

■ EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE FOR FIRST NATIONS, INUIT AND MÉTIS CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

This section sets out the context, foundations, considerations, and status of early learning and child care for First Nations, Métis and Inuit people, recognizing the uniqueness of each Indigenous cultural group.

FIRST NATIONS, INUIT AND MÉTIS COMMUNITIES

People who self-identify as Indigenous to the land known as Canada numbered 1,807,250 in the 2021 long-form Census, up 9.4% from the Indigenous population in the 2016 Census. Accounting for 5% of the Canadian population, the Indigenous population includes First Nations, Inuit and Métis people—all constitutionally recognized Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Indigenous peoples live in northern areas, in the south, in remote and urban areas. Some First Nations people live on reserves but according to the 2021 Census, “801,045 Indigenous people lived in a large urban centre of at least 100,000 people, accounting for over half (44.3%) of the total Indigenous population”. Thus, early learning and child care for Indigenous children and families in all sorts of communities—Indigenous lands and communities, rural, remote and northern, towns, suburbs and large cities—is of interest.

The First Nations population of 1,048,045 (2022) includes those in 630 First Nations communities (reserves) representing more than 50 nations and 50 languages, as well as First Nations people not living on reserves. According to 2016 Census data, 40% of First Nations people lived on reserve.

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The 70,540 Inuit people live mostly in Inuit Nunangat which is comprised of four regions: the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (northern Northwest Territories), Nunavut, Nunavik (northern Quebec) and Nunatsiavut (northern Labrador). Inuit Nunangat includes 53 communities and encompasses roughly 35% of Canada’s land mass and 50% of its coastline. About one in four Inuit people live outside Nunangat. Of those living outside Inuit Nunangat, about half live in towns or cities. More than a third of the 53 communities in Inuit Nunangat have populations under 500 people and most can only be reached by air year-round and by air and sea during the summer.

The Métis emerged as a distinct Indigenous people and nation in the historic Northwest during the late 18th century. The historic Métis Nation Homeland encompasses the prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta and extends into contiguous parts of Ontario, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories, and the northern United States.

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Developing and providing early learning and child care for the varied First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities is a complex task that requires collaboration among individuals, communities, jurisdictions and funding sources. For First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples, the principle of self-determination and the centrality of cultural identity are key in the design and delivery of early learning and child care services. Overarching principles underpinning the development of early learning and child care services are shared among First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples, but each distinct group tailors its programs to the specific culture and priorities that best serve its families.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF FIRST NATIONS, INUIT AND MÉTIS NATION EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

In 1996, the [Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples \(vol 5\)](#) recommended federal, provincial, and territorial governments cooperate to support an integrated early childhood funding strategy to: a) extend early childhood education to all Indigenous children regardless of residence; b) encourage programs that foster the physical, social, intellectual and spiritual development of children, reducing distinctions between child care, prevention and education; c) maximize Indigenous control over service design and administration; and d) offer one-stop accessible funding; and e) promote parental involvement and choice in early childhood education options.

The [Truth and Reconciliation Commission \(TRC\)](#) was initiated in 2008 and reported in 2015 after substantial consultation. Its creation was part of a settlement of the “largest class action in Canadian history” between the federal government, four national churches and Indigenous persons who had been removed from their families as children to live at residential schools. Citing the Canadian history of forced separation of children from their families to send them to residential schools, abuse, cultural assimilation and appropriation of Indigenous lands, the TRC [called for action in 94 areas](#) including “federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments developing culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families”.

Following the release of the Truth and Reconciliation report, the October 2015 federal election resulted in a change of government. The Liberal government first elected in 2015 committed to working towards addressing the historical wrongs to Indigenous peoples.

In 2016, Canada endorsed the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#). Canada has committed to “a roadmap to advance lasting reconciliation with Indigenous peoples” and “further steps to respect, recognize and protect the human rights of Indigenous peoples and to address the wrongs of the past.” In 2019, Canada passed [An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families](#) which sets out national principles and confirms the jurisdiction of Indigenous peoples over Indigenous child and family services. In 2021 Parliament passed [The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act \(UNDRIP Act\)](#) which obligates Canada, in consultation and cooperation with Indigenous peoples to “take all measures necessary to ensure that the laws of Canada are consistent with the Declaration” and to “... prepare and implement an action plan to achieve the objectives of the Declaration.”

