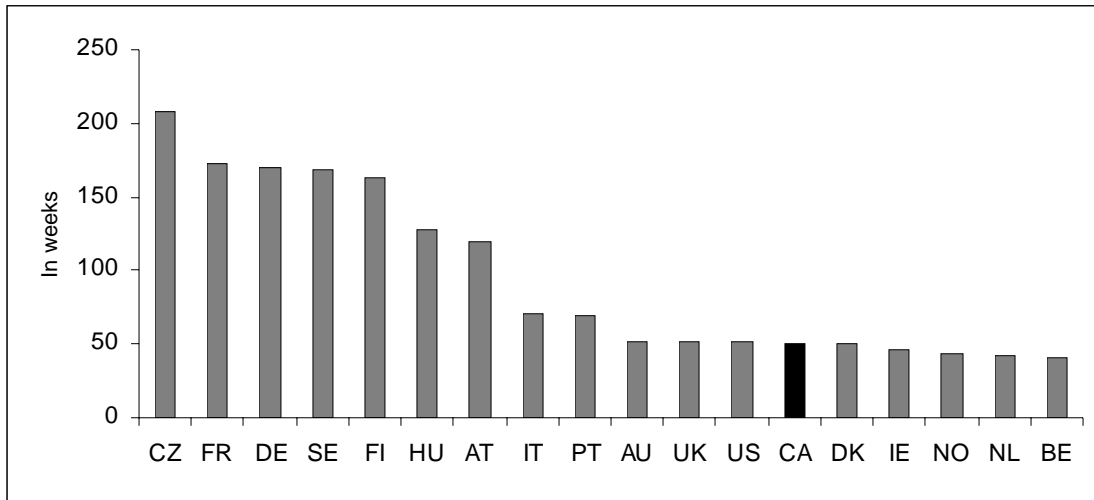
Figure 4. Percent of children living below the poverty line



Data source: OECD. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Annex C, pg. 248.

Supporting families with parental leave

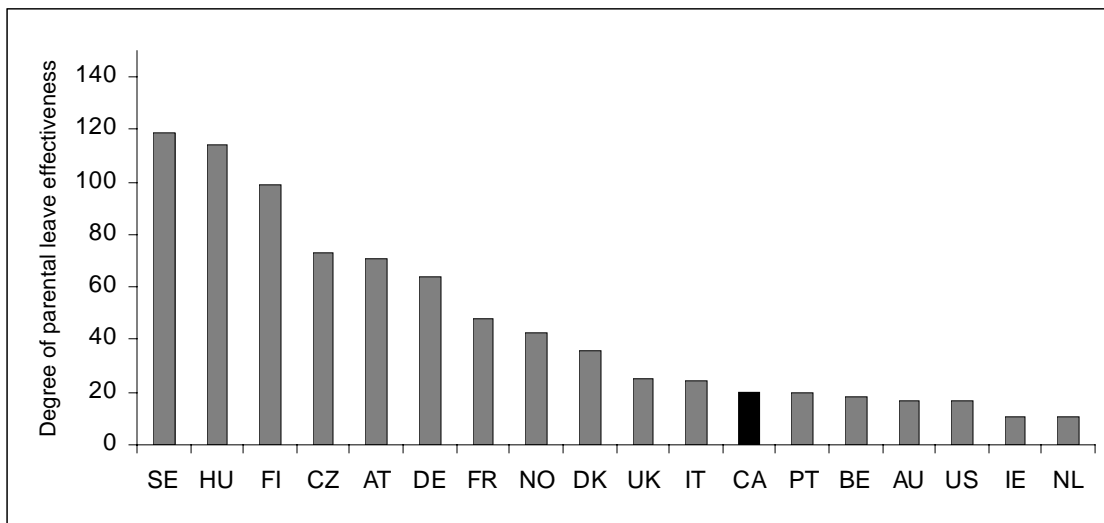
Figure 5. Total maternity/parental leave in weeks



Note: These maternity/parental leaves may be paid, partly paid or unpaid.

