
■ THE STATE OF ECEC IN CANADA IN 2005: AN OVERVIEW

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN CANADA: THE CURRENT STATE

Currently, each of Canada's 14 jurisdictions – 10 provinces, three territories and the federal government – has its own approach to early childhood education and care (or early learning and child care). Each has a number of programs for “care” and “education” as well as for meeting other objectives such as ameliorating the effects of poverty and supporting parents.

Each of the provinces and territories has a provincial program of regulated child care that usually encompasses nursery or preschools, centre-based full-day child care and regulated family child care. The provincial child care programs provide legislated requirements for operation of services and a variety of kinds of funding arrangements, usually under a social or community services ministry. Provincial/territorial governments also have responsibility for public kindergartens that in most jurisdictions are part-time for five year olds under ministries of education. Generally, kindergarten programs for five year olds (or fours in Ontario) are a public responsibility while “care” and early childhood education for children younger than age five is assumed to be a private, family responsibility. In addition to these provincial/territorial programs, there are a variety of care and education programs – for example, Aboriginal Head Start and the Child Care Expense Deduction – that are under the aegis of the federal government.

These programs – regulated child care and kindergarten – supplemented by family resource programs (primarily intended to support parents), an assortment of cash payments and complemented by maternity and parental leave constitute ECEC (or early learning and child care) in Canada.

Between the mid-1990s and 2001, the proportion of children aged six months to five years who were in child care increased significantly while more child care-using families shifted to child care centres and relatives.¹ In 2005, most of the more than 70% of children with both parents (or a single parent) in the paid labour force were presumed to be in child care that was not regulated. These arrangements are sometimes provided by a relative, or by an unregulated family child care provider or in-home caregiver.

The range, quality and access to early childhood education and care services and access to them vary enormously by region and circumstances. Organized ECEC services across Canada are in short supply or – like public kindergarten – not labour-force sensitive. Regulated child care is usually too costly for ordinary families or not high quality enough to be “developmental”. Young school-aged children may be alone after school or attend recreation or other community programs that are not intended to provide “care”.

No region of Canada yet provides a system of well-designed and funded early childhood education and care services to meet the needs of a majority of families and children.

HISTORY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

The history of early childhood education and care in Canada began in the mid-18th century. Kindergartens were preceded by infant schools that developed in the first half of the 1800s in several provinces to offer care and instruction to

¹ Child care, 1996-2001. (2005). *The Daily*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/050207/d050207b.htm>

poor children. The first private kindergartens – motivated by the idea that children benefit from formal education and then influenced by the thinking of the time about the importance of education in early childhood – began to appear and, in cities and larger towns, were commonplace by the end of the 1870s.

The kindergarten movement soon moved beyond its first middle and upper class clientele as private kindergartens spread across Canada. These included “free kindergartens” run by missionary and charitable groups which began to be used as a tool for social reform and as a way of assimilating immigrant children.² Following right on the heels of the first similar programs in the United States, the first Canadian public kindergarten opened in the Toronto Board of Education in 1883. Influenced by the work of European educational specialists like Pestalozzi and Froebel, the Ontario kindergartens were recognized officially in 1885 and were funded by the province two years later.³ Intended for three to five year olds and full day, by 1900 there were kindergartens in towns and villages across Ontario.

Some of the early kindergartens were apparently used – in part, at least – as “care” programs. As Toronto’s public-school kindergartens were becoming more widespread, some were opened to look after children while their mothers were employed. Even before this, however, there were some “care” programs in Montreal, Toronto and, by 1920, in Halifax, Ottawa, Winnipeg, Vancouver and other cities. Some of these accommodated infants. Throughout this period, these early childhood services were developed and run by charitable – mostly women’s – groups.

While there was organized child care in a number of Canada’s provinces early in the 1900s, there was little government involvement until World War II. A 1942 Order-in-Council established the Dominion-Provincial-War-time Agreement, the first federal intervention in organized child care. It offered 50% cost sharing to assist provinces to provide child care for children whose mothers were working in essential war industries. Only Ontario and Quebec participated in this agreement. After the war, the federal government withdrew its support and all six of the Quebec child care centres, and many of Ontario’s, closed.

