



From vision to action: Early childhood education and care in 2020

by Martha Friendly and Susan Prentice

From day care to child care to early childhood education and care

When the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women recommended that Canada develop a national day-care program in 1970, the main goal was to support women's equality. As research about the benefits to children from high quality early childhood programs has accumulated, the goal of supporting mothers' labour force participation has been joined by other goals that have come to drive the debate today. What was called daycare in the 1970s, then child care in the 1980s and 1990s, is now called early childhood education and care (ECEC) or early learning and child care. The term early childhood education and care describes inclusive and integrated services that play multiple roles for children and their families. It signals a holistic concept that has become commonplace internationally, although it has been slower to arrive in North America. Here "care" and "early childhood education" are mostly split into separate programs and access is still only for a minority of preschool-age children.

The concept of blended early childhood education and care reflects the contemporary consensus that care and education are inseparable. Good ECEC programs are neither babysitting nor schooling nor solely early childhood education nor solely care. They are not just for children or only for parents. Well-designed early childhood education and care services can meet a wide range of goals including care, learning and social support for children and their parents. ECEC connotes an integrated and coherent approach to policy and provision that is inclusive of all children and all parents – regardless of employment or socioeconomic status.

This BRIEFing NOTE presents a vision for what an universal early childhood education and care system in Canada might look like from the program to the policy level. It explores the potential for Canada to move from a patchwork of disjointed programs – many of them of mediocre quality – to a comprehensive high quality system and suggests changes that would put such a system in place.

An ECEC centre in 2020: Regina's Elsie Stapleford¹ Children's Centre

It's 7:30 AM in 2020 in Regina, Saskatchewan. The Elsie Stapleford Children's Centre is just opening its doors when Martina arrives with four-year-old Sophie. After Sophie happily joins Nellie, her main teacher, and the few other children who have arrived, Martina goes to the resource room to borrow a book about nutrition before she leaves for her training program at 8:30. The resource room staff person isn't in yet but Martina will be able to talk with her by phone or in person later on. Before she leaves, she has a chance to seek Nellie's advice about Sophie's new habit of waking up several times a night. This has been a real problem for Martina, as she is a single mom who needs to be well-rested to do well in her college program in forestry management. Martina and Nellie discuss solutions as well as putting sleep issues on the next parent meeting agenda.

The Centre

The Elsie Stapleford Children's Centre has its own building at one end of the school grounds. It's a free-standing purpose-built building designed for 100 children 0 - 5 years, adjacent to the neighbourhood public school. The flexible program at the Centre replaces the previous mix of kindergarten, child care, preschool, family resource centres and private care and education arrangements made by parents. Today just about every neighbourhood family with young children wants to participate in the Centre.

¹ Elsie Stapleford, a Canadian child care pioneer, grew up in Regina. Having received an MA in Child Psychology at U of T and working as director of eight Wartime Day Nurseries in Toronto, she became the first head of a provincial Day Nurseries Branch in Canada. Under her leadership, child care in Ontario increased and access spread to Aboriginal groups and children with disabilities.

The Centre has large windows that allow children to see the surrounding outdoors and community. There are good connections between the indoors and the natural play spaces surrounding the centre. As a result, unlike the practice in some of the old church or community centre basement child care centres, the children spend considerable time outdoors, often moving between the indoors and the outdoors on their own. Inside, good visibility across the multi-levels and different areas facilitates communication and children's autonomy. The building design takes account of local conditions, so there is ample space for putting on and taking off snowsuits and boots, something Prairie children do several times a day in the winter.

Each age group has its own space and shares common areas such as the central kitchen and the large interior courtyard-gathering place which is also used for parent meetings and social functions. There are pleasant eating areas for each group, peaceful rooms where children sleep at naptime, a well-equipped kitchen that produces nutritious and tasty meals and snacks, areas to accommodate a wide variety of activities and ready access to the outdoors. The equipment is good quality, with an eclectic range of materials for art and science activities. There are places to display and keep things children bring from home. Music and movement are an integral part of the daily program. Staff have their own space where they can gather to share a cup of coffee, eat lunch and hold staff meetings. The Centre is creatively and thoughtfully arranged, a comfortable homey environment that supports and enhances the activity that goes on within it.

