

a Childcare Resource and Research Unit publication

occasional paper **36**

The Trudeau government's changing child care file

From “institutional day care” to early learning
and child care for all

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Childcare Resource and Research Unit
January 2025
childcarecanada.org



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January 2025, 21pp

ISBN 978-1-896051-85-7

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Design: design by Billie Carroll (UNIFOR Canadian Freelance Union)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was published as a chapter in the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternative's *The Trudeau Record: Promise vs. Performance (2024)*, Editors Katherine Scott, Laura MacDonald and Stuart Trew, published by James Lorimer & Company Ltd. The authors would like to express our sincere appreciation to the editors and the publisher for permission to re-publish the chapter in this format.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

From "institutional day care" to early learning and child care for all: The Trudeau government's changing child care file

1. Child care services—governance—Canada; 2. Early childhood education and care - history - Canada; 3. Child care - Trudeau government;
4. Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care - CWELCC; 5. Friendly, Martha; 6. Prentice, Susan; 7. Childcare Resource and Research Unit

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Citation: Friendly, M., Prentice, S. (2024). *The Trudeau government's changing child care file: From "institutional day care" to early learning and child care for all*. Toronto: Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

The Trudeau government's changing child care file

From “institutional daycare” to early learning and child care for all

Child care advocates were relieved when Justin Trudeau's Liberals defeated Stephen Harper's Conservatives in October 2015. The Harper regime, which began with the cancellation of a Liberal government initiative to fund what the Conservatives called “institutional daycare,” was grim for child care advocates. The climate for child care improved under Trudeau's first mandate, but it took a pandemic for the government to promise “early learning and child care for all” and a third mandate to move from promise to action. As of June 2024, the aspirational universal child care system, despite important progress, was still in the initial stages of development.

This paper assesses the Trudeau government's record on child care. It begins with the period from 2015 through the October 2019 election and the pandemic, then describes the ambitious child care commitment of 2021 and ends by anticipating the future. We examine three questions. First, how distinctive have the Trudeau years been from the Harper period on early learning and child care? Second, what has child care's trajectory looked like under Trudeau? Finally, what are the fault lines for the ambitious promise of “early learning and child care for all”?

First mandate: “Because it’s 2015”¹

In the 2015 election campaign, all parties put families front and centre. The Conservatives promised to “stand up for families,” the New Democratic Party (NDP) to “give them a break,” while the Liberals would “put them first” (Bezanson 2017, 23). The Conservatives touted spousal income-splitting and improving the Child Care Expense Deduction, a tax-and-cash-transfer approach that advocates termed ABC, or “anything but child care.” The Conservative policy approach featured “care of the child,” a concept encompassing any and all forms of care: full-time maternal care, care by relatives, unregulated child care, and the licensed services they called “institutional daycare.”

The 2015 Liberal, NDP, and Green Party platforms, in contrast, shared several features. Each promised expansion of early learning and child care, defining it as an educational program for children that also supports mothers’ employment. Thus, it was considered good for women, good for families, and good for giving children the “best start in life.” Delivery would be by licensed services, supply-side funded, rather than by cash to parents. All three parties stressed that the federal government had a key role to play in improving early learning and child care provision in collaboration with provinces/territories and Indigenous Peoples (Friendly 2015b). The NDP made universal child care central in its 2015 election platform. It promised that parents would pay fees of no more than fifteen dollars per day, underwritten by federal spending of \$5 billion per year to support child care services. The NDP declared it would finance a federal child care contribution largely by eliminating the Harper government’s \$2 billion annual income-splitting program (Anderson and Ivanova 2015).

¹ Trudeau’s first line on his first day as prime minister, in response to a question about why he had chosen to create a gender-balanced cabinet (see Friendly 2015a).

The Trudeau Liberals framed child care as “economic security for middle class families,” briefly touching on women’s economic security. During the 2015 campaign, they didn’t embrace universal child care but proposed child care funding as part of a ten-year \$20 billion Social Infrastructure Fund. The Liberals promised to work with provinces, territories, and First Nations, within the first 100 days in office, to create a new early learning and child care framework to “deliver affordable, high- quality, flexible, and fully inclusive child care for Canadian families,” with some focus on “those most in need” (Liberal Party of Canada 2015).