Data source: OECD. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Annex C, pg. 240

Figure 6. Effective parental leave

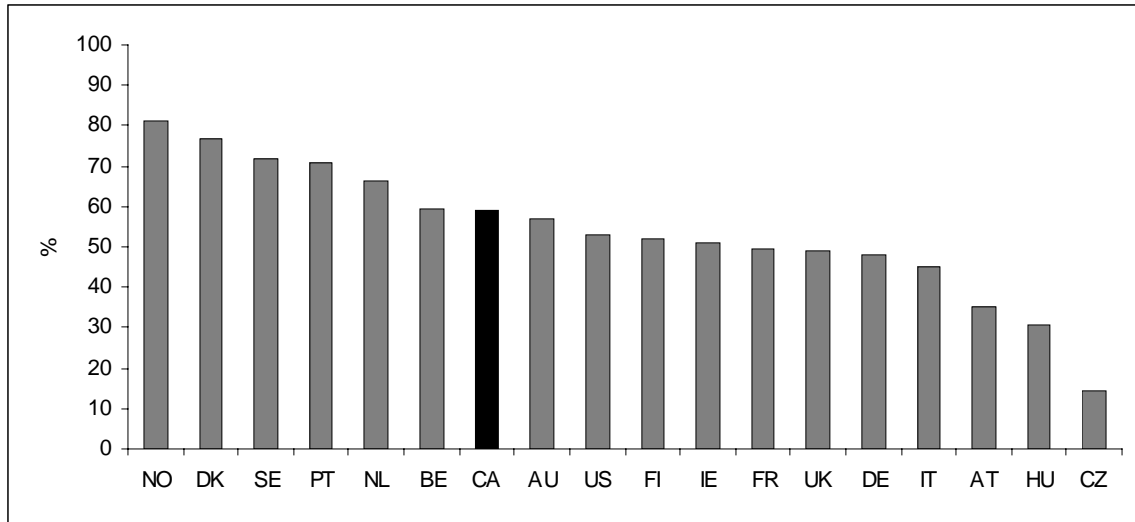


Note: The degree of parental leave effectiveness was calculated by the OECD authors by weighting the length of parental leave by the level of payment. Effective parental leave = [(maternity leave in weeks – 14 weeks) X % payment benefit] + (total parental leave in weeks X payment benefit)

Data source: OECD. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Annex C, pg. 240.

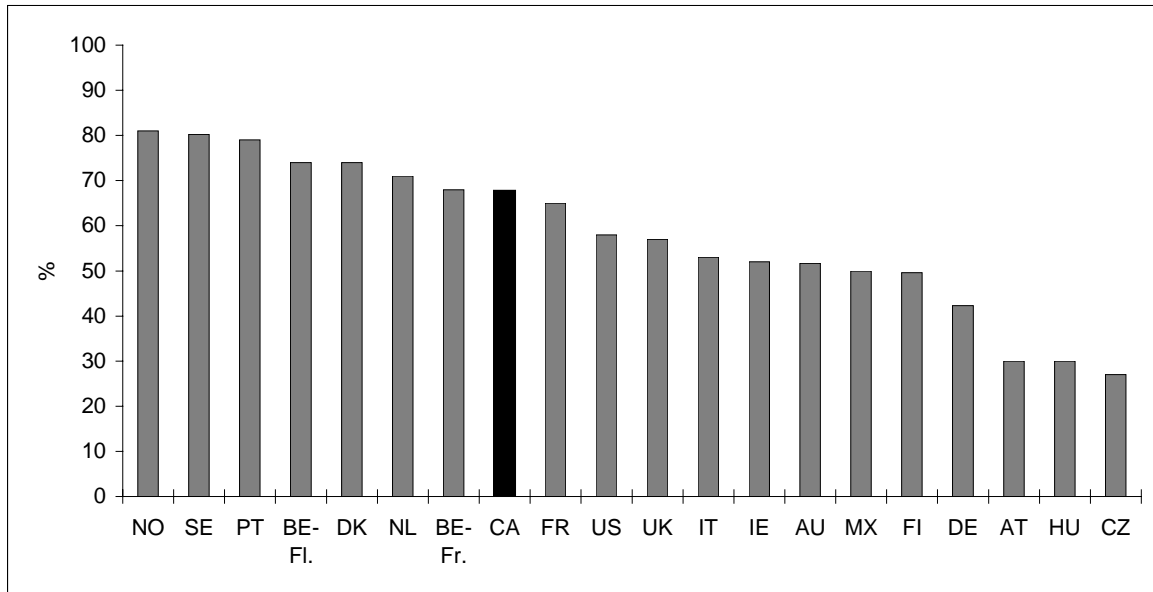
Mothers working outside the home

Figure 7. Employment rates of mothers with children 0-3 years



Data source: OECD. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Annex C, pg. 245.
 Note that data for Austria are from the *Austria Country Note*.