The children and parents

At 8:45, Billie arrives with her neighbour Michelle, their two four-year-olds, Nina and Carolyn, and Billie's new baby. Michelle has been a stay-at-home mum for several years and Billie is part way through a maternity leave from her job with the provincial government. Nina and Carolyn join their preschool group outside.

Billie has ten minutes before her mothers' group gathers, so she has time to look in on the infant room that seven-month old Johnny will join when he turns one. Watching the infants, Billie imagines Johnny exploring the sunny bright rooms, negotiating baby-size floor equipment, building his first friendships, hearing stories and music, exploring colours, shapes and textures and being cared for by warm, sensitive and knowledgeable early childhood teachers. She feels confident in the Centre's approach to her own Ojibwa culture. The Centre's program integrates ideas such as respect for the

environment that are especially important to her as a member of a First Nations community. She and several other parents and staff have worked to ensure that Aboriginal culture is well integrated into the daily program.

Michelle is interested in entering an early childhood education training program at the University of Regina. She already has some experience with children with special needs through her training in Trinidad as a paediatric nurse before she immigrated to Canada. Her experience as a parent at the Children's Centre has encouraged her to shift into ECEC. She will drop by the resource room later to chat to the recent graduate working there about the University program.

They're joined by Richard, whose daughter Jane has Down Syndrome. Jane will spend from 9:00 to 3:00 in the preschool room with her friends, supported by a special needs resource teacher. Richard is a free-lance writer, looking for a little companionship before he begins his work day. He finds it over a quick cup of coffee with Michelle in the staff room, which welcomes parents first thing in the morning. They're on the parent board together and the two families have come to know each other well, exchanging child-rearing tips, weekend babysitting, recipes and social occasions.

The children – Jane, Sophie, Nina and Carolyn – spend a lot of the morning outdoors. The Centre has had a vegetable garden for several years and the preschoolers have been experimenting with growing different kinds of carrots, lettuces and beans. Some of the carrots are now ready to eat. It's Sophie's turn to help make lunch: she and her friend Carolyn proudly show off their carrots before they help wash them to serve for lunch.

The early childhood teachers

With 100 children who range from about eight months to six years, the Children's Centre has quite a few staff: 18 educators, a director and an assistant director, a cook and a kitchen assistant as well as cleaning/maintenance staff. Because parental leave is now much more generously-paid, flexible and available to more parents, the Centre rarely enrolls very young babies but there is an infant room with eight children under 15 months. The other age groupings are fairly flexible but generally children are in a group with a two-year age range.

A number of the staff are early childhood specialist teachers, having attended the new four-year ECEC degree program at the University. Some of them moved

into an ECEC specialty as advanced students based on the college early childhood diplomas they took before the new program had been initiated. The Centre director is an early childhood specialist with both university and graduate degrees. Her experience and education include ECEC pedagogy as well as personnel skills and understanding the issues that confront families. Among the teams are educators with community college qualifications. If they choose to enroll in a university ECEC specialization, the articulation between the college diploma program and the four-year university degree is now a smooth process.

Since most of the financing of ECEC programs is now from public sources, educator salaries are now commensurate with their education. ECEC teachers are now virtually all unionized, a development which has had a positive impact on their wages and working conditions. This year, three of the staff are male. Ever since the salaries and recognition improved, more young men have been joining the early childhood field.

Financing and governance

The local school board operates the Children's Centre under its ECEC division and the municipality manages the finances using earmarked funds from the provincial and federal governments. The Centre's budget is based mostly on enrolment and age mix. From 9:00 to 3:00, services are fully publicly funded for all children with no parent fees. Outside these hours, parents pay affordable, geared-to-income fees for early morning, late afternoon and holiday hours, with low-income parents paying no fees. There are no fee subsidies for which parents have to qualify. The old stigmatizing and ineffectual fee subsidy system ended back in 2010, when new federal funds began to flow to the provincial government. The principle of the new financing system is that ECEC is substantially funded for all children. Parent fees represent just 15 percent of the overall provincial ECEC budget, with the remainder coming from public funds. This means that the government can steer the development of a variety of program choices among which parents can choose.

One of the old ideas that had shaped the ECEC system before 2010 – that giving money to parents rather than to programs ensured choice and empowered parents – has given way to a more evidence-based approach to financing. The concept that the market doesn't work for ECEC programs (as it doesn't for elementary education) had been explained by economists and political scientists for some time but until the new national ECEC policy

was introduced in 2010, the considerable research evidence about funding and governance of ECEC had fallen on deaf ears within government ranks.

