



# 6 Developing non-standard hours child care

Childcare Resource and Research Unit March 2022

MOVING  
FROM PRIVATE  
TO PUBLIC  
PROCESSES.

A SERIES ON  
CREATING  
CHILD CARE  
IN CANADA

Childcare Resource  
and Research Unit

[childcarecanada.org](http://childcarecanada.org)

## About the series

One aspect of Canadian child care provision is that the supply of child care services is too limited to meet demand, unevenly distributed and inequitable in terms of location. The primary reason for this is that “creating” child care services in Canada has mostly been treated as a private responsibility. This private approach is in contrast to public processes where governments take responsibility for ensuring that child care services are developed where and when they are needed.

As Canada begins to fulfill a historic commitment to build a universal early learning and child care system, the challenge of limited, uneven, inequitable child care availability must be tackled systemically—a more publicly managed, planned, intentional approach based on greater public responsibility for ensuring the availability and determining the characteristics and distribution of regulated child care.

This series of short, topical papers covers the importance of designing effective child care expansion strategies and some elements that can contribute to developing them. The series is based on a longer publication, [\*Moving from private to public processes to create child care in Canada\*](#) (2020), and has been revised and re-developed in this more accessible series format to reflect current Canada-wide policy developments.

## (Not) working nine-to-five: Non-standard hours child care to meet harder-to-serve needs

### What's the issue?

This series of papers makes the case that the private initiatives Canada has relied on to create child care services fail to meet the need. As a result, child care to meet families' varied needs is usually in short supply or non-existent. There is no place this is more evident than in non-standard hours child care.<sup>1</sup>

This paper addresses child care for what is widely agreed is a “hard-to-serve” parent population: parents working non-standard hours. It argues why a shift to more public responsibility for creating non-standard hours child care services is critical if these services are to become part of a transformed cross-Canada child care system.

Although Canadians increasingly work outside the traditional working hours of 9-5, there are relatively few child care programs available to meet non-standard hours or schedules. Like other aspects of child care in Canada, there has been an expectation that non-standard hours child care will be created independently based on need. However, high administrative requirements and high operational costs deter providers from opening and maintaining sustainable non-standard hour programs, as the challenges are even greater than for those operating during ordinary daytime hours. This is particularly true if child care programs aim to be “flexible” to meet parents' needs for on-demand child care.

Experience and research show that sufficient public funding and public management are required if non-standard hour programs are to become more available as child care provision in Canada expands more generally. Thus, as the papers in this series have discussed, successfully developing a supply of responsive non-standard hours child

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to acknowledge the contribution to this paper of Non-standard work and child care in Canada: A challenge for parents, policy makers, and child care provision (2019) by D.S. Lero, S. Prentice, M. Friendly, B. Richardson, & L. Fraser.

care services is unlikely to occur in the absence of a shift from private to public responsibility for creating child care services where they are needed.

### *What is non-standard hours child care?*

Part of the challenge of discussing non-standard hours child care has been the multiple definitions of the term “non-standard hours” itself. Each province holds its own definition of a “standard work week” used for overtime calculations, with no nationally held definition of what is meant by “standard work hours”. The simplest way to define non-standard hours is by defining what it is not: work that takes place on a regular schedule Monday-Friday, generally between the hours of 8:00 am and 6:00 pm.

The definition of non-standard hours child care is related to but different from definitions of non-standard hours work. A 2019 report by Lero, Prentice, Friendly, Richardson & Fraser defined non-standard hours child care as:

- Slightly non-standard (extended) hours (6:00 am to 8:00 pm);
- Earlier morning or later night hours (5:00 am to 12:00 am);
- Very late night, overnight care (12:00 am onwards);
- Weekends (anytime on Saturday or Sunday);
- On request participation (including emergency, flexible scheduling, special arrangements, or drop-in care.)

Recognizing the differences among these categories of non-standard hour child care is essential for delving into the supply of non-standard hour care. In Canada, definitions of non-standard hours child care vary by province (See Lero et al., 2019: 89), which can make it challenging to accurately track the prevalence of non-standard hours care across the country.

Often “flexible working hours” and the related “flexible child care” are used to describe non-standard hours. “Flexible” is an imprecise term—a freelance designer who can choose her own schedule has very different child care needs than a fast-food worker with irregular

hours and frequent shift changes made unilaterally by the manager. “Flexible child care” generally means that child care arrangements can be arranged “on demand” with little advance notice; this can apply to both standard hours and non-standard hours child care. Flexibility creates significant issues for service providers with regard to staffing and administration, yet many parents need child care flexibility in order to work. Flexible hours are often (but not necessarily) a characteristic of non-standard working hours.