Figure 8. Employment rates of mothers with children 0-6 years

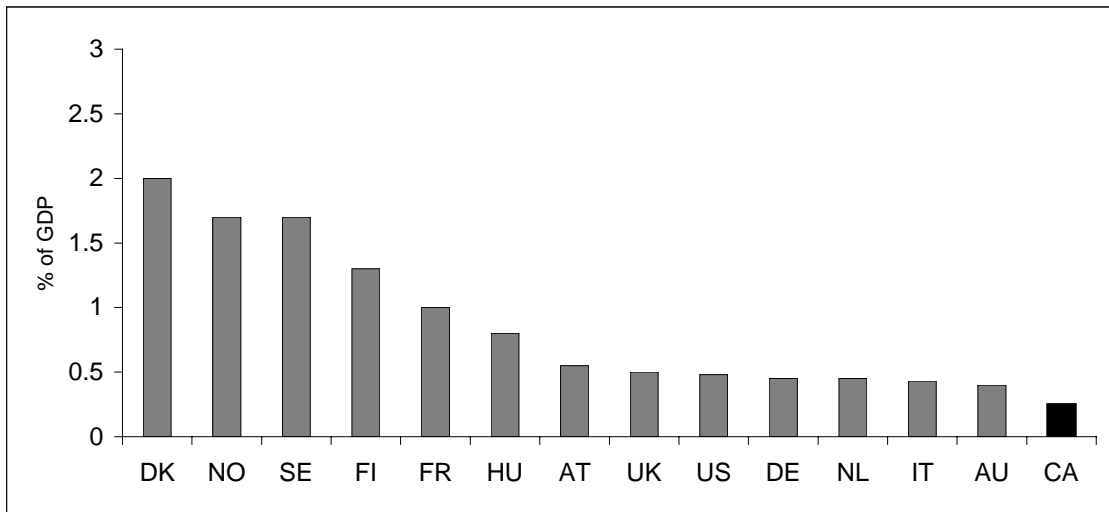


Data source: OECD. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Education and Care*. Country Profiles.
 Note: While the data in these two tables are for employment rates, in Canada, the labour force participation (LFP) rate has been used more commonly. LFP rates include workers who are temporarily not employed but are still considered to be in the labour force (such as those on Employment Insurance). LFP rates would be somewhat higher than figures used here. Note that the data for Austria are from the *Austria Country Note*.

Provision of early learning and child care programs: Funding, access and quality

Spending on ELCC programs: How does Canada compare?

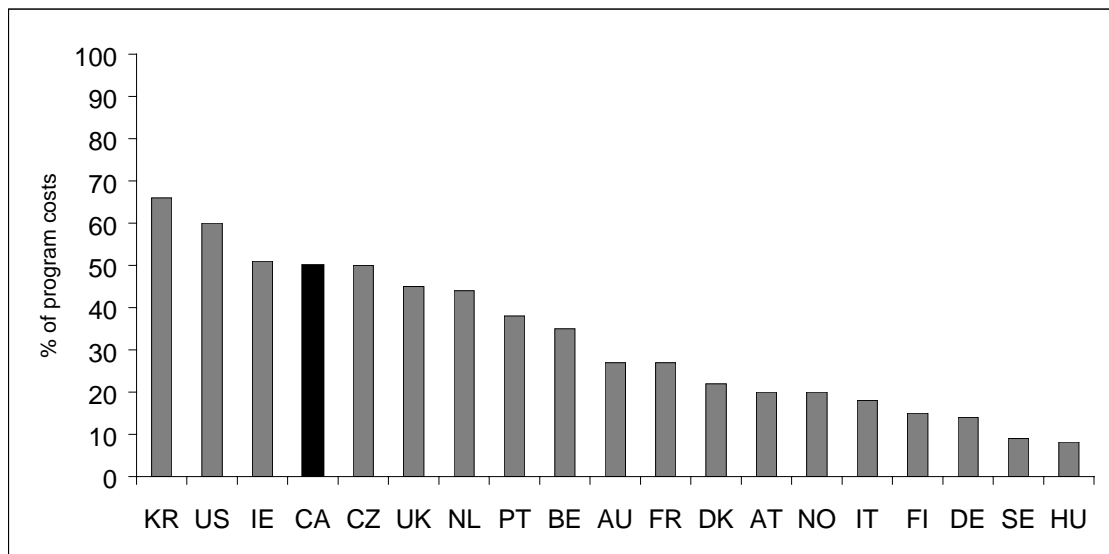
Figure 9. Public spending on ELCC programs for children 0-6 years as a % of GDP



Data source: OECD. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Annex C, pg. 246.