ECEC programs are now publicly managed by local authorities. On reserve, First Nations manage the ECEC programs just as local governments do. Services are still delivered by a mixed economy of public and private (mostly non-profit) providers but under the new policy framework, this is shifting. Because public funds are used only for public and non-profit programs and there is a more adequate supply of good choices for parents, there is no reason to have new for-profit centres. Today almost all newer centres are public – as are quite a few of the formerly parent-run programs, to the great relief of the overworked parent boards, most of whom had asked to have the burden of administration taken up by their local government.

The children

At 9:30 am, a group of four family child care providers arrive at the Centre with their 11 young children, mostly infants and toddlers. While the children play in the well-equipped gross motor room with a teacher and two early childhood students fulfilling practicum requirements, the providers' group holds its weekly meeting and study session. The public health nurse from the City Health Department arrives for her regular well-baby visits. She works closely with the Children's Centre, sometimes consulting with staff about specific children and – together with the Centre staff – has helped some families find individualized health and social resources.

Sophie, Nina, Carolyn and Jane spend a splendid day together with their other special friends Jamal, Paul and Olivia. Occasionally their activity is with their group of 25; often they are with one other child or a small group; sometimes they chose to engage in an activity alone. Today Olivia and Paul spend the first part of the morning outside in a sunny corner of the interior courtyard building elaborate structures with blocks – then knocking them down. The staff tend not to interfere much with these kinds of children's activities but observe and document them. Carolyn and Sophie continue their story book-making with input from Marcella, one of the educators. Then it is their day to help the cook with preparations for lunch in the kitchen – something they love to do. Lunch comes at 11:30 for the preschool group – a first course of cut-up fresh vegetables and dip, then couscous with lots of vegetables and chicken chunks. Carolyn and Sophie help bring in the dessert they helped

prepare – a pear crisp and are thrilled when everyone loves it. Their three to five year old group eats lunch together in their own space. Children help set the tables for the meal, pass the serving bowls and help clear up afterwards.

Some of the children’s activities – like a massive wall mural they have been working on for the Centre’s family Thanksgiving celebration – are ongoing and may be carried out over a period of time. Most of the projects are initiated and developed through collaboration among children and teachers. The children use a wide range of materials for art, science, music, language and spend a good deal of time outdoors in the Centre’s adjacent terrain. The program encourages the children to explore, collaborate with others and to express themselves and rarely is directed at specialized skills or school-preparation since everyone knows that young children learn best through play.

The children are not concerned about or very aware of differences between their families and those of their friends regarding income, religion, sexuality, or ethnicity. The four-year-olds will continue at the Children’s Centre until they go to elementary school and its school-aged program when they are about six.

The parents and teachers will come together at the Children’s Centre on Wednesday evening for the bimonthly meeting to share a dessert potluck and hear a speaker on language development and the value of reading to children. The parent committee for each room meets monthly, too; the parents and teachers together discuss and work on issues related to the program, menus, new developments like hiring and specific issues raised by parents. They also elect a Centre representative to sit on the City of Regina’s ECEC Council, a group that is closely involved in budget and policy decisions at the city level. The parent meetings are where Martina and other parents can address their concerns – everything from strategies to help young children sleep to plans for hiring a new teacher to the design for a new outdoor space.

The Children’s Centre and the community

The families at the Elsie Stapleford Children’s Centre are proud of the role it plays in their community. They view the centre as a public good, not a rare commodity only available to special populations or as a potential profit-making business. Parents say it has brought them together and supported them as partners with ECEC teachers in their children’s upbringing. They were all

thrilled when the government of Saskatchewan picked their centre to show off to the President of the United States when she made a visit to western Canada.

Families understand that the centre is neither solely education nor solely care but a new kind of institution, rooted in the community and important enough to be supported through financing and policy by senior levels of government. They know that communities in every part of Canada have set up similar centres to meet the needs of their own local populations. Provincial policies in all parts of Canada mandate ECEC programs; provincial and territorial governments work closely with local education authorities and the community to ensure quality and equity across regions.