Following World War II, the federal government’s role in child care in the modern era was mostly indirect and limited. Nevertheless, its second foray into child care in 1966 had an important impact on the way it has developed since that time. The Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), the national welfare program, was introduced in 1966 to ameliorate or prevent poverty. Through the child care provisions of CAP, the Government of Canada entered into cost sharing agreements with the provinces for welfare services including child care. For the purpose of 50-50 cost sharing, CAP treated child care like other welfare services and established federal conditions for cost sharing. These conditions stipulated that federal funds were available to pay only for services for needy, or potentially needy, families, and that to be eligible for funding as a welfare service, child care had to be regulated and public or not-for-profit.⁴ The design of CAP meant that federal funds were used almost exclusively for fee subsidies for families who were income- or means-tested to determine eligibility.⁵

As social services are a provincial responsibility in Canada, the provinces were not compelled to participate. However, although it took a decade for them all to begin to use CAP’s child care provisions, eventually all the provinces cost shared their eligible child care costs through CAP. CAP thus began to spur the development of child care services throughout Canada and to shape their evolution throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The residual approach to funding meant that regulated child care emerged as a welfare – rather than a universal or educational – service.

But as mothers with young children entered the paid labour force in growing numbers, middle class families also began to use child care centres that usually served both subsidized and fee paying families. Although there were always difficulties with the limited funding arrangements, the supply of regulated child care services grew dramatically throughout Canada as most of the provinces developed and refined service delivery, regulation and funding in the 1970s and 1980s.

2 Prochner, L. (2000). A history of early education and child care in Canada, 1820-1966. In Prochner, L. and Howe, N. (Eds). *Early childhood education and care in Canada*: 11-65. Vancouver: UBC Press.

3 Mathien, J. (2001). *Children, families and institutions in the late 19th and early 20th century Ontario*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

4 CAP’s other route allowed child care costs in for-profit services to be cost-shared for eligible means-tested families as an “item of assistance”.

5 It should be noted that the Canada Assistance Plan was ended by the federal government in 1996 and has not been replaced by a national welfare program.

In 1971, parental out-of-pocket child care expenses were allowed as a tax deduction under The Income Tax Act and maternity benefits for eligible new mothers were included under The Unemployment Insurance Act.

In 1970, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women called for a National Day-Care Act, the first national recognition of child care as part of the growing recognition of women's equality. The provinces – beginning with Quebec in 1979 – began to provide funds other than fee subsidies to child care centres to reduce operating costs or to improve wages. Community demand for a national child care program – led by the growing feminist movement – swelled throughout the 1980s.

At the same time – separated conceptually, administratively and programmatically from “care”, public kindergarten was established in almost every province and territory, becoming an entitlement in most jurisdictions so that by the mid 1980s, most Canadian five year olds and (in Ontario, four year olds) were enrolled in public, mostly part-day kindergarten programs.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN THE 1980s AND 1990s

Between 1984 and 1995, there were three significant attempts to develop a national approach to child care as successive federal governments announced that a national strategy for child care would be developed. Each of these – the Task Force on Child Care set up by the Trudeau government (1984), the Special Committee on Child Care of the Mulroney government (1986), and the initiative based on Jean Chretien's 1993 Red Book election commitment – was initiated by a federal government. Each recognized the primacy of the provinces in social or educational services such as child care. However, none of these efforts was successful in producing a pan-Canadian strategy or approach to early childhood education and care.

In the mid 1990s, Canada's political arrangements (which had historically featured tensions between federal and provincial roles) tilted toward provincial domination. This shift very much impacted the future of early childhood education and care. During this period, the Canada Assistance Plan was abolished (1996) and all federal dollars for provincial health, education and welfare programs were subsumed in a block fund, the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST).⁶ Social policy experts feared that without conditions like those that had been part of the CAP agreement, provincial spending of the substantially reduced federal dollars in the CHST would become less accountable either to the federal government or the public. A debate about what was termed “social policy renewal” arose in a climate of anxiety about Quebec separation and the fiscal deficit. This was formalized in February 1999 as the federal government and the nine provinces comprising “the rest of Canada” outside Quebec signed the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA). These features of politics vis-à-vis Canadian federalism continue to play a key role in the development of a national early learning and child care program in 2005.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR ECEC

That Canada's government is a federal system is key in how responsibilities for ECEC are defined. The division of powers between federal and provincial governments was originally defined in the Constitution Act of 1867 and has evolved over the years. The Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA) agreement of 1999 currently shapes Canada's social policy.⁷

With few exceptions, ECEC services – child care, nursery schools, kindergarten – like health, social services, and elementary, secondary and post-secondary education – are under the jurisdiction of provinces and territories. Each of Canada's 10 provinces and three territories has developed a program of regulated child care and – except in Prince Edward Island where kindergarten is part of regulated child care centres – a separate public kindergarten program.