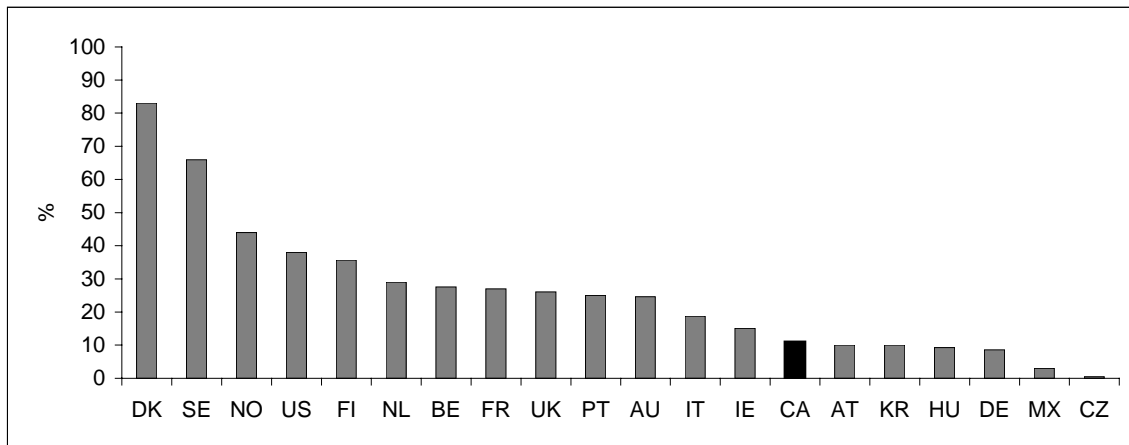
How does Canada's access to regulated ELCC programs measure up?

Figure 10. Costs to parents for ELCC programs



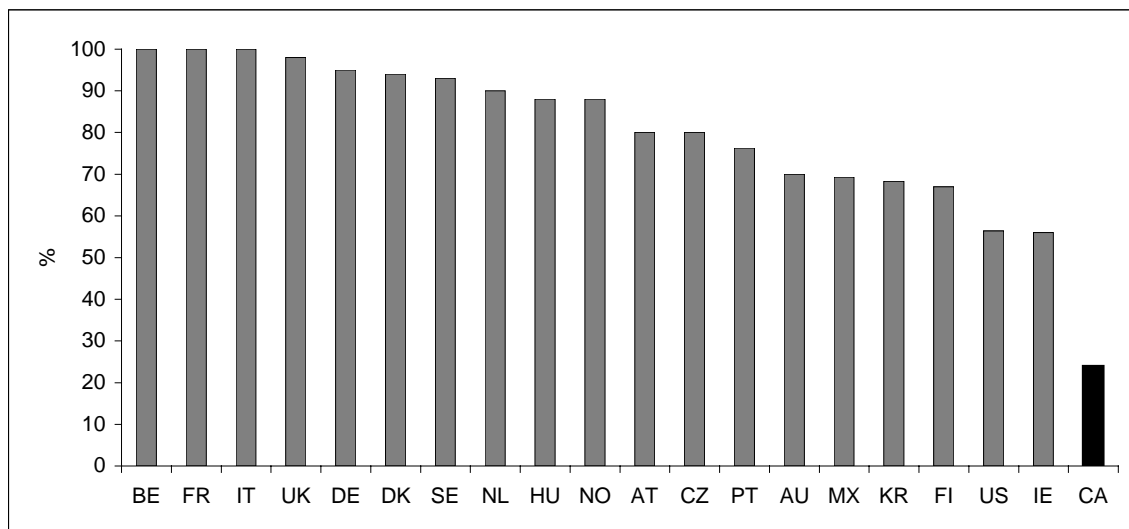
Data source: OECD. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Country Profiles.

Figure 11. Percent of children 0-3 years in regulated ELCC programs



Canadian data for this variable were identified as missing data in *Starting Strong II*. The figure here is a rough estimate based on provincial/territorial data compiled in *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada* (2004). It does not include regulated family day care for which age breakdowns are not available. Note that the data in this figure are for years from 1999-2004. Data source: OECD. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Annex C, pg. 246.

