

## More than the sum of the parts: An early childhood development system for Canada

This summary is based on *More than the sum of the parts: An early childhood development system for Canada* (2000) by Jane Beach and Jane Bertrand, published by Childcare Resource and Research Unit, University of Toronto. It is available in print and on-line at <[www.childcarecanada.org](http://www.childcarecanada.org)>.

At the end of the twentieth century, early childhood education, child care and family support services are unevenly scattered across the Canadian early childhood landscape. Although in any given day, young children and their families may experience several of these programs, there is little coordination or integration among them. Instead, parents face a dizzying array of policies, funding arrangements, eligibility requirements and types of programs. Often parents who are trying both to balance work and family responsibilities and to meet the developmental needs of their children piece together a variety of arrangements. The nature and success of these arrangements varies by the availability of programs in the community, the parents' own financial resources and their particular work and family requirements. Children may be excluded from programs because their parents are not in the labour force, do not meet eligibility criteria or cannot afford the costs. The results are often unsatisfactory for parents and children.

Does this make sense? Could there be one integrated approach to children's early learning and care programs within a coherent policy framework? Should there be? Today most analyses take the position that a blended, coherent system of early learning and care services incorporating child care, early childhood education and family support services should be available for all children in every community.

For many policy-makers, in Canada at least, the idea that kindergarten, child care, "head start", parenting centres and family resource programs could or even *should* be integrated into the same policy framework and delivered as part of one blended program is a new and perhaps radical point of view.

### What are Early Child Development Programs?

Child care, kindergarten, "head start" programs, nursery schools, playgroups, family resource programs/parenting centres are all designed to meet families' and young children's needs, in part, at least. (N.B. These are sometimes called "early childhood care and education" or "early learning and care"). These services began as separate programs with different mandates — supports to parental employment, preparation for schooling, compensatory education for children at-risk, parent education, and social/peer interaction for young children. However, child care, early childhood education and family support programs are all components of early childhood development programs.

### Parents, Children and Early Childhood Programs

- **Ayesha:** Ayesha, who goes to kindergarten in the local public school in downtown Toronto every morning, goes home at lunchtime with a neighbour, a regulated family child care provider, who cares for five children in the afternoon. Her father picks her up at around 5:30.
- **Madeline:** Five-year-old Madeline goes to kindergarten in downtown Montreal; she stays all day, and after the kindergarten day is over, goes to the school-based child care centre until her father picks her up at 5:30.
- **Carmen:** Four-month-old Carmen lives in a small village near Halifax. Her mother is at home for the year on (partially) paid maternity leave. Carmen and her mother meet other parents and infants in a local church basement every Friday morning. The group grew out of a prenatal support group offered by the local public health department; each Friday, the parents set up a floor play space for the infants with equipment and play materials provided by the public health department. Her mother is unsure about what kind of child care arrangements she'll be able to make when she goes back to work.

- **Simon:** Three years old, Simon goes to a Calgary nursery school three mornings a week. His father works a night shift and his mother works at the shopping mall on Thursday and Friday nights and all day Saturdays but is home during the week. One parent is at home except for Friday night when Simon stays with his Grandma.
- **Carla:** Carla is a year old and goes to the child care centre at the university where her mom is getting her PhD. She is often there by 8:00 am and goes home with her dad or mom around 5:00 pm.
- **Elisheva:** Elisheva is a severely brain damaged four-year-old. She can sit only with support, cannot speak, and needs to be fed. For a year, she has been in a municipally-operated child care centre where a specially trained Resource Teacher provides the extra help that allows her to be part of her group. Her mother and father are both in the paid labour force.
- **Ian:** Three-year-old Ian's parents are both professionals working full-time. Almost every day, Ian goes to a child care centre run by a parent board. His special friends are Tyson, whose mom is struggling to move from welfare to work, Gazi, whose parents are both autoworkers, and Liam, a psychiatrist's son. Ian's parents believe that having friends from a wide range of ethnic and socio-economic groups is a valuable experience for their son.
- **Jessica:** Jessica, who is two-and-a-half, goes with her mother and younger brother to a family resource program two or three mornings a week. Sometimes her mother stays but occasionally she leaves Jessica and her brother for a couple of hours. The resource centre is run by the local Band Council and provides a MicMac-oriented program.

Ayesha, Simon, Carla, Ian, Elisheva, Carmen and Jessica are all in early child development settings. Although the funding, management, and administration of the programs differ, their daily activities are similar. If the settings are of high quality, all these children are exploring rich social and physical environments that support their healthy development.

In each of these settings, the physical environment is set up for children. Carla's infant room has a large open play area with lots of soft cushions and pillows. The wall is lined with a cruising rail for beginning walkers and there are low shelves with bright toys for shaking, poking, pushing and pulling. Jessica's favourite time at the family resource program is the circle time, when a staff or a parent reads stories from picture books and all the children and parents join in songs and child-centred activities. Ayesha's kindergarten, Simon's nursery school, Ian's and Elisheva's child care, and Carla's infant room have circle time too. Simon often plays in the dramatic play centre

at his nursery school; for Simon, like the children in the other settings, there are dress-up clothes and lots of dishes and pots and pans. Simon likes to pretend he is a busy chef at a big restaurant. Ayesha's and Madeline's kindergartens look a lot like Simon's nursery school. A favourite place for all is the art easel with its fresh pots of paint each day.

In each setting, adults both educate and care for each child as they build relationships that are both responsive and respectful to children's growing competence and abilities to cope. They make sure their needs for food, physical safety, sleep and toileting are met. These adults know that children are not isolated individuals but are part of families, and that support to those families is critically important. There are other children to play with in each setting; adults play a role in setting the stage and encouraging the play among the children.

