

# First Nations, Inuit, and Métis early learning and child care

## ■ FIRST NATIONS, INUIT, AND MÉTIS PEOPLES

In the 2021 Canadian Census, people who self-identify as Indigenous numbered 1,807,250,<sup>3</sup> up 9.4% from the 2016 Census. Accounting for 5% of the Canadian population, the Indigenous population includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples – all constitutionally recognized Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

According to the 2021 Census, 801,045 Indigenous people – representing 44.3% of the total Indigenous population – lived in a large urban centre of at least 100,000 people. Thus, early learning and child care (ELCC) is of interest for Indigenous children and families in all types of communities – Indigenous lands and communities; rural, remote, and northern communities; and towns, suburbs, and large cities.

The First Nations population was reported to be 1,048,045 in 2022. This represents people from more than 50 Nations and languages living on one of more than 3,000 reserves and lands across Canada, as well as those living off reserve.

The 70,540 Inuit in Canada live mostly in Inuit Nunangat's<sup>4</sup> four regions: the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (northern Northwest Territories), Nunavut, Nunavik (northern Quebec), and Nunatsiavut (northern Labrador).

Inuit Nunangat, which encompasses roughly 35% of Canada's land mass and 50% of its coastline, includes 53 communities. More than a third of these communities have populations under 500 people, and most can only be reached by air and sea during the summer and only by air the rest of the year. About one in four Inuit live outside Nunangat; of those, about half live in towns or cities.

The Métis emerged as a distinct Indigenous People in the 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. In 2021, the Métis population in Canada was 624,220.

## ■ THE CONTEXT OF FIRST NATIONS, INUIT, AND MÉTIS ELCC

### Truth and Reconciliation

The 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (volume 5) recommended that federal, provincial, and territorial governments cooperate to:

- Extend early childhood education to all Indigenous children, regardless of residence;
- Encourage programs that foster the physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual development of children, reducing distinctions between child care and education;

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<sup>3</sup> The most recent data are from the 2021 Census. The next long-form census is scheduled for 2026.

<sup>4</sup> Inuit Nunangat is an Inuktitut term meaning “the place where Inuit live.” It includes land, water, and ice.

- Maximize Indigenous control over service design and administration;
- Offer one-stop accessible funding; and
- Promote parental involvement and choice in early childhood education options.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established in 2008 as a requirement of the 2007 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. This agreement was, at the time,<sup>5</sup> the largest class action settlement in Canadian history. It was made 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, abuse, cultural assimilation, and appropriation of Indigenous lands, the TRC [called for action in 94 areas](#), including Call to Action 12: “We call upon the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families.”

Following the release of the Truth and Reconciliation report, the Liberal government led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, first elected in 2015, committed to addressing the historical wrongs to Indigenous Peoples. Building on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and Canadian endorsement of it, Canada passed the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act \(UNDRIP Act\)](#) in 2021. It obligates Canada 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.”

In 2021, as Canada embarked on building a Canada-wide child care system, these commitments to Indigenous Peoples set the stage for specific action on Indigenous early learning and child care.

### ***Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework***

In 2018, following substantive engagement with Indigenous partners, the Government of Canada and National Indigenous Organizations (the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, and the Métis National Council) endorsed the co-developed [Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care \(IELCC\) Framework](#). The *IELCC Framework* (2018) is an overarching conceptual structure that sets the stage for the three distinct frameworks for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis ELCC policies, programs, and services. Recognition of these needs and appropriate responses to them are essential components of reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples and compliance with the Canadian *UNDRIP Act*.

The *IELCC Framework*:

...envisions First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children and families as happy and safe, imbued with a strong cultural identity. It sees 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. (p. 5)

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<sup>5</sup> The *First Nations Child and Family Services, Jordan's Principle, and Trout Class Settlement Agreement*, approved in 2023, has since surpassed it as the largest class action settlement in Canadian history.



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

Consistent with the broad principles of the *IELCC Framework*, specific priorities inform each of the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis frameworks.

### **FIRST NATIONS EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE FRAMEWORK**

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

### **INUIT EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE FRAMEWORK**

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

### **MÉTIS NATION EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE FRAMEWORK**

The overarching goal of the *Métis Nation's 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 their

unique needs. 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.”