## **What’s the context?**

Compounding the difficulty parents who work standard hours have in finding and affording child care, finding extended hours or flexible child care – especially in the child care “deserts” in which close to half (44%) of Canadian children live – can be extraordinarily challenging for parents (Macdonald, 2018). The cost of standard hours child care is already prohibitive for many Canadian families, and the increased operational costs for non-standard hours care can increase fees even more. Non-standard hours child care acutely highlights the failure of a market model for child care and illustrates why a more publicly managed approach would be a more effective way of ensuring needed services are available.

The idea of what constitutes “standard hours” work is contextual and dependent on the norms and labour laws in different countries. In North America generally, 9:00 am to 5:00 pm is generally seen as standard working hours. In Canada, non-standard workers are more likely to be women, parents, young adults, racialized and recent immigrants, Indigenous persons, and to have less formal education and earn lower incomes overall. It is estimated that 1.5 million parents of young children in Canada worked non-standard shifts in 2016-2017 and at least one parent worked a non-standard schedule in 39% of all families with one or more children under six years of age (Lero et al, 2019).

Challenges facing families needing non-standard hours child care are—in many ways—similar to those facing all Canadian families: accessibility and affordability are main concerns. Interviews with parents suggest that

they often use a “package” of child care arrangements due to a lack of affordable regulated non-standard hours child care. Parents, especially mothers, report high levels of stress over the lack of child care options, the high fees and the struggle of managing their complex child care “packages”. Parents working non-standard hours stated that being able to access regulated care—even at standard hours—offered a stable base to organize the remaining non-standard hour care around (Lero et al., 2019).

The challenges of non-standard hours care in Canada also characterize other jurisdictions with market-based child care systems. The United States faces similar scarcity of non-standard hour services as Canada. In some countries with universal child care, non-standard hours care is more prevalent but is still not easily available. For example, in Finland, families have had a statutory entitlement to 24 hour “day and night” care since 1972 (Rönkä et al., 2017). Although Finland is recognized as having universal access to non-standard hours child care, only 60% of municipalities provide “flexible” care, and rural areas have limited access. Similar to the Canadian context, lone-parent families and lower educated parents are over-represented in Finland’s flexible and extended hours child care services (Rönkä et al., 2017). It is important to keep in mind that the norms and practice with regard to work hours are different in North America and Europe, where standard work hours are [shorter](#) and expectations about long work hours are different.

The data necessary to fully understand and document non-standard hours child care are woefully insufficient. Halfon and Friendly noted “the lack of information about demand for non-standard hours services inhibits providers from moving forward with setting them up, and makes it more difficult to identify parents that need the services once they are in place” (2015: 55).

## **What’s the current state?**

While none of Canada’s province/territories has adopted policy to ensure access to non-standard hours care, there have been in recent years some developments related to non-standard hours child care. In

2015, Halfon and Friendly found few provincial/territorial policies or initiatives related to non-standard hour care (2015). Notably, by the time Lero et al. conducted their study of non-standard hours child care in 2019, “flexibility” had been identified as one of the five principles in the federal government’s Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Care, most of the provinces/territories had developed definitions of non-standard hours child care, there were a number of jurisdictions with non-standard hours specific regulations and several had financial and policy initiatives associated with non-standard hours child care.

As data about the supply of non-standard hours child care services across Canada were not available, Lero et al. calculated that most available non-standard hour care falls under the category of “slightly” non-standard—in other words, open a bit earlier or a bit later, and that overnight care is rare. They estimated that less than 2% of centres provide anything other than “slightly” non-standard care such as overnight care (2019: 106). Whether non-standard care is predominantly provided through family child care or centres depends on the province; Ontario, British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Manitoba provide non-standard care mainly through family child care and Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador and PEI primarily offer non-standard hours care in centres.

Providing non-standard hours care presents service providers with a number of hurdles without adequate government funding and policy support. Recent and previous research identify similar challenges that have persisted over time:

#### *Financing*

The operating costs of non-standard hour care are higher due to fluctuating use patterns (especially with flexible care), higher staffing and administrative costs and additional equipment and space costs. Enrollment may also be lower than provincially regulated ratios, due to fluctuating demand.

#### *Staffing*

The recruitment and retention challenges in ELCC generally are exacerbated when trying to find staff who want to work

early morning, evening, or overnight hours, while fluctuating numbers can mean irregular schedules for staff. To incentivize staff to work inconvenient hours, services may guarantee a minimum number of hours or pay premium wages for these times, both increasing the operating costs of non-standard care.

### *Administration*

Child care on flexible schedules generates substantial additional administrative work to communicate with families, manage families' child care schedules and organize staffing schedules, reported by service providers to be double the administration work compared to a standard hours program.