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Children do not come to an early childhood program merely to do their "learning". Rather, they "live" in these settings for several — or many — hours each week. Just as they are learning at home when they discover how the flusher on the toilet works or how to use simple tools to fix things or how soothing it is to hear dad's voice sing them to sleep, each hour in an early learning and care program is filled with new information and experiences.

Most one-, two-, three- and four-year-old children in Canada, however, do not have access to high quality programs. If they are sufficiently disadvantaged, they may be able to attend one of a very few nursery or preschool programs aimed at giving them a "head start"; these are almost always part-day programs that make it difficult for parents to participate in the workforce. In order to participate in the workforce, many modest income families juggle schedules and make whatever arrangements they can afford for their children. If their families are low-income, they may be able to get a child care subsidy, and, if they are fortunate, find a space in a high quality child care program. Unlike kindergarten programs, which have long been recognized as important for children and worthy of public support but are usually only part-day, child care is still considered largely a private responsibility, requiring parents to buy what they can afford in the marketplace.

Overall, unless their parents can pay — most children have little opportunity to go to an early learning and care program until their fifth year when most Canadian children go to publicly-funded, half-day kindergarten.

## Why Early Childhood Services are Essential

Two imperatives push for an inclusive, comprehensive system of early child development programs for young children and their families. First, there has been a dramatic increase in the interest in and knowledge about the importance of early experiences for young children, and considerable research supports the efficacy of early learning and care services. Second, the structure of families and communities in 2000 has changed dramatically from 40 or 50 years ago when most children grew up in environments where fathers worked outside the home and were the chief breadwinners, and mothers were full-time homemakers. Today, a majority of Canadian children grow up with two parents who both work outside the home in the paid labour force or with a sole support mother who is in the workforce or training.

## Policy Incoherence

Over a century or more, Canadian early childhood programs have evolved as three main silos: child care, early childhood education and supports to parenting. Although observation of models for blended early childhood services in other countries has contributed to the understanding that children can be “cared for” and “educated” at one and the same time, the separate silos have, by and large, remained in place. Public policy that takes a holistic view of children’s and families’ needs by providing blended early learning and care programs does not exist in Canada as a whole or in most provinces. Early childhood development policy directions often contradict one another and conflict with the consistent message from research that an early child development system would benefit all young children.

## An Idea Whose Time has Come

When Canada first established itself as a nation, the value of education to individuals and to society was recognized. It was obvious that most individual families were unable to provide the opportunities that allow children to attain the necessary educational outcomes. Slowly, independent one-room schools supported by communities and private schools for the wealthy evolved into a public education system. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the public educa-

tion system ensured that all children aged seven to twelve years had the opportunity to attain an education necessary to meet society’s needs. Today, public education is compulsory from ages five or six years to 16 or 18 years.

Over the same time period, private colleges and universities for the wealthy evolved into a publicly supported post-secondary education system that now includes universities, community colleges and technical institutions. Post-secondary education opportunities are substantially publicly funded and are now widely available to Canadian youth to prepare them for participation in the labour force and citizenship in a democratic society.

As Canada enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a situation similar to that of public and post-secondary education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century exists for early childhood development services. It is now time to build a system that knits together the array of program fragments and ensures that every child has the opportunity to attain optimal early childhood development outcomes that are appropriate to his or her abilities.

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Although families have the primary responsibility for their own children, today there is wide agreement that they need systematic support from society as a whole. At the same time, the design of an early childhood development system assumes the existence of other systems of support: an equitable taxation and income support system, a quality physical and mental health care system, maternity and parental leave benefits, and effective child welfare systems.

## Vision into Action

Canada needs an integrated early childhood development system that provides community-based services for all children and their families. This system would be a first tier of support for the period of development from conception to six years that is followed by public schooling and post-secondary education. A coherent early childhood development system would pull together the fragments of early childhood education, child care and parent/caregiver support services and initiatives. These programs would be flexible enough to meet diverse family needs and sensitive to diverse cultural and linguistic values and practices.

Canadian federal-provincial/territorial arrangements now codified in the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFSA)

demand that Ottawa and the provinces/territories work together as partners and that dual participation is required for any new national initiative. This is a fundamental change from the federal government's previous role in developing social programs such as health care, pension plans or employment insurance. The federal government can support an overarching national policy framework designed in partnership with the provincial and territorial governments for an early childhood development system. Each province or territory can establish its own service infrastructure and determine the operating framework for early childhood development programs in that jurisdiction.

The overarching framework should be based on knowledge available from current practice and research to create environments for young children that are effective in supporting optimal early development within the context of today's social and economic realities. While the federal government cannot dictate the terms of such a framework to the provinces and territories, SUFA suggests that the appropriate mechanism would be for the two levels of government to develop a set of principles to guide the use of funds. Guiding principles based on best knowledge available from practice and research would include: *Comprehensiveness, Universal Availability and Accessibility; Integration; High Quality; Accountability; Community Delivery.*

It will be a formidable task to transform this vision into action. There are at least two significant challenges. First, without the incentive of a sizeable federal financial contribution, it will be difficult to convince the provinces to negotiate an agreement that matches the vision. And, second, while there is clear agreement on a broad vision, much less agreement exists on the components and structure of an early childhood development system. A clear and coherent plan for implementation with targets and timetables is essential. And, finally, a strong show of political leadership from the federal and from at least a few provincial/territorial governments is critical to a successful agreement on an early childhood system — and then to its implementation. ●

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