Figure 12. Rate of access to ELCC programs for 3-6 year olds



Data source: OECD. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Country Profiles.

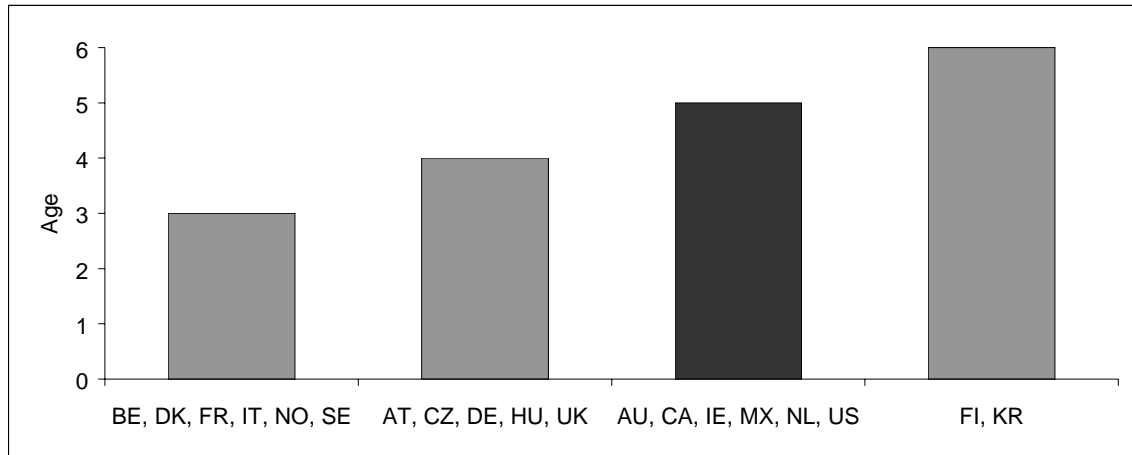
AU, CZ, FI, HU, NL, UK – Estimated (averaged across ages 3-6)

DE – Estimated (averaged across ABL and NBL)

CA – Children 0-6 in child care including regulated family day care.

Overall, data to make a more precise estimate are not available.

Figure 13. Age by which at least 75% of children are enrolled in an ELCC program



Data source: OECD. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care. Country Profiles.*
 In IE, majority of children are enrolled in primary, not pre-primary

Discussion

These data, together with the OECD expert team's observations and the detailed comparative material in the review's reports show that Canada's early learning and child care situation does not measure up when compared to international standards or best practices. While it will come as no surprise to most people that the ELCC systems in countries such as Sweden, Denmark, France and Belgium are much further advanced than Canada's, it may be a surprise – even shocking – that in some important ways, Canada is surpassed by the U.K., Australia and even the United States.

Figure 9, *Public spending on ELCC programs for children 0-6 years as a % of GDP*, begins to paint this picture. It shows that Canada is the very lowest ELCC spender among 14 OECD countries. The data show Canada's expenditure at 0.25% of GDP; Australia, the next lowest, spent 0.4% while the U.S. spent 0.48% of GDP. That is, even among the group of lowest spenders (compared to the highest spenders – Denmark at 2.0% of GDP, Sweden and Norway at 1.7 %), Canada ranked at the very bottom.⁵ The implications of low ELCC spending are discussed in a number of the OECD's reports (2001, 2004, 2006). These analyses link low spending directly not only to poor access and inequity but also to poor quality through low staff wages, limited infrastructure and poor physical facilities.

One may ask how well Canada supports children and families in other ways. Figure 3. *Public spending on family/child benefits and services* shows comparative spending for cash benefits and services for families and children. Here Canada is fourth from the bottom, with

⁵ It should further be noted, as the OECD does, that Quebec spent 65% of total Canadian public spending for regulated child care in 2004; this substantially increases the Canadian spending total overall.

only Korea, the U.S. and Mexico spending a lower proportion of GDP. And regarding social programs as a whole (Figure 2. *Social expenditures as a proportion of GDP*), Canada is fifth from the bottom, again ranked down with Korea, the U.S., Mexico and Ireland.