Canadian municipalities do not have powers assigned by constitutional arrangements but are rather subordinate to the provinces which delegate powers including taxing powers to them. Outside Ontario – where they play several important

⁶ In 2004, the CHST was divided into the CHT (health) and the CST (social) .

⁷ See CRRU Issue File *The Social Union Framework Agreement: Issues in Canadian Policymaking*
http://action.web.ca/home/crru/rsrscs_crru_full.shtml?x=62287

roles in child care (funding, operation of services [about 10% of regulated child care services] and policy-setting) – municipal /regional governments generally have no role in regulated child care, although the City of Vancouver has adopted a key role. Local school boards (or school divisions) – also subordinate to provincial governments – usually have primary responsibility for operation of elementary school, including kindergarten.

“The community” and parent users are an important part of Canadian ECEC. At the service delivery level, the bulk of the supply of regulated child care is initiated and maintained by parent and/or voluntary boards of directors; these child care programs comprise most of the non-profit child care sector which represents about 80% of the total supply. Otherwise parents generally have little specific role in regulated child care, although the bulk of child care services is paid for by parent fees; a national study in 1998 found that an average of 49.2% of revenue for full-day child care centres came from parent fees.

In most parts of Canada, advocacy, professional and service groups, and, to some extent, organized parent groups where they exist, make up what is often called “the child care community”. These groups are important providers of services like professional development and in-service training.

In addition, advocacy for more and better child care – and now ECEC – has been a visible feature of the Canadian ECEC landscape for decades. Alliances with other groups with an interest in ECEC – the labour movement, anti-poverty activists, feminists and other sectors – have long been a fundamental element of Canadian advocacy for child care.

SERVICE OVERVIEW

Most of Canada’s ECEC programs are under provincial jurisdiction. Generally, regulated child care includes centres, usually (except in Quebec, Saskatchewan and the Yukon) nursery schools or preschools (part-day centre-based programs) and regulated family child care under the same legislation. Almost all jurisdictions now require at least some of the staff working in child care with children to have some training in early childhood education; however, Canadian requirements for early childhood training are acknowledged to be less than adequate.

All jurisdictions subsidize some or all of the costs in regulated child care for low-income parents. However, in most cases, limitations on the number of these subsidies exclude many eligible parents; in other cases, the subsidy provided doesn’t cover the whole fee; sometimes there is a significant gap between the subsidy rate and the parent fee. Some provinces also provide funds to support the overall operation of child care services; this may be in the form of wage grants to raise staff wages. Overall, though, except in Quebec, child care is primarily a fee-paying service in Canada with many families not able to access services due to costs. Only Quebec has set out goals for child care and designated substantial public funding.

All of the provinces and territories also provide public kindergarten. In almost all cases kindergarten is part of the public education system and in most jurisdictions it is an entitlement. All provinces/territories provide kindergarten for five year olds; in Ontario, most school boards offer universal four year old kindergarten too. Most kindergarten is part-day or part-time with three provinces offering full-day kindergarten. Attendance at kindergarten is compulsory in several jurisdictions; however, almost all age-eligible children attend public kindergartens when they are offered. Three provinces and the territories maintain more than one publicly funded school system (public and Catholic). All offer kindergarten in both official languages where population warrants. Some regions such as Nunavut provide kindergarten in regional First Nations or Inuit languages.

Generally, there is little connection between kindergarten programs and regulated child care services at either the policy or service delivery level. In some provinces, Ontario for example, there are many child care centres located in schools; in Toronto, a pilot project, First Duty, has integrated child care and kindergarten more programmatically. Except in Quebec where school-aged child care (including for five year olds) is under the aegis of the Ministère de l’Éducation, child care services are usually not the responsibility of the education system but are operated by community boards of directors, other institutions or organizations or by for-profit operators. School-based child care often serves school-aged children but other age groups, including infants and toddlers, may be served in school locations also.

Provincial/territorial ECEC programs are covered in more detail in the individual section for each jurisdiction and in the Big Picture and Long View tables. ECEC services for Aboriginal communities and those under federal aegis are described in subsequent sections.