### *Flexibility*

Parents working non-standard hours often work unpredictable hours, so may need flexible child care, sometimes called "on demand". The flexible element is a key challenge for providers because the unpredictability of children's attendance and fluctuating use creates additional financial, staffing, scheduling and other administrative burdens (Lero et al., 2019; Halfon & Friendly, 2015; Gouvernement du Québec, 2002; Foster & Broad, 1998; Friendly, Cleveland & Willis, 1994).

Finally, Lero et al.'s (2019) recent analysis, consistent with other Canadian research on non-standard hours child care, concluded that additional funding and support, whether from unions, employer or public government funding has been key to their creation and sustainability. Successful centres are also often part of larger organizations or agencies and have experienced leadership teams.

## **Conclusion**

The context for this series of papers is Canada's new historic commitment to building a universal child care system. It argues that to build such a system, the challenge of limited, inequitable child care availability

must be tackled systemically using a publicly managed and planned approach based on greater public responsibility. As this paper has pointed out, there is no aspect of child care provision in which this is more apparent than non-standard hours child care.

Establishing and maintaining non-standard hours child care, which many parents in Canada need, has many challenges that deter individuals and private groups from developing it. In the new, universal, publicly funded child care environment to which the Government of Canada has committed, assuming public responsibility for ensuring that non-standard hours child care is established and maintained when and where it is needed has the potential for ensuring that these harder-to-deliver services become part of a more responsive child care reality.

## **Spotlights from across Canada**

The two case studies that follow illustrate how non-standard schedule child care programs can be created and sustained in Canada. The two examples are very different, but both highlight the importance of strong government support and ongoing communication and collaboration between government, child care programs and other community stakeholders.

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### **Seasonal child care in rural Prince Edward Island: Eastern Kings Early Childhood Academy**

Prince Edward Island has taken a decisive and active role in creating non-standard child care within the province. The provincial government recognized that the demand for non-standard hours child care would not be met under the current conditions faced by child care operators and took a leadership role to create more sustainable non-standard child care in the province.

When the federal government's Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care offered to provide transfer funds to provinces/territories to develop initiatives consistent with its principles of accessibility, affordability, quality, inclusivity and flexibility, PEI undertook to:

- Create spaces for children whose parents work non-standard hours and/or seasonally;
- Create up to five new Early Years Centres with a focus on serving these populations;
- Work with stakeholders and industry to identify flexible ELCC needs;
- License additional spaces for non-standard hours to serve these populations.

PEI used a community planning and development process aimed at creating child care to support families working non-standard hours and/or seasonally. PEI child care officials collaborated with public sector health care organizations that operate 24 hours seven days a week to identify their employees' child care needs and also provided funding to a community group to assess child care needs and make recommendations to the government more generally.

Eastern Kings Early Childhood Academy in Souris, PEI offers 58 spaces, providing care for 68 families, some part time. It is open 6:45 am until 5:30 pm. Flexibility is a key consideration for this centre in their rural setting; they work to accommodate families and their schedules as much as possible.

Eastern Kings Early Childhood Academy is one of PEI's Early Years Centres, receiving operational "unit" funding, and additional funding for its extended hours and seasonal spaces. As a seasonal program, they provide eight additional spaces for seasonal demand based on agriculture and the fishery. Generally, the seasonal employment means children must transition from part time to full time care in the busy months. The additional seasonal funding enables the centre to hire special needs consultants and additional staff during these months. In many cases, one of the main challenges facing non-standard hours' child care is staffing but this has not been an issue in Eastern Kings. The regular staff were happy to gain extra hours due to the seasonal extension of regular hours, although they are not offering harder-to-staff child care late at night, overnight, or on weekends.

The PEI initiative used several best practices for ELCC planning:

*Fit programs to community need*

In Prince Edward Island, research had shown non-standard hours work to be intertwined with seasonal working patterns in the province's fishing and agriculture industries. Therefore, they prioritized seasonal non-standard hours care (and associated funding) rather than other forms of non-standard hours child care that were not as needed in their communities, such as overnight care.

*Assess demand in multiple sectors*

As well as creating seasonal care for workers in the fishing and agriculture sectors, PEI also conducted a survey at 24 hours/seven days a week health care facilities across the province to identify the child care needs of their staff. They are also working with a funded community group exploring the gaps in access to child care that limit women's participation in the workforce more generally.

*Engage in ongoing collaboration with community*

The provincial government worked closely with the child care sector and broader community to ensure programs fit their needs and were sustainable. The licensed child care sector, employers, community organizations and parents were all regularly consulted and brought into the discussion about how to increase access to child care outside traditional work schedules.