These legislated commitments set the stage for Indigenous early learning and child care as Canada is embarking on developing a Canada-wide child care system for all. The federal government’s [Indigenous ELCC Transformation Initiative](#), which is described on the next page, supports the implementation of the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework (IELCC). The Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework IELCC recognizes the importance of a distinctions-based approach in ensuring that the rights, interests and circumstances of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation are acknowledged, affirmed, and implemented, and that Framework supports distinct First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Nation frameworks representing their respective vision, goals and priorities. It also embodies the spirit and substance of the UNDRIP Act by enabling Indigenous control through a new partnership model and co-development of Indigenous ELCC under the IELCC.

Bill C-35, *An Act respecting Early Learning and Child Care in Canada*, was introduced in the House of Commons on December 8, 2022 to frame and transform the current child care market to a system of universal early learning and child care Canada-wide for all families and children including those who are Indigenous. It includes clear and explicit identification of Indigenous rights and specifically references UNDRIP in a rights-based framework.

CULTURAL INTEGRITY

A central concern for First Nations, Inuit and Métis people is maintenance of their culture and cultural identity through self-determination. Thus, culturally sensitive “distinctions-based” early childhood education (that is, early childhood education designed to reflect the unique needs of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples, including their history, cultures, languages and traditions, and the implications of this for staff training and service delivery) is a main focus. These elements are reflected in the ELCC Frameworks of the First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

As a 2016 [report](#) from the First Nations Information Governance Centre noted:

The health and well-being of Indigenous peoples is rooted in a unique relationship between the people, the land, and the cultures and languages that connect us to the land. For Indigenous children in particular, their understanding of who they are and their connections with Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world is integrally interconnected with their early life experiences. Developing an understanding of one's self, individually and as part of a collective, is a learning process that begins at birth.

The National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) includes more than 100 Indigenous-operated non-profit, member organizations and charities across Canada. The NAFC highlights the importance of providing culturally safe, relevant and appropriate spaces and services to Indigenous peoples, especially urban Indigenous children and families. In its submission to the UN on the rights of the Indigenous child under UNDRIP, NAFC emphasized the absence of a focus on urban Indigenous early learning and child care, "... something that is sorely needed."

TRANSFORMING FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS AND INUIT EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE

THE INDIGENOUS EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE TRANSFORMATION INITIATIVE

[The Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Transformation Initiative](#) supports implementation of the co-developed Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework (IELCC) (2018) and the distinct First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation frameworks which reflect the unique cultures and priorities of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis families and children across Canada. This initiative enables greater Indigenous control in IELCC through a new partnership model to facilitate Indigenous-led decision-making to advance national and regional priorities. The goal is for Indigenous children and families to have greater access to ELCC programs and services that are holistic, accessible, inclusive, and flexible, culturally appropriate and improve children's outcomes.

Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) is the federal focal point guiding this horizontal initiative, with Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) and the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) as co-signatories to the horizontal terms and conditions of the IELCC Transformation Initiative.

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At the time the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework was released in June 2017, the federal government announced co-development of a separate Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework beginning with extensive cross-Canada engagement with Indigenous communities across the country. Recognizing the distinct needs and goals of Indigenous children and families, in September 2018, the Government of Canada, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Inuit Tapirit Kanatami (ITK) and the Métis National Council (MNC) released a co-developed [Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework \(IELCC\)](#). It is a complement to the 2017 Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework (MLF) between the Government of Canada and provinces/territories.

THE INDIGENOUS EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE FRAMEWORK

The IELCC Framework (2018) is an overarching conceptual structure that sets the stage for implementation of three distinct frameworks for First Nations, Inuit and Métis early learning and child care policies, programs and services that Indigenous families and communities in rural, remote and urban locations across Canada want and need. Recognition of these needs and appropriate responses to them are essential components of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and compliance with the Canadian UNDRIP *Act*. Currently, new policies and programs are being introduced in many jurisdictions, involving First Nations, Inuit and Métis governance bodies and community-based, non-profit Indigenous led organizations.

The [IELCC Framework](#) states that:

It envisions First Nations, Inuit and Métis children and families as happy and safe, imbued with a strong cultural identity...children and families supported by a comprehensive and coordinated system of ELCC policies, programs and services led by Indigenous peoples, rooted in Indigenous knowledges, cultures and languages, and supported by strong partnerships of holistic, accessible and flexible programming that is inclusive of the needs and aspirations of Indigenous children and families.