After a Liberal majority government was elected in October 2015, the promised national framework followed. Federal, provincial,² and territorial governments agreed to the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework Agreement on June 12, 2017, enabling thirteen bilateral agreements covering between 2017 and 2020, and later renewed (Government of Canada 2017). These agreements set out how much federal funding was allocated to each province/territory and, in a general way, how federal funds would be spent. A parallel process with Indigenous communities resulted in the 2018 Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework, the umbrella agreement for distinctions-based First Nations, Métis, and Inuit frameworks (Government of Canada 2018).

The 2017 Multilateral Framework Agreement made each province or territory responsible “to develop systems that best respond to the needs and priorities of their communities.” It funded licensed services, not cash transfers to parents, and was based on five principles: affordability, accessibility, quality, inclusivity, and flexibility. Nearly \$400 million annually was included in the 2018

² Asymmetrical federalism meant that Quebec did not participate in the national plan. The Multilateral Framework Agreement noted that Quebec “supports the general principles of the Early Learning and Child Care Framework, [yet] does not adhere to the Framework, as it intends to preserve its sole responsibility in this area on its territory. The Government of Québec expects to receive its share of the federal funding and will continue to invest significantly toward programs and services for families and children.”

federal budget, with additional funds for federal spending on Indigenous child care, child care innovation, and data, reporting, and accountability, totalling \$7.5 billion over eleven years. Funds were designed to ramp up over time, rising to a high point of \$870 million annually in the 2027–28 fiscal year.

A 2019 report evaluating the multilateral framework agreement identified five ways it fell short. First, the framework took a targeted, not a universal, approach. Second, there was little accountability to assess whether provinces/territories were achieving their goals. Third, the funding was inadequate; in 2017, Ottawa was offering less than half the funds promised for Paul Martin’s early learning program (\$5.5 billion over five years, before it was cancelled in 2005). Fourth, there was no commitment to quality, leaving wages, early childhood training, and the crucial issue of for-profit child care unaddressed. Finally, there was little transparency, so civil society engagement, oversight, and public accountability were not considered (Pasolli 2019).

During the 2015 election, the federal government reasserted that child care was of interest to them and re-engaged with child care advocates and provinces, territories, and Indigenous communities. The Trudeau government recognized the distinction between funding that supported regulated early learning and child care and cash transfers to parents for child rearing through a revamped Canada Child Benefit.³ But the funding they committed to early learning and child care was modest, to support correspondingly modest and targeted advances in child care. Neither the funds nor the approach came close to what Pierre Trudeau’s Task Force on Child Care recommended in 1986 or what the Royal Commission on the Status of Women knew was necessary for women to be

³ The Canada Child Benefit, which was considerably enhanced and redesigned by the Trudeau government, is a non-taxable amount paid monthly to help eligible families with the cost of raising children under eighteen years of age. It is geared to income but received by 90 per cent of families.

“accorded true equality” through support for child care in 1970 (Friendly et al. 2018).

Nevertheless, despite the still tentative child care initiatives during Justin Trudeau’s first mandate, it was evident that the Trudeau approach was very different from that of Stephen Harper and the Conservatives. While new national policy and funding architecture awaited, the child care file had risen in importance and positioning. Promisingly, child care was back on the national agenda.

Child care becomes essential

Justin Trudeau’s second federal election campaign included several new, but still modest, commitments on child care. The 2019 platform promised 250,000 new before- and after-school spaces, with parent fees reduced by 10 per cent; more support for early childhood educators by reducing the cost of their post-secondary education; and creation of a federal secretariat charged with establishing the groundwork for a pan-Canadian child care system. To do this, the federal government promised \$55 million, in addition to funds already earmarked in the multilateral framework agreement for the provinces and territories (Liberal Party of Canada 2019).

The Liberal platform also promised to tackle some of the weaknesses of the paid parental leave provision (Doucet and de Laat 2022), pledging a “guaranteed paid family leave for everyone.” All parents, it declared, would be able “to afford to spend the first year at home with their child, when it matters most,” at an initially projected cost of \$800 million per year (Liberal Party of Canada 2019). The campaign stressed that the Liberals had “made life easier for parents” and would accelerate this in a new mandate.

Justin Trudeau’s second election resulted in a minority government, beginning on October 21, 2019. Less than five months

later, the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Canada, disrupting lives and institutions in previously unimagined and profound ways.