## ■ TRANSFORMING FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS, AND INUIT ELCC

The federal government’s Indigenous ELCC Transformation Initiative supports implementation of the *IELCC Framework*. The initiative 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 through specific frameworks representing their respective visions, goals, and priorities. It also embodies the spirit and substance of the *UNDRIP Act* by enabling Indigenous control through co-development of Indigenous ELCC.

First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples are committed to maintaining their culture and cultural identity through self-determination. Thus, the main areas of focus are culturally sensitive early childhood education designed to reflect the unique needs, history, cultures, languages, and traditions of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples, and the implications for staff training and service delivery. These elements are reflected in the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis ELCC frameworks.

### The Indigenous ELCC Transformation Initiative

The Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Transformation Initiative supports implementation of the IELCC and the distinct First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Nation frameworks within it that reflect the three groups’ unique cultures and priorities. The Initiative enables greater Indigenous control in IELCC through a 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, flexible, and culturally appropriate, and to improve children’s outcomes.

Employment and Social Development Canada is the federal focal point for this initiative, with Indigenous Services Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada, and Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada as co-signatories to the horizontal [terms and conditions](#) of the IELCC Transformation Initiative.

### ELCC program provision and financing (2018 – 2026)

Budget 2017 built upon the three federal “legacy” IELCC programs (described below) and committed \$1.7 billion over 10 years (starting in 2018 – 2019) to advance the goals of the *IELCC Framework*. The 2020 Fall Economic Statement (FES) committed an additional \$145 million over five years (starting in 2021 – 2022) for IELCC and a total of \$225 million ongoing. The 2020 FES also made the funding for IELCC under Budget 2017 permanent and ongoing at 2027 – 2028 levels.

The 2021 federal budget provided a historic commitment to early learning and child care, with significant implications for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children and families. The \$27.2 billion over five years (through 2026) and commitment to build a “Canada-wide, community-based system of quality child care” represented the most significant federal financial and policy commitment to child care to date. As a

component of this commitment, Budget 2021 built on the *IELCC Framework*'s distinctions-based approach, with an investment of \$2.5 billion over five years for Indigenous ELCC to support programs and services, infrastructure, and governance and partnership building.

The \$2.5 billion earmarked for IELCC in Budget 2021 included:

- \$1.3 billion over five years and \$369 million ongoing to enhance distinctions-based funding envelopes for IELCC;
- \$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 (Budget 2023 re-profiled this investment over four years, providing further time to ramp up and plan for investments);
- \$59.8 million over five years beginning in 2021 – 2022 and \$16 million ongoing starting in 2026 – 2027 for additional investments in the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) program; and
- \$10 million a year starting in 2023 – 2024 and ongoing in additional investment for the expansion of the IELCC Quality Improvement Projects funding envelope.

The government also committed an annual increase of 3% for Indigenous ELCC program funding starting in 2027 – 2028, although this increase is not applicable to before- and after-school care on reserve.

The *IELCC Framework* and associated investments to support its implementation form a distinct yet integral part of the Canada-wide ELCC system. Funding to support IELCC is intended to complement, not replace, provincial/territorial funding for ELCC, in recognition of the significant needs in Indigenous communities. It is also meant to ensure that Indigenous governments can participate alongside federal, provincial, and territorial governments in the design and implementation of the Canada-wide system.

The Indigenous ELCC Transformation Initiative enables horizontal coordination of federal investments in IELCC through flexible, Indigenous-led approaches. [Horizontal terms and conditions](#) provide a single-window approach to federal IELCC funding. Employment and Social Development Canada, Indigenous Services Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada, and Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada are the federal partners that use these terms and conditions to participate in the Indigenous ELCC Initiative.

## ■ INDIGENOUS ELCC LEGACY PROGRAMS

### Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities

In 1995, the Government of Canada established the [Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities](#) (AHSUNC) program through the Public Health Agency of Canada as part of a commitment to create early intervention programs that promote the healthy development of Indigenous children. As



a national early intervention initiative, AHSUNC supports First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children and families living off reserve or in northern communities.

Funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, the program enables local Indigenous organizations and governance bodies to design and deliver culturally grounded, community-driven programming that reflects local needs and priorities. AHSUNC sites typically offer part-day, centre-based programming for multiple cohorts of children, allowing for broad participation and community reach. Each site is guided by six interrelated components – education, health promotion, culture and language, nutrition, social support, and parental/family involvement – which together foster the holistic wellbeing of children and strengthen connections among families, communities, and culture.