*Connect programs to larger policy goals in early learning and care*

The initiative was designed to align with the larger goal of increasing access to child care across the province, meeting both parents' employment needs and children's development and well-being needs. Thus, the fee subsidy program was modified to allow eligible families to continue accessing their subsidy after their seasonal employment hours

ended allowing many children to access regulated child care for the first time, including children with disabilities whom may not have been included previously, directly tying into PEI's goal of meeting more children's development and well-being needs.

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### **YMCA of Greater Toronto: Emergency child care during the COVID-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated both the precarity and necessity of child care services across Canada. In the case of non-standard hours care, COVID-19 motivated several provinces to create or increase the supply of 24/7 or other non-standard hour child care to meet the needs of essential personnel in March and April 2020. From this experience, it is clear that non-standard hour care can be set up quickly and provided effectively when there is political will and adequate public resources.

During COVID-19, child care centres across Ontario were mandated to close March 17th 2020. The province then announced they would be funding an emergency child care program in which select centres were able to operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week. All these were to be completely free for eligible parents—those deemed to be “essential workers”. Municipalities as Local Service System Managers managed these programs, recruited the families and selected the service providers that would run the programs.

The YMCA of Greater Toronto Area is one of the largest providers of child care in Canada, with over 33,000 spaces in 300 centres across the Toronto area. During the COVID-19 pandemic, YMCA GTA opened 14 emergency child care programs across three municipalities,<sup>2</sup> which offered extended hours care—in some cases, 24 hour care—until the provincial funding ended June 26th 2020.

There were several factors that enabled this non-standard hour program to operate successfully during the pandemic:

<sup>2</sup> In Ontario, municipal entities are mandated as Local Service Managers, a municipal role that is unique to Ontario in Canada. See, in this paper series [How municipal roles in child care contribute to accessibility](#).

### *Robust funding*

There was significant interest from the provincial government that these programs open quickly and safely. There was agreement to provide financial support for full staffing (regardless of attendance numbers), and have a designated supervisor and cleaning staff on site at all times. Having maximum staff there at all times allowed parents total flexibility in their hours of care and made staff scheduling easier. The funding was integral to re-hiring hesitant staff in this unprecedented time: the YMCA offered everyone full-time hours with benefits, provided additional sick time, compensated for travel and increased all salaries by 30%.

### *Strong collaboration between government and providers*

The YMCA and the three municipalities they are located in worked together closely throughout the opening and running of the emergency child care centres. In Peel Region (where 10 of the centres were located), local government staff had virtual meetings with the YMCA team several times a week before their opening, and continued to check in regularly throughout the program. The government staff acted as a point person to assist the YMCA with all the licensing and regulatory hurdles to prepare for non-standard hours, and provide child care during a pandemic. This included expediting COVID-19 testing, liaising with the local fire department about the new 24-hour centre, and assisting with licensing changes.

### *Demand measuring, and tailoring hours to the local context*

The municipalities sent out a survey to families to understand the demand for different care hours. The survey helped set the hours of the 14 centres. It was determined that most communities did not actually have demand for overnight care. Only two centres ended up providing full 24-hour care, while

most provided extended hours until 8:00 pm or 9:00 pm, or in some cases, 1:00 am.

*High capacity organization*

The Greater Toronto YMCA is the largest non-profit provider of child care across Canada, and has a developed administrative model and large human resources and health and safety departments. Moreover, the YMCA operates under a federated model, in which local branches are independent but connected to other YMCA's across Canada. The YMCA was able to leverage their capacity and experienced leadership team to rapidly implement this new program, and share resources with other YMCA branches also running emergency care. Also, as a large and well known organization, they had a pre-existing relationship with municipalities and the provincial government, which supported strong communication channels.

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# MOVING FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC PROCESSES

A SERIES ON CREATING CHILD CARE IN CANADA

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Childcare Resource and Research Unit  
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## Publications in this series

- 1 [\*How child care services are created in Canada\*](#) (January 2022)
- 2 [\*Building capacity in the non-profit child care sector\*](#) (February 2022)
- 3 [\*How municipal roles in child care contribute to accessibility\*](#) (February 2022)
- 4 [\*How publicly delivered child care services contribute to accessibility\*](#)  
(February 2022)
- 5 [\*Assessing child care needs and forecasting demand\*](#) (March 2022)
- 6 [\*Developing non-standard hours child care\*](#) (March 2022)
- 7 [\*Using public buildings and public land to expand child care services\*](#)  
(Forthcoming)
- 8 [\*More than spaces: Creating universal child care in Norway\*](#) (Forthcoming)

## Series overview document

[\*Moving from private to public processes: A series on creating child care in Canada\*](#)