By April 2020, public health considerations had led most provinces and territories to close most licensed child care provision.⁴ Parents — at least those who were able — began to work from home while caring for children, some of whom, depending on age, participated in virtual schooling. This meant that parents were often caring for children and supervising schoolwork while juggling their own paid work and unpaid work. Some parents, especially those with “essential” jobs, such as health care providers, grocery store staff, or transit workers, continued working outside their home. Most provinces and territories provided regulated child care for essential workers, but who was eligible, what was available, and how it was paid for were uneven and shifting. During the first wave of the pandemic, 72 per cent of child care programs were closed, and those that remained open experienced reduced enrolment of up to 90 per cent (Friendly et al. 2020).

Economist Jim Stanford, among others, noted that the fragile situation of child care services primarily supported by parent fees before the pandemic created a financial and operating crisis when the pandemic hit (2020). Without the parent fees that most of Canada’s licensed child care relied on as its primary revenue source, revenues plummeted. There was enormous variation across the country, as different provinces and territories adopted different policy and funding measures. Clearly, the “pandemic created chaos for child care service providers, hardship for families” (Friendly et al. 2021a, 43).

Women’s employment was particularly hard hit in what became called a “she-cession” (Yalnizyan 2020). The Royal Bank of Canada warned that the pandemic threatened decades of women’s labour

⁴ Eleven provinces and territories closed all or most child care centres; six closed regulated family child care.

force gains (Desjardins et al. 2020). As successive waves of the virus roiled, public health measures shifted, and although federal pandemic funding such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and Canada Emergency Wage Supplement⁵ enabled most child care services to survive, the child care sector re-emerged profoundly weakened.

The hard lessons experienced by families and employers during the pandemic carried dramatic policy implications. Ahmed Hussen, then- minister of families, children and social development, commented that “child care is not a luxury but a necessity” (McQuigge 2020). Prime Minister Trudeau explained that “the global COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that without access to child care, parents — especially women — cannot fully participate in the economy” (Prime Minister of Canada 2021). It became the conventional wisdom in Ottawa that child care was key to Canada’s capacity to reopen and rebuild from the COVID-19 crisis (Bezanson et al. 2020).

The federal government’s fall economic statement in November 2020 promised that a plan for early learning and child care would be announced in the next federal budget. After decades of feminist advocacy, stretching back at least to the landmark Royal Commission on the Status of Women fifty years earlier, it seemed that Canada might be ready to move decisively to build a universal child care system. Child care had become “essential.”

Affordable, quality child care for all

When she announced the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan in the April 2021 federal budget, Chrystia Freeland,

⁵ The Government of Canada put in place a suite of pandemic relief programs aimed at the general population. Early learning and child care services and staff were eligible for these, and a majority made use of them, according to a Canada-wide survey of early learning and child care services (Friendly, Forer, Vickerson and Mohamed 2020).

Canada's first female finance minister, declared: "I make this promise to Canadians today, speaking as your Finance Minister and as a working mother: We will get it done." Her budget committed \$27.2 billion over five years to operationalize a national vision of child care. It was the "single largest line item in the massive 739-page budget document" (Tasker 2021). The budget made clear a vision of a transformed publicly funded early learning and child care system "for all."

Conservative leader Erin O'Toole promptly signalled that his party would oppose the initiative, pointing out that child care is a provincial responsibility and that he'd prefer parents to be "in the driver's seat" (cited in Tasker 2021). But many others were ecstatic. The Trudeau government's child care commitment was called a "watershed" (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives 2021) and "the turning point" (Ballantyne 2021). The Childcare Resource and Research Unit said, "we believe the budget commitments open the way to building — over the short, medium and long term — the universal child care system diverse families in communities across Canada want and need" (2021). A *Globe and Mail* editorial, noting that "attempts to build national child care have failed for 50 years," asked, "Could this time be different?" offering the opinion that "the dividends . . . look to be significant, for women, children and the economy" (Globe and Mail 2021).

The Trudeau government's \$27.2 billion over five years represented the most significant federal financial and policy commitment to child care ever. Combined with 2017 funding, federal spending for child care totalled almost \$34 billion over five years; in fiscal year 2025–26 and thereafter, the federal government would spend at least \$9.2 billion annually on child care, including earmarked funds for Indigenous early learning and child care. The budget also promised a new federal secretariat and a new national advisory council on early learning and child care.

