
Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2019

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**CHILDCARE RESOURCE
AND RESEARCH UNIT**

Childcare Resource and Research Unit

www.childcarecanada.org

December 2020; Revised February 2021

INDIGENOUS EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE

CONTEXT

In 2016, there were 1,673,785 people self-identified as Indigenous living in Canada, up almost 30% from the most recent previous mandatory census in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2017a). Accounting for 4.9% of the Canadian population, the Indigenous population includes First Nations, Inuit and Métis people.

Indigenous peoples live in remote and/or northern areas and in urban areas and in the south. Some First Nations people live on reserves but according to data from the 2016 Census, “867, 415 Indigenous people lived in a metropolitan area of at least 30,000 people, accounting for over half (51.8%) of the total Indigenous population” (Statistics Canada, 2017b). 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 from an Indigenous perspective.

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

In 1996, [the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples](#) had recommended that federal, provincial, and territorial governments cooperate to support an integrated early childhood funding strategy that a) extends early childhood education to all Indigenous children regardless of residence; b) encourages programs that foster the physical, social, intellectual and spiritual development of children, reducing distinctions between child care, prevention and education; c) maximizes Indigenous control over service design and administration; d) offers one stop accessible funding; and e) promotes parental involvement and choice in early childhood education options (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Vol 5: 208).

The [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) (TRC) was initiated in 2008 and gathered information and consulted until it reported in 2015. Its creation was part of a settlement of the “largest class action in Canadian history” between the federal government and four national churches and Indigenous Canadians who— as children— had been removed from their families to live at residential schools. Citing the Canadian history of forced separation of children from their families to send them residential schools, appropriation of Indigenous lands and cultural assimilation, 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” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015, Calls to action).

Following release of the TRC report, the October 2015 federal election led to a change of government. The Liberal government has made a commitment to work towards redressing the historical wrongs to Indigenous peoples.

CULTURAL INTEGRITY

A huge concern for Indigenous people is maintenance of their culture and cultural identity. Thus, culturally sensitive early childhood education, which for some Indigenous groups means “distinctions based” education (that is, early childhood education designed to reflect the unique needs of First Nations, Inuit and Métis, including their history, cultures, languages and traditions, and the implications of this for staff training and service delivery) is of special concern. [Indigenous early childhood experts](#) also point out that general standards for child care centres are sometimes too rigid or otherwise inappropriate for northern and/or remote communities as well as not reflecting traditional Indigenous cultural norms and practices.

There is a strong emphasis among Indigenous groups in developing ELCC programs operated and controlled by Indigenous communities themselves.

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 (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2016).

FEDERAL INDIGENOUS ELCC PROGRAMS

At one time, federal funding for Indigenous child care was limited to First Nations in the Yukon and Northwest Territories, in Ontario and Alberta, where the then-Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) covered costs in accordance with provincial funding policies. Until 1995, when the time the first Aboriginal Head Start program was announced, there was relatively little earmarked federal (or any) spending for Indigenous ELCC in much of Canada (See Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, and Forer, 2009).

Historically, on reserve social programs have been the responsibility of the Government of Canada while social programs for Indigenous people living off reserve have been either a federal or a provincial responsibility. Although some provincial governments regulate some Indigenous child care including on reserve services, others do not; in some provinces, First Nations communities do not recognize provincial jurisdiction on reserves. Generally, Indigenous organizations, sometimes at the regional level and sometimes at the community level ([Friendship Centres](#), for example) have had responsibility for the administration of funds and development of services.

A number of federally funded programs have been launched since the mid 1990s that provide ELCC for on reserve First Nations, Métis and Inuit people and urban and northern Indigenous people.

THE INDIGENOUS EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE TRANSFORMATION INITIATIVE AND THE INDIGENOUS EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE (IELCC) FRAMEWORK

The Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Transformation Initiative supported the implementation of the co-developed [Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework \(2018\)](#) (IELCC). This framework reflects the unique cultures and priorities of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children across Canada. The Transformation Initiative enables greater Indigenous control in IELCC through a new partnership model to facilitate Indigenous led decision making to advance national and regional priorities. Indigenous children and families will 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 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.

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 to begin with extensive cross-Canada engagement with Indigenous peoples across the country.

Recognizing the distinct needs and goals of Indigenous peoples, in September 2018, the Government of Canada, Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) and the Métis National Council (MNC) released a co-developed [Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#) (IELCC). It was to complement the 2017 Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework (MLF) between the Government of Canada and provinces/territories.

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 ([Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#)).

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;
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 to control the design, delivery and administration of an Indigenous 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 in which the Government of Canada, First Nations, Inuit and Métis are working together to establish ELCC priorities, policies and funding allocations. The Indigenous ELCC Secretariat at Employment and Social Development Canada acts as a focal point within the federal government to implement the IELCC Framework.

