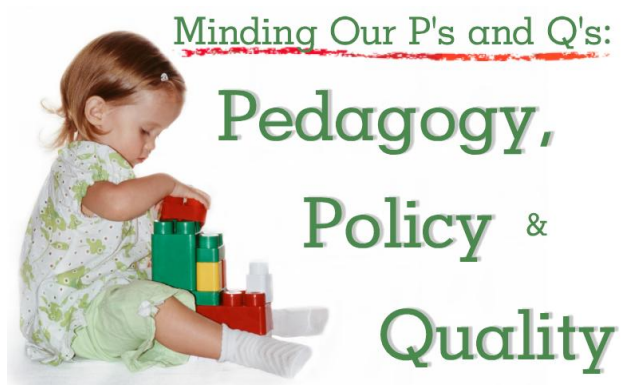


The Best of All Worlds:

A Community Vision for Early Learning and Child Care in Canada

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Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada
151 Slater Street, Suite 714, Ottawa ON, K1P 5H3
(613) 594-3196 / 1-877-261-1342
www.ccaac.ca



Background and Purpose

The *Pedagogy, Policy, and Quality* project builds on the CCAAC's 25 years of work and commitment to the development of effective public policy for early learning and child care (ELCC)¹. More recently, the importance of this project work was emphasized by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in its international thematic review of early childhood education and care. The OECD review of 23 countries resulted in the 2006 release of *Starting Strong II*², a report that identified Canada as the only country without a clearly articulated vision for early learning and child care – technically, a pedagogical/curricular framework.

A vision that outlines what a system of early learning and child care services can achieve for Canadian children, families and communities is essential - without this foundation, how can we develop coordinated policy, allocate public funds appropriately, and measure our progress? This project seeks to advance Canada's vision for early learning and child care by supporting a broad-based dialogue on pedagogy, policy and quality in early learning and child care.

Approach

This project was carried out using three inter-related approaches:

- 1. Community consultations** - the CCAAC engaged in broad community consultations throughout our network which reaches about four million Canadians. Our work permeates many sectors: parents, early childhood educators, researchers, academics, the women's movement, the health sector, the anti-poverty movement, governments at all levels and aboriginal peoples, to name but a few. Throughout the duration of the project we asked at every opportunity: what is your vision for early learning and child care in Canada? We expanded on this question as we presented at national and regional conferences; on panel presentations at local libraries; in large groups and small groups across the country; at meetings with government representatives; and over coffee sitting on small chairs in child care centres. We asked for comments to be submitted online; we hosted workshops where we engaged in written visioning exercises; and we recorded public views in multiple ways. Parents, who arguably have the greatest stake in the process, were invited to submit comments and share their views.
- 2. Expert consultations** - both Canadian and international researchers and academics with significant expertise in the field were involved through consultations and by sharing research, presentations, and resources.
- 3. Literature review** – our review of the international literature helped us learn from the approaches in other countries, while our review of information and approaches to early learning and child care within Canada helped us understand the diversity, the disparity and the similarities from coast to coast to coast. Highlights of our literature review and related resources are posted on the project website for public access (www.ccaac.ca).

The project was guided by a pan-Canadian steering committee to ensure the diverse views and experiences in each region of Canada, including those of special populations, were included.

1. The abbreviated term "ELCC" used throughout project documents refers to early learning and child care, consistent with Canada's Multilateral Framework Agreement and is meant to convey the range of services for preschool children, referred to by the OECD as early childhood education and care (ECEC).

2. OECD. *Starting strong II: Early childhood education and care*. Paris, France: OECD; 2006.

Findings

The evidence, both at home and abroad, overwhelmingly affirms that early learning and child care offers multiple benefits to children, families and society. Access to quality child care services promotes health, advances women's equality, helps reduce child poverty, and deepens social inclusion in communities. Furthermore, economic studies have repeatedly shown that the multi-generational benefits of focused, accountable investments in child care services outweigh the costs by at least 2 to 1 and even more for disadvantaged populations.

Yet despite (or perhaps because of) the multiple inter-sectoral benefits provided by early learning and child care, Canada has failed to clearly articulate a comprehensive vision that outlines our goals for young children's healthy development and family support, from which a defined direction for policy development would flow. Governments in Canada have increased investments directed to early childhood development, including early learning and child care, since 2000/01. However, without a comprehensive and integrated vision for children and families, the approaches taken to date across most of the country reinforce the patchwork of services that are delivered through various ministries with a range of mandates, goals and infrastructure.