Figure 5 and 6 show comparative provision of maternity/parental leave. With regard to total weeks of leave – which may be paid, partly paid or unpaid – Canada is fifth from the bottom with Denmark. The range of total weeks runs from the Czech Republic at 208 weeks (four years) and France at 172 weeks to Belgium at 41 weeks (Figure 5). When considering the effectiveness of parental leave policies using a weighted calculation taking both duration (weeks) and payment into account, Canada still remains at the lower end (Figure 6). It is interesting to note, however, that introducing the payment into the equation means that the places of many of the countries change with Sweden and Hungary having the most effective leave provision (Figure 6). That is, payment, not only time, matters.

Considered in several different ways, the data on access show that – compared to other OECD countries – access is low in Canada. Figure 13 (*Age by which at least 75% of children are enrolled in an ELCC program*) shows that in six of the 20 countries, 75% of children are enrolled in an ELCC program at three years; in a second group of six, 75% are enrolled at four years. Canada is in the next group – together with Australia, Ireland, Mexico, the Netherlands and the U.S. – where it isn't until age five that at least 75% of children attend an ELCC program. Thus, from this perspective, 60% of these 20 OECD countries offer better access to ELCC than Canada.

Considering access in another way, Figures 11 and 12 show Canada's and the other OECD countries' access rates for 0-3 and 3-6 year olds respectively. The figure for 0-3s (identified as missing data in *Starting Strong II* but roughly calculated here) places Canada seventh from the

bottom⁶. Figure 12 showing rates of access for 3-6 year olds shows – consistent with Figure 13 discussed above – Canada ranks at the very bottom.

Another aspect of accessibility is cost to parents which are very high in Canada. As figure 10 shows, Canadian parents pay the 4th highest fees (for child care⁷), with only American, Irish and Korean parents paying more.

When mother's employment rates are considered, Figures 7 and 8 (*Employment rates of mothers*, 0-3 year olds and 0-6 year olds), show Canada 7th and 8th from the top, respectively. Thus, although access to regulated ELCC programs is low, Canadian mothers are quite highly employed. This is consistent with the OECD's observations that

In several countries, a majority of under-threes are in unregulated family day care for at least part of the day ...and ...

access for 3-6 year olds is "negligible" in Canada, Greece, Ireland, Korea, Mexico, Switzerland and Turkey (*Starting Strong II* Summary presentation, 2006).

Finally, the OECD's data on GDP per capita – a measure of the nations' wealth – are shown in Figure 1. Here Canada is close to the very top, surpassed only by the United States, Norway and Ireland. Considering this in U.S.\$, the range runs from \$36,700 in the U.S. to \$9,370 in Mexico; Canada's GDP per capita is \$30,700. Sweden's per capita GDP is \$28,100 while Denmark's is \$29,200 and France's is \$27,200. Thus, being a wealthy country does not necessarily lead to high spending and provision for families and children.

Of course, these data do not tell the whole story about the provision of ELCC in any of these OECD countries. There is a major gap in available comparative data about quality that can be easily graphed. Here the interested reader is encouraged to access the more detailed analyses and descriptions in the Canada and summary reports.

In summary

The original motivation for this Thematic Review, stated by the OECD Education Ministers in 1996 was to "improve the foundations for lifelong learning...by...assigning high priority to the goals of

⁶Calculated using provincial/territorial figures for number of spaces in *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2004* (Friendly and Beach, 2005). Note that the estimated rate of access figure of 11% calculated for this comparison is a *very* rough estimate as provinces/territories do not keep "year of age" data, enrollment in regulated family day care is usually not available by age and some provinces/territories cannot provide age breakdowns by licensed spaces.

⁷Note that Canadian parents usually do not pay fees for kindergarten. The figures for the U.S. also do not include kindergarten, which is also usually free.

improving access and quality in early childhood education" (1996). One objective of the OECD's project was to contribute to the policy discussion about ELCC among governments, other key stakeholders and the general public in member countries. Canada can learn much from the documentation, data and analysis that the Thematic Review has produced. The OECD's work not only presents a compelling case for investment in high quality ELCC for all children but shows why and how structural changes in policies and practices – not merely more resources – are essential.

These analyses also show that while Canada is one of the OECD's wealthy countries, not only is our ELCC situation very poor but our provision of other supports for families and children – paid maternity/parental leave and other social programs – is limited too. This research makes clear that with regard to ELCC, we have a long way to go to begin to achieve the equity, social justice and enlightened self-interest that most Canadians appear to want.

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Martha Friendly, October 2006