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, additional AHSUNC services are increasingly needed in unserved and underserved areas, specifically more resources to enable AHSUNC programs to support children with disabilities and their families. Limited financial capacity exacerbates difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff. The evaluation notes that new funding committed to the IELCC Initiative in the 2021 federal budget provides incremental funding increases for AHSUNC over five years beginning in 2022 – 2023 (totalling \$122.9 million), which will hopefully help address these ongoing challenges and strengthen program capacity across communities.

The AHSUNC program in British Columbia presents a unique landscape compared to other jurisdictions. While the AHSUNC program was initiated as, and largely remains, a centre-based early learning program, a number of AHSUNC sites in British Columbia operate within a more integrated early learning environment, often in collaboration with provincially licensed child care centres or other Indigenous-led early learning programs.

Across British Columbia, all AHSUNC sites operate within this broader provincial early learning context, navigating varying degrees of integration, collaboration, and alignment with provincial standards and priorities. While approaches differ from community to community, all sites maintain a focus on cultural continuity, flexibility, and community governance – ensuring that programming remains responsive to local priorities.

Canada-wide, the structure of AHSUNC delivery varies; some provinces and territories license AHSUNC programs (typically by invitation of the community or program), while others do not.

In 2025, at least 136 AHSUNC sites in urban and northern communities reach 4,500 children outside British Columbia. There were 43 AHSUNC sites in British Columbia in 2025.

### **Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve**

The [Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve](#) (AHSOR) program through Indigenous Services Canada, which builds on AHSUNC, was initiated in 1998. AHSOR funds activities that support the physical, developmental, emotional, social, cultural, and spiritual wellbeing of young children living on First Nations reserves through flexible, Indigenous-led approaches. Like AHSUNC, AHSOR is centred on six components: education, health promotion, culture and language, nutrition, social support, and

parental/family involvement. Programming is typically half-day and can be delivered in a centre-based environment, through outreach services, or through home visits.

A 2024 [Evaluation of the Healthy Child Development Program](#), which includes AHSOR, found:

AHSOR programs are operating with a holistic approach to supporting child development – including integration of Nation-based culture and language activities, play-based learning, health promotion, nutritious food access, and involvement of parents and Elders. The key accomplishments within the AHSOR program as described by community representatives include strengthened connection to culture and positive identity, improved school readiness, the development of trusting relationships with children and families, and achievement of emotional and developmental milestones. (p. 28)

Canada-wide, some provinces and territories license AHSOR centre-based programs (usually by invitation of the community or program), and some do not.

According to the most recent available reporting (2022 – 2023), 364 AHSOR programs reach over 11,063 children through centre-based and outreach programming on reserves across all provinces except British Columbia.

Since 2013, funding for AHSOR for First Nations in British Columbia has been administered by the First Nations Health Authority under the British Columbia Tripartite Framework Agreement on Health Governance. The 156 AHSOR programs in British Columbia are administered through the First Nations Health Authority.

AHSOR does not serve the Yukon or Nunavut. There is one AHSOR program in the Northwest Territories on the K’atl’odeeche First Nation Reserve.

## First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative

The First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI) was first established in 1995 through Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (a predecessor of Employment and Social Development Canada) 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](#), the FNICCI:

...began in 1995 with the 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. (p. 1)

Originally funded through one of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada’s 12 labour market development programs, FNICCI was developed to ensure First Nations and Inuit children whose parents were in employment training or starting a new job could access quality child care services that met their development needs. In 1999, FNICCI was integrated with the Aboriginal Human Resource Development Strategy, and in 2004 it transitioned to the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy,



now Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program (transition in 2019) under the mandate of Employment and Social Development Canada.

In 2025, approximately 463 child care sites providing approximately 11,563 spaces in First Nations and Inuit communities across Canada were receiving [FNICCI funding](#). FNICCI-funded child care centres also use other funds, both federal and provincial/territorial. Table 10 provides provincial/territorial numbers of child care centres on First Nations reserves and Inuit lands.

Bill C-35, *An Act respecting Early Learning and Child Care in Canada*, which received royal assent in 2024, includes clear and explicit identification of Indigenous rights and specifically references UNDRIP in a rights-based framework.