Across Canada, children’s centres now incorporate early childhood education, child care and support for parents and are usually located as part of elementary schools or in their own space. They are primarily operated by school authorities, although local government operates them in one province. In a few instances, communities have opted to develop some children’s centres through community organizations under public management. Centres in some locales have flexible hours, later or earlier opening and closing times, different arrangements of centre-based, family child care and family resource provision, and –depending on the community – different linguistic and cultural approaches. Similar centres can be found in rural or less densely populated areas, in those with seasonal work patterns, as well as in urban areas.

Whatever kind of community, however, ECEC programs are part of a public planning process that assumes that governments are responsible for ensuring that they are available. They are, like the Elsie Stapleford Children’s Centre, all affordable, high quality, publicly- funded, publicly-accountable and labour-force sensitive.

The new system is enormously popular. When the opposition party in Ottawa suggested that the ECEC program was too expensive and should be rolled back to cater solely to poor children, there was widespread public outrage and numerous critical editorials in media all across the country.

Canadians strongly support the universal ECEC system. In 2020, it looks like it’s here to stay.

The policy framework for a mature early childhood education and care system in 2020

Like this “on the ground” image of the Elsie Stapleford Children’s Centre, the following section looks at ECEC in Canada after at least a decade of system-building, evolution and fine-tuning. It presents the policy ideas and framework that underpin ECEC in Canada in 2020. This takes into account what is known about best practices in ECEC policy from both children’s and parents’ perspectives, as well as what is possible in Canada given our political history and realities.

Purposes of ECEC

A clear statement of the purposes and goals that underpin the early childhood system is fundamental to moving from vision to action. The goals of the Canadian ECEC system in 2020 clearly recognize that first and foremost, ECEC is a program designed for children. This is consistent with what is known about the best ECEC programs from international and comparative research. But as most Canadian mothers (and fathers) are in the paid labour force, education or training, the ECEC system goals also recognize that the system must at the same time be organized to reflect and accommodate what parents need. Thus, while ECEC programs in 2020 are designed as wonderful children’s programs, they also need to be multifunctional – available both to children with parents in the labour force and those with parents not in the labour force. Parents may access them for different amounts of time depending on their specific needs or preferences.

Parents’ needs have to be balanced with children’s well-being. Improved family policy plays an important role in this balance as maternity, parental and fathers’ leave can ensure that mothers and fathers are able to spend time with an infant or an ill child or choose to work part-time or flexibly. This means that ECEC programs should be complemented by enhanced maternity/parental leave with better rates of reimbursement for more people as well as by public policy regarding workplace practices designed to protect family time.

Goals for children

But what does being a program “designed for children” mean? What are our goals and values for children? These are important questions, as they shape the pedagogical concept and approach of early childhood

programs. As with most things, the values and conception of childhood underpinning early childhood programs tend to be not black and white but shades of grey. Just as most parents want their children to do well and achieve in school, most people would also agree that children are more than human capital or future workers. For example, research conducted by the Canadian Council on Learning found that Canadian parents think that early childhood learning should focus on attitudes – on fostering a positive attitude toward learning – more than on school readiness.

Most people would agree that the purpose of early childhood education must be broader than school-readiness and preparing children for the work-world. With this in mind, Canada’s ECEC system in 2020 begins with the understanding that children are active learners and social beings, engaged, eager to explore, competent, and capable of sustained activity and interests. Consistent with the idea of children’s rights embodied in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, early childhood is viewed as an important stage in its own right, not merely a period of preparation for adulthood. The system’s goals for children draw on a broad approach to child development and well-being, so ECEC programs employ an active learning and play-based pedagogy.

A universal approach

The ECEC system envisioned here is universal. Universal in this sense does not necessarily mean free but it does mean affordable. It also does not mean that it is centrally-operated from Ottawa or a provincial capital. Rather, while there are national principles, provincial policy, guidelines and management, ECEC programs are mostly locally designed and are operated with community and parent participation. Universal also means that in the mature system, every child has access to a high quality ECEC program in her community and families have a reasonable choice of high quality centre-based or well-supported family child care programs with full-day or part-time possibilities and – within reason – extended hours. Parental choice is assured through an adequate supply of programs, affordability and a community-based approach to program development. Finally, it should go without saying that universal does not mean compulsory participation; ECEC is optional for families.