The Framework outlines nine principles, each of which flows from engagement with First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation communities and leadership:

1. Indigenous knowledges, languages and cultures;
2. First Nations, Inuit and Métis self-determination;
3. High quality programs and services;
4. Child and family-centred;
5. Inclusiveness;
6. Flexibility and adaptability;
7. Accessibility;
8. Transparency and accountability; and
9. Respect, collaboration and partnership.

The Indigenous ELCC Framework acknowledges that First Nations, Inuit and the Métis are distinct peoples with rights to self-determination, including the right for each group to control the design, delivery and administration of its ELCC system.

To enable greater self-determination and control of Indigenous ELCC priorities, a partnership model has been adopted to implement the Indigenous ELCC Framework; the Government of Canada, First Nations, Inuit and Métis representatives are working together to establish ELCC priorities, policies and funding allocations. The Indigenous ELCC Secretariat at Employment and Social Development acts as a focal point within the federal government to implement the IELCC Framework.

Consistent with the broad principles of the IELCC, distinctions-based First Nations, Inuit and Métis frameworks with specific priorities have been developed:

- **Priorities – [First Nations Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#)**

Establishment and expansion of high quality ELCC programs and services that enhance the cultural continuity of First Nations is primary, rooted in First Nations languages, knowledge and cultural practices. Curriculum development and professional resources for ELCC programs that are based in First Nations cultures and languages are key to implementing this framework.

- **Priorities – [Inuit Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#)**

In seeking to achieve a system of Inuit ELCC in which the Inuktitut language and Inuit culture are embedded, a major strategy is to pursue funding arrangements including the Inuit Nunangat Fiscal Policy Space, an approach that enables long-term integrated funding that the Inuit would control and could direct toward a sustainable IELCC system. In addition to prioritizing stable, decent wages and working conditions for early childhood educators with explicit consideration for the cost of living in the North and to building human resource capacity and training in early childhood education based upon Inuit knowledge, it is a priority to support Inuit families living outside Inuit Nunangat by establishing Inuit-centered and led child care and family resource programs in urban areas.

- **Priorities – [Métis Nation Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#)**

The overarching goal of Métis Nation ELCC Framework is to create and enhance early learning programs and supports for Métis children and their families that are anchored in Métis culture and responsive to the unique needs of Métis children and families. One key strategy is to support “... ELCC providers, from inside and outside the Métis Nation, to be trained and educated in early childhood education and the cultural ways of the Métis Nation, thereby enhancing their competency in working with Métis Nation children and their families.”

ELCC PROGRAM PROVISION AND FINANCING

INDIGENOUS EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE IN THE 2021 FEDERAL BUDGET AND BEYOND

The April 2021 federal budget provided a historic commitment to early learning and child care. The \$27.2 billion over the next five years and commitment to build a “Canada-wide, community-based system of quality child care” represents the most significant federal financial and policy commitment to child care to date. As a component of this, budget 2021 built on the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework’s distinctions-based approach and framework with a proposed additional investment of \$2.5 billion over the next five years in Indigenous ELCC to support programs and services, infrastructure, governance and partnership building. The earmarked \$2.5 billion for the IELCC for 2021 – 2026 includes:

- \$1.4 billion over five years, and \$385 million ongoing, to improve Indigenous families’ access to high quality programming;
- \$515 million over five years, and \$112 million ongoing to support Before and After School Care for First Nations children on reserve;
- \$264 million over four years, and \$24 million ongoing to repair and renovate existing Indigenous ELCC centres;
- \$420 million over three years, and \$21 million ongoing to build and maintain new centres in additional communities; and
- An annual increase of 3% for Indigenous ELCC program funding starting in 2027 – 2028 to ensure that programs can grow as communities grow. (This is not applicable to before- and after-school care on reserve.)

An additional \$34 million per year over 10 years will enhance the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) program. As well, another \$44 million per year has been identified for 10 years for the Indigenous ELCC Quality Improvement Project. This application-based, Indigenous-led fund will support projects advancing foundational elements of Indigenous ELCC such as cultural and language resources, professional capacity, centres of excellence or networks, data, research reporting or evaluation activities and links to provincial/territorial initiatives.

All these additional funds for IELCC build on previously existing federal funds of approximately \$132.6 million (2018) for the three “legacy” federal Indigenous ELCC programs described in the following section, as well as a further \$1.7 billion over 10 years committed in 2017 and 2018.