The budget was ambitious both fiscally and in policy scope, including enhanced expectations for provincial/territorial use of the federal funding. The most specific condition was the requirement to reduce parent fees by 50 per cent on average by the end of 2022⁶ and to an average \$10 a day fee by fiscal year 2025–26. It also committed to “ongoing annual growth in quality, affordable child care spaces across the country,” with expansion targets to be set in bilateral agreements.

A noteworthy aspect was a preference for not-for-profit services: the Trudeau government specified expansion in “primarily not-for-profit quality child care,” marking a first-time federal government commitment on this hotly contested issue (Cleveland 2021; Friendly et al. 2021b).

The budget also promised to make “meaningful progress” on before- and after-school care, to develop publicly available data, to build on the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework’s distinctions- based approach, and to introduce federal child care legislation “to enshrine the principles of a Canada-wide child care system in law.” It was less specific about the child care workforce, stating it would work with provinces and territories “to ensure that early childhood educators are at the heart of the system, by valuing their work and providing them with the training and development opportunities needed to support their growth and the growth of a quality system of child care.” Finally, an agreement with each province and territory would be negotiated, including an asymmetrical agreement with Quebec.

Between July 2021 and March 2022, all⁷ provinces and territories signed onto the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement: British Columbia was first, and Ontario last. Each

⁶ With the exception of Quebec, due to their “asymmetrical” agreement with Ottawa.

⁷ The agreement between Quebec and the federal government is an asymmetrical agreement, with Quebec not subject to federal conditions to receive the funding.

provincial and territorial agreement had common core elements and was accompanied by a bespoke two-year action plan.⁸

Provincial and territorial governments joined with varying degrees of enthusiasm, in some instances largely due to the pull of the significant funds, as Ottawa deployed its purse to nudge provincial action. With little protest from most jurisdictions (Alberta, Ontario, and New Brunswick were standouts), premiers agreed to Ottawa's stipulation that expansion would be "primarily" non-profit and public. Across Canada, fees in regulated child care for children younger than school age fell even more rapidly than initially forecast. By the spring of 2023, six jurisdictions reached the 2025–26 target of ten dollars per day, and nearly everywhere else, fees fell 40 per cent or more (Macdonald and Friendly 2023a).

Bill C-35, *An Act Respecting Early Learning and Child Care* had first reading in the House of Commons on December 8, 2022, and unanimously passed third reading in June 2023. It received royal assent on March 19, 2024. Thus, fifty years since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women had first proposed a "national day-care act," it became a reality in Canada.

Will early learning and child care for all be achieved?

By 2023, the Trudeau government had promised a universal child care program and taken on a significant funding role. There was ongoing dialogue, if not full collaboration, between Ottawa and the provinces/ territories and Indigenous governance bodies. The Trudeau government had established significant sustained multi-year federal child care funding. Parent fees had fallen dramatically

⁸ All agreements shared the five principles established in the 2017 Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework: affordability, accessibility, quality, inclusivity, and flexibility. Affordability was to be tackled first through the 50 per cent fee reduction, then \$10 a day parent fees by 2025–26.

across the country. Does this mean that a solid foundation to establish “early learning and child care for all” had now been established? Has Canadian child care been transformed to “a system”?

High parent fees had long been one of the main barriers to accessibility, but as the 2024 Alternative Federal Budget pointed out:

Parent fee reductions have increased demand for licensed programs, widening the longstanding gap between demand and supply, and exposing access inequity. This has further exposed the failure of governments to expand licensed child care and to retain and recruit qualified early childhood educators to support existing and new programs (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives 2023).

Child care coverage remains low: in 2021, Canada had a regulated child care space for just 28 per cent of preschool-age children (Beach et al. 2023). Almost half of Canada’s young children live in a “child care desert,” a postal code in which more than three children compete for a single preschool child care space (Macdonald and Friendly 2023b). That there is a need and heightened demand for a much-expanded supply of regulated affordable child care is not news. Nor is it news that child care expansion across Canada is hampered by a child care workforce crisis fuelled by historically low wages and lack of respect for the educators. As federal Child Care Minister Karina Gould said at a Canada-wide child care advocacy meeting in June 2021, “there is much work still to be done.”

In 2021, the *Globe and Mail* identified the two challenges facing the new child care program: federal–provincial wrangling and “the grinding gears of the political cycle” (Globe and Mail 2021). In the current environment, these two challenges expose key fault lines.