While quality early learning and child care services provide benefits to Canadians along multiple dimensions, it seems that Canada struggles to incorporate more than one dimension of early learning and child care into its goal-setting and resulting public policy.

For example, although the research confirms that young children's care and education cannot and should not be separated, some provinces focus primarily on the healthy child development/early learning dimension. This approach does not promote a complete vision; it leads to the provision of parenting resources and part-day programs that – while important – don't address the needs of families who work or study, nor do they provide integrated, seamless services for children of working families.

Other provinces have continued to focus on alleviating poverty, enhancing social inclusion and/or supporting workforce attachment through targeted early learning and child care programs, but these programs also 'miss the mark' in many ways. The incomplete vision promoted here is targeted and/or labour force attachment oriented, resulting in programs that often lack the funding required to ensure high quality developmental programming for children. As a result, access to quality affordable early learning and child care programs remains out of reach for most families – including many that this targeted approach is actually trying to reach. Further, research repeatedly shows that targeted approaches to early learning and child care are ineffective because children's vulnerability spans the socioeconomic spectrum.

It is important to note that some provinces have attempted to incorporate the comprehensive policy recommendation of the OECD calling for an integrated approach to supporting children and families. Broad-based, Cabinet- or senior executive-level committees representing several ministries have been developed in some provinces. However, the results on the ground are still fragmented because we have not achieved a holistic, integrated and universal vision of healthy early child development and parent support.

Our public education systems provide a close to home example of how a holistic vision of older children's care and education leads to a universal, publicly funded system that entitles all children to education and care services starting at age five, irrespective of their parents income levels or work status.

But when it comes to younger children, Canada has by and large left their care and education to the marketplace. As a result, and relative to our peer nations in Europe, Canadian services are inaccessible, unaffordable and of inconsistent quality. Furthermore, the fragility of child care services in Canada makes us vulnerable to foreign takeover by publicly-traded companies who may capitalize on the high demand for services, but whose business model is not compatible with governments' existing commitments to improving access to quality, affordable early learning and child care services.

Recommendations

Canadians are fed up with the patchwork of fragmented services and expressed a clear desire to develop a *system* that simultaneously meets all the goals for early learning **and** child care.

Canadians repeatedly pointed out the inefficiencies of existing programs that serve one set of needs while ignoring others. For example, part-day programs designed to support healthy child development and learning not only fail to meet the needs of many parents who are employed or going to school, but often complicate their lives unnecessarily as they struggle to make arrangements to move children from one program to another. Making better use of existing facilities – for example kindergartens, pre-kindergartens, HeadStart programs, and preschools – to expand their hours and operations to meet the needs of parents who need additional care hours for their children is one way to start.

Canadians from coast to coast to coast are clear on their vision for early learning and child care services. They must:

- ❖ Be of **high quality**, delivering developmental programming that supports children to learn and develop in a loving play-filled environment;
- ❖ Be **affordable** to ensure that every child has the option to participate, regardless of their parents' ability to pay, just like public schools;
- ❖ Be **adequately, publicly and directly funded**, ensuring that funds are used both to improve children's daily experiences and to ensure that the early childhood workforce is well-educated, trained and compensated;
- ❖ Be **available** in every community, meeting the needs of parents' work schedules, daily and seasonally, as well as those who choose to participate on a part-time or casual basis;
- ❖ Be **accessible** for families with diverse needs and from diverse cultures;
- ❖ Be **planned, owned and delivered by communities** to ensure long-term stability of services that meet community priorities, as well as integration with other community services to ensure provision of resources to parents, children with diverse abilities, special populations, and a smooth transition to formal school.

We can do better – in fact, we can have the best of all worlds. One comprehensive system can meet multiple goals cost-effectively and simultaneously offer a range of choices for young children and their families in a range of settings - part-time, full-time, centre-based, family-based, community hub models, etc. A comprehensive, holistic vision does not specify where the child is, but rather that wherever the child is – at home or in the community – their experiences support healthy child development while parents are supported in all of their roles.