BUDGET 2017 AND BUDGET 2018 FUNDING ASSOCIATED WITH THE INDIGENOUS ELCC FRAMEWORK

New funding of \$1.7 billion over 10 years, starting in 2018-19, is being invested to support Indigenous led early learning and child care priorities and to advance the vision of the IELCC Framework. These funds, profiled over 10 years, will be guided by the principles of the IELCC Framework and include:

- Distinction-based funding envelopes:
 - Up to \$1.02 billion will support ELCC for First Nations and will be managed in partnership with First Nations;
 - Up to \$111 million will support ELCC for Inuit and will be managed in partnership with Inuit; and,
 - Up to \$450.7 million will support ELCC for the Métis Nation and will be managed in partnership with the Métis Nation.
- These distinctions-based funds are in addition to federal funding for the three existing federal Indigenous ELCC programs described in the following section, with approximate annual investments of \$132.6 million (2018).

In addition to distinctions-based funding, \$34 million per year over 10 years has been invested to enhance the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) program. Indigenous ELCC Quality Improvement Project funding of \$44 million per year over 10 years has also been invested to fund application-based, Indigenous-led projects to advance foundational elements of Indigenous ELCC, (e.g., cultural and languages resources; professional capacity, centres of excellence or networks; data, research reporting or evaluation activities; or, links to provincial/territorial service delivery).

Since 2018-2019, new national and regional partnership tables have started to emerge to facilitate Indigenous led decision-making to advance national and regional ELCC priorities. Alongside national tables, regional partnership tables are currently being established to support planning and priority setting and promote inter-sectoral coordination to strengthen collaboration among players in the ELCC sphere.

CANADA WIDE FEDERAL INDIGENOUS ELCC PROGRAMS

Canada wide federal ELCC programs 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.

Three federal departments and agencies are the federal partners that may use these terms and conditions to participate in the Indigenous ELCC Initiative:

- Employment and Social Development Canada;
- Indigenous Services Canada;
- Public Health Agency of Canada.

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 program to fulfill an election commitment to establish early intervention programs for Indigenous children.

Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) is a national early intervention initiative to support healthy development of Indigenous children not living on reserve. The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) provides funding to local Indigenous organizations to develop and deliver culturally appropriate programming. AHSUNC sites typically offer part time programming for multiple cohorts of children to expand reach. The program is centered on six components: education, health promotion, culture and language, nutrition, social support, and parental/family involvement.

Currently, AHSUNC has 134 sites that reach approximately 4,600 children annually through a majority of part-day preschool programs. An [evaluation of AHSUNC](#) was published online in 2017.

ABORIGINAL HEAD START ON RESERVE (AHSOR)

Indigenous Services Canada

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 in First Nations communities.

Like AHSUNC, AHSOR is centred on six components: education, health promotion, culture and language, nutrition, social support, and parental/family involvement. Currently, there are 363 programs (excluding BC) that include outreach and centres. AHSOR programs are located in 356 First Nations communities.

FIRST NATIONS AND INUIT CHILD CARE INITIATIVE (FNICCI)

The First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI) was first established in 1995 through Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) to provide First Nations children living on-reserve and in Inuit communities with similar access to affordable, quality child care as non-Indigenous children. According to a federal government report:

[FNICCI] had a goal of creating 6,000 child care spaces in 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 (Government of Canada: 2018).

Originally funded through one of then-HRSDC's labour market development programs, FNICCI was developed at least in part to support parental employment. Since 2011, FNICCI has been funded under the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program (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". Currently, there are 463 FNICCI child care centres across Canada.

A report of a research project by Inuit Tapirit Katami, [Assessing the Impact of the First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative across Inuit Nunanga](#) was published in 2014.

FEDERALLY FUNDED INDIGENOUS PROGRAMS FOR INDIVIDUAL PROVINCES

FIRST NATIONS ON RESERVE CHILD CARE – ONTARIO

Regulated child care centres and family child care in Ontario First Nations communities (reserves) have had federal funding for many years under the 1965 Indian Welfare Agreement. These 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.

In 2019, the Ontario government reported funding 99 First Nations and three transfer payment agencies to support 75 licensed on reserve child care centres. (See the ONTARIO section of this report for further details).

CHILD DAY CARE PROGRAM – ALBERTA

Child care centres on reserve are not normally licensed in Alberta. However, under an agreement between Alberta and the federal government, on reserve child care centres are eligible for federal government funding equivalent to parent fee subsidies when programs demonstrate to the federal government that they achieve provincial licensing standards. (See the ALBERTA section of this report for further details).

HEAD START – NEW BRUNSWICK

New Brunswick has 15 Head Start programs that receive funding through an agreement between the First Nations of New Brunswick and Indigenous Affairs and Northern Development Services Canada. None of the 15 Head Start programs currently operating in New Brunswick under this agreement is licensed by the province. (See the NEW BRUNSWICK section of this report for further details).