Most elements of the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan were still under construction: universality, public funding, public and non-profit delivery, and ensuring that early childhood educators are at the heart of the system. Operationalizing these important elements was proving to be more challenging than was addressing affordability as a result of weak provincial/territorial implementation and, in some instances, by provincial/territorial design, reflecting differences in approach between Ottawa and some provinces.

With the introduction of Canada-wide early learning and child care, the federal government now played both a larger funding role and a correspondingly larger policy role in child care. However, the main elements of the early learning and child care policy, such as ensuring an adequate qualified early learning and child care workforce, remained in the hands of the provinces.

The substantial federal funds committed in the 2021 federal budget were mainly used to reduce parent fees, leaving scant room to deliver the wage increases needed to attract and retain a qualified workforce. Economist Gordon Cleveland (2023) cites Statistics Canada data to point out that early childhood educators in Canada are paid as if they had only a high school education. If the additional federal funds that advocates and analysts have been recommending (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives 2023) are forthcoming, these could be an important element for leveraging better provincial/territorial results on early learning and child care workforce issues.

Additionally, how child care expansion will be achieved remains a key and contested aspect of system building. A new \$1 billion federal child care expansion loan program, and \$60 million in grants, were introduced in the April 2024 budget to help spur the construction of new public and non-profit child care spaces. These new investments are consistent with the Trudeau government's

direction that its child care funding must be used for regulated child care services and that expansion should be “primarily” through public and non-profit services. But this key element is under fire from several provinces, the Official Opposition in the House of Commons, and right-wing allies.

The Conservative child care critic also challenged the term “inclusive” used by a federal government official to refer to one of the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan’s principles: “There seems to be a very big disconnect between wanting to be inclusive but then stating that you’re going to fund primarily not-for-profit and public child care” (House of Commons 2023). Right-wing Conservative party allies⁹ also continued to call for “funding the parent for any care of the child,” funding for unregulated care, and publicly funding expansion of for-profit child care.

These forces, and slow progress on workforce issues, expansion, and pressure from several provinces for more flexibility on for-profit expansion, reveal fault lines that have the capacity to delay or derail the child care project, as demand for licensed child care continues to rise with much-reduced fees.

The Trudeau government’s child care program has developed far beyond the embryonic program crafted by Prime Minister Paul Martin’s Liberal government, then summarily dismantled by the Harper government almost twenty years ago. Parents who have a licensed space have experienced dramatically reduced fees. Canada’s first federal early learning and child care legislation is now a reality. Early childhood educators have found an advocacy voice and recognition, if not yet the better wages and decent work they deserve. The idea that universal child care is part of the social infrastructure of modern societies is regularly heard in mainstream policy circles, a marked change from a decade ago.

⁹ See testimony by Cardus, Child Care Providers Resource Network, and the Alberta Association of Child Care Entrepreneurs at Senate committee hearings #71 on Bill C-35.

These advances, given sufficient time, resources, and continued political will, provide a strong foundation for moving forward. There is no question that child care is, and will remain, a provincial responsibility, but how far the federal government can and will intervene through use of its spending power¹⁰ remains to be seen.

While the political cycle grinds ever toward the next federal election, what does the future hold for child care? Will the Trudeau government leave a legacy that ensures that “early learning and child care for all” is so secure, a new government cannot overturn progress? Back in 2005, when hockey icon Ken Dryden, then a minister in Paul Martin’s cabinet charged with bringing in a national child care program, was interviewed about such a possibility, he used the following metaphor: “We need to paint ourselves into a corner” to protect it through public support (Geddes 2005).

What is risky for Canada is the fate of child care under a different government with a radically different approach. Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre was a key proponent of the Conservative government’s individual, fund-the-parent approach, declaring in 2015 that “the real child care experts are Mom and Dad” (Adler 2015). As political observer Susan Riley has said, the Canada-wide child care program launched by the Trudeau Liberals will be “celebrated as the country’s most important social and economic reform since medicare — if it survives” (Riley 2022).

10 The federal spending power is defined by the Centre for Constitutional Studies as “Parliamentary authority to spend as it chooses monies collected pursuant to its taxing and regulatory powers . . . Parliament may make gifts to provinces or individuals . . . and if it chooses, may attach conditions to its gifts.”

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