At the present time, Canada-wide federal ELCC programs for First Nations, Inuit and Métis families and children are under the new umbrella horizontal Terms and Conditions of the Indigenous ELCC Transformation Initiative. This Initiative enables horizontal coordination of federal investments in Indigenous early learning and child care through

flexible, Indigenous-led approaches. Employment and Social Development Canada, Indigenous Services Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada are the federal partners that use these Terms and Conditions to participate in the Indigenous ELCC Initiative.

INDIGENOUS EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE LEGACY PROGRAMS

Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) – Public Health Agency of Canada

In 1995, the Government of Canada established the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) program to fulfill an election commitment to establish early intervention programs for Indigenous children. AHSUNC is a national early intervention initiative to support healthy development of Indigenous children not living in First Nations reserves or on Inuit lands. Thus, it supports First Nations, Inuit and Métis children and families.

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) provides funding to local Indigenous organizations and governance bodies to develop and deliver culturally appropriate programming. AHSUNC sites typically offer part-time programming for multiple cohorts of children to expand their reach. The program is centered on six components: education, health promotion, culture and language, nutrition, social support, and parental/family involvement.

AHSUNC was initiated as, and largely remains, a centre-based, part-day program. Currently, it reaches approximately 4,300 children annually through preschool programs most of which are part-day. A [2022 evaluation of AHSUNC](#) confirmed that families strongly support the cultural programming and inclusion of Indigenous languages in AHSUNC programs. At the same time, there is a growing need for additional AHSUNC services in unserved and under-served areas and a specific need for more resources to enable AHSUNC programs to support children with special needs and their families. Difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff is exacerbated by limited financial capacity. The evaluation notes that new funding committed in the 2021 federal budget to the IELCC Initiative will provide incremental funding increases for AHSUNC over the next five years beginning in 2022 – 2023 (total \$122.9 million).

In 2022, there were 133 AHSUNC sites across Canada. The number of AHSUNC sites by province/territory can be found in Table 13 in this report.

Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve (AHSOR) – Indigenous Services Canada

Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve was initiated in 1998, building on Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities. AHSOR funds activities that support learning and developmental needs of young children living on First Nations reserves.

Like AHSUNC, AHSOR is centred on six components: education, health promotion, culture and language, nutrition, social support, and parental/family involvement. AHSOR was initiated as a part-day program and remains that way for the most part.

In 2022, there were 511 AHSOR programs Canada-wide. Table 13 in the report shows AHSOR by province.

First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI)

The First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative was first established in 1995 through Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) to provide Indigenous children with similar access to affordable, quality child care as non-Indigenous children. According to a 2018 federal government report, [*An audit of social infrastructure funding – First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative*](#):

[FNICCI] had a goal of creating 6,000 child care spaces on First Nations reserves and in the Territories based on a government commitment from 1993. Additionally, FNICCI was intended to provide culturally appropriate, affordable, quality child care services comparable to what is available to other Canadian children. In 1999, FNICCI was bundled into the Aboriginal human resource development agreements with First Nations and with service providers in the Territories to take advantage of the agreement holders' delivery networks.


Originally funded through one of then-HRSDC's¹² labour market development programs, FNICCI was developed at least in part to support parental employment. Since 2011, FNICCI has been funded under Indigenous skills and employment training programs (now ISET) under the mandate of Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). It is described as “providing access to quality child care services for First Nations and Inuit children whose parents are starting a new job or participating in a training program”. In 2022, there were 463 centre-based programs with FNICCI funding across Canada. Note that FNICCI-funded child care centres also use other funds, both federal and provincial/territorial. Table 12 in this report provides provincial/territorial numbers of child care centres for Indigenous families and children.

FEDERALLY-FUNDED INDIGENOUS PROGRAMS IN INDIVIDUAL PROVINCES

FIRST NATIONS CHILD CARE ON RESERVE – ONTARIO

Regulated child care centres and family child care on Ontario First Nations reserves have had federal funding for many years under the federal government-Ontario 1965 Indian Welfare Agreement. These programs are delivered by First Nations under agreements with the Ontario government (Ministry of Education) and are regulated under Ontario's provincial child care legislation and regulations.

¹² HRSDC was one of the predecessors of ESDC.



In 2021, 74 licensed child care centres delivering 3,291 spaces were operating in 59 First Nation on reserve communities in Ontario. There were also two regulated home child care agencies with 31 homes, with spaces for 186 children on First Nations.