Blending care and education

The collection of public and private care and education arrangements for preschool-aged children that in 2008 includes kindergarten, child care, nursery school, family resource centres and private care arrangements have been replaced. In their stead are seamless and flexible ECEC programs. The new system is now available for preschoolers as well as school-aged children outside regular school hours at low fees parents can easily afford. The school-age component is now closely attached to elementary schools and designed to meet the interests of 6 - 12 year olds, providing opportunities for developing autonomy, recreation, learning outside school, skill development and evolving social interests while also fulfilling parents' care needs outside regular school hours.

Governance

All three levels of government play roles in the ECEC system. The federal government provides the bulk of the public funding and plays a leadership role in a Canada-wide policy framework. The federal government also takes a lead role in research and monitoring, with good data, ongoing evaluation and assessment and a long-term research agenda a key part of the ECEC system. Provinces, territories and First Nations are responsible for designing, shaping and maintaining the system.

At the provincial level, ECEC is located in one government department – education – supported by infrastructure, planning and by a critical mass of knowledgeable officials. System-wide planning ensures targets and timetables for expansion and ongoing quality improvement. Local government and education authorities have the direct responsibility for local program design, local infrastructure and planning and service delivery. Community-based, publicly-managed ECEC programs are shaped through collaboration that includes educators, parents and community. Programs are responsive to and involve parents at the local community level.

Different provinces have opted for somewhat different ECEC options but there are Canada-wide goals and principles, just as there are for Medicare under the Canada Health Act. Thus, there are comparable ECEC systems in each province along with local flexibility in determining priorities and program specifics to meet, for example, the needs of a rural community or to ensure French language programs for francophone families outside Quebec.

Financing

ECEC is now primarily publicly-financed, with programs receiving operating budgets from government. Similar to other wealthy countries with high quality ECEC systems, Canada has surpassed the international benchmark of at least 1 percent of GDP on ECEC as a minimum. There are no demand-side vouchers, child care allowances or other ECEC funding paid to individuals and no fee subsidies for which parents have to qualify. Instead, services are funded through the supply-side, with global budgets, as elementary schools are financed. While there are some parent fees for portions of ECEC programs or for certain age groups, costs are affordable for all and free for low-income parents.

ECEC environments

Well-designed facilities and environments now enhance the quality of ECEC programs, as do high-quality equipment and supplies. Rather than the church basements and left-over spaces in which most Canadian child care centres had historically operated, Canada's new ECEC centres have incorporated the elements of purpose-built (or purpose-renovated) good design that make a difference to quality. Good quality equipment and materials are available to stimulate children's curiosity. And well-designed outdoor spaces encourage programs' full use of the outdoors in all seasons. Capital funds for expansion, improvements and ongoing facility maintenance are an ongoing part of the budget package, rather than a rare luxury.

Educators

ECEC programs in 2020 are delivered by qualified, fairly-paid, well-respected early childhood educators supported by ongoing training and knowledgeable pedagogical and policy leadership at all levels. The teaching team in centres is led by early childhood specialists with university degrees working alongside college-educated colleagues. Graduate education is also available for developing a critical mass of Canadian-trained highly educated ECEC specialists. A career ladder, achieved by articulating college and university programs in the early childhood field, allows transitions over educators' working lives. The availability of support and administrative staff means that teachers spend their time with the children rather than cooking, doing the books or maintenance.

Inclusion in a system

To ensure democratic operation, public accountability, high quality and an integrated rather than a fragmented approach, public funds in 2020 are directed only to community-based publicly operated and not-for-profit programs. Consistent with Canadian values, ECEC programs include families and children across the socio-economic spectrum, cultural values and diversity are well respected and children with disabilities are as fully included as their typically developing peers. Culturally appropriate programs welcome all children and their families and the system incorporates respect for diversity and social inclusion as principles at all levels.

In 2020, ECEC programs are part of sustained, well-resourced, publicly funded and provincially organized systems everywhere in Canada. This means that rather than relying on parents, volunteers or entrepreneurs to initiate, fund and operate programs, there is public funding, public planning, public infrastructure and public management of ECEC programs. In a mature system, each centre is part of a democratic, participatory system set up so that families and children can benefit from the opportunities.

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Note: This BRIEFing NOTE is adapted from the final chapter of a book by Martha Friendly and Susan Prentice; "About Canada: Childcare" available from Fernwood Press.

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