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The Changing Landscape

There are many changes currently affecting the child and family system in Toronto. These changes are unfolding at a municipal, provincial, and community level. At the same time, advancements within the broader social context are helping to shape new ways of thinking about child and family well-being. This section explores Children's Services' role in advancing and responding to the changing landscape.

influences on the system

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES



Engagement with diverse stakeholders including families, service providers, and the broader community provided critical feedback and profoundly influenced the direction for the next five years.

BROADER SOCIAL CONTEXT

Many issues and trends unfold simultaneously on local, national, and international stages. These issues – such as quality and vulnerability – impact the sector at a systemic level, and inform Children’s Services’ policies and best practices.



PROVINCIAL POLICY

Provincial policy and legislation is driving significant change in the child and family sector. As the service system manager, Children’s Services implements provincial policy in Toronto in a way that best meets local needs.

CHILD & FAMILY SYSTEM

MUNICIPAL POLICY

Many city-wide strategies and policy initiatives impact the lives of children and families in Toronto. Children’s Services plays an important role in championing the interests of children and families in the development and implementation of these strategies.



STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

In the process of developing this Service Plan, Children's Services heard from a range of diverse stakeholders: from families and children to our many partners in the child and family service sector. Stakeholders' priorities are both universal and distinct. As a result, Children's Services' approach to meeting the needs of children and families must be both broad and targeted.

On the one hand, many of the recommendations we heard were specific to the needs of a particular group or population – i.e. newcomer, LGBTQ, and French-language families. This confirmed that the best approach for building diversity and inclusivity into the system is to develop parallel yet distinct strategies that acknowledge and address the unique experience of each community. At the same time, there were common themes related to accessibility, communication, and integration that resonated across different stakeholders' priorities. These included:

- Affordability, availability, and quality of child care
- Multiple waitlists and fees
- Seamless transitions between services
- Accessible information about services
- Ongoing communication and engagement with families and service providers
- Well-paid and trained staff
- A cohesive and coordinated service system

To read the full report on our stakeholder engagement process, visit: toronto.ca/children/serviceplan.

★ Many new actions reflect stakeholder feedback, including specific actions: 7 (pg. 56); 14 (pg. 57); 15 (pg. 57); 16 (pg. 58)

ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Through independent engagement with the Aboriginal community, it was determined that the main priority was the need to build cultural capacity across the child and family system. Outside of Aboriginal-specific programs, Aboriginal families don't see themselves reflected in the system. They indicated that every step of the process of gaining access to child care – from outreach to intake to special needs support – should promote and reflect Aboriginal cultures. Other recommendations included:

- “Navigators” to engage and support Aboriginal families
- Cultural considerations related to families' eligibility for fee subsidy
- Voluntary Aboriginal self-identification in a sensitive and positive way
- Home child care options

★ See actions 11 (pg. 57); 12 (pg. 57); 18 (pg. 58)



STRONG NEIGHBOURHOODS STRATEGY

The Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020 identified 31 “Neighbourhood Improvement Areas” (NIAs) across Toronto for targeted investment and support. In each NIA, the City will: work with residents and community organizations to deliver and integrate services; address neighbourhood priorities; and work with other funders and businesses to bring in new investments.^{xx} Child care and family support programs are meeting places where families come together, build networks, and connect to the community. Children’s Services will work with NIAs to align child and family services with local planning objectives, increase access to child care spaces and fee subsidies, and build community capacity. We will engage marginalized and hard-to-reach communities in order to better understand and respond to their needs.

★ See action 2 (pg. 56)



In building a child and family system in Toronto, we are moving toward outcomes-based policy and planning. Outcomes describe the desired improvements in the overall well-being of children and families. Outcomes-based policy is important for two reasons. It is evidence-based, drawing on data and research to monitor and understand changes in population well-being over time. Secondly, it articulates a set of common goals that service providers can work towards collaboratively. In partnership with the Toronto Child and Family Network, Children’s Services facilitated a community-driven process to develop 10 outcomes for Toronto – five child outcomes and five family outcomes.^{xxi} These outcomes will be monitored using common indicators and reported to the public regularly. Over the next five years, these outcomes will be used to inform policy and strategic planning, and to evaluate and improve services for children and families.

★ See actions 19 (pg. 58); 35 (pg. 60)

HUMAN SERVICES INTEGRATION

The Human Services Integration Project is a partnership between three City Divisions: Toronto Children's Services, Shelter, Support & Housing Administration, and Toronto Employment & Social Services. The project is focused on the delivery of three income support programs: child care fee subsidies, rent geared to income housing subsidies, and Ontario Works. Over 200,000 Toronto residents access these programs every year, and many access more than one program, often at the same time. Common functions, like application and intake, will be integrated and simplified, to better meet the needs of residents, improve their service experience, and create more time for staff to work with individuals and families.

★ See action 32 (pg. 60)



POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY

One in four children in Toronto lives below the low income measure. Interventions and supports geared towards the early years – including child care and other family services – are proven to alleviate the impacts of poverty on children's quality of life, and help to break the cycle of poverty in the long-term. Addressing child and family poverty is crucial to any poverty reduction strategy.^{xxii} City Council committed to developing a Poverty Reduction Strategy in April 2014. In addition, the Province released an updated Poverty Reduction Strategy for 2014-2019. Children's Services will work with other divisions to develop and implement initiatives that align with provincial and municipal objectives and that will meet the needs of children and families.

★ See action 9 (pg. 57)



TORONTO NEWCOMER STRATEGY

In Toronto, 14 per cent of children from newborn to age 14 are newcomers. Newcomer families face unique and complex barriers to accessing services. The Toronto Newcomer Strategy is designed to improve newcomer settlement through the advancement of a seamless, accessible, and collaborative service system. Child and family services play a vital role in supporting newcomer families as they settle in Toronto. Child care is often the first step for families to access employment, training, and other services.^{xxiii} Family Support programs help them to build social support networks and tap into other community resources. Further, research has shown the many benefits of infusing cultural and linguistic diversity into children's programs.^{xxiv} Children's Services continues to work with the Toronto Newcomer Office to ensure that families can access and navigate meaningful services that are diverse and responsive to their needs.

★ See actions 15 (pg. 57); 16 (pg. 58)

The Urban Aboriginal Framework (UAF) brings together community aspirations and City responsibilities, including a Statement of Commitment to the Aboriginal Communities of Toronto adopted by City Council in July 2010.^{xxv} Children's Services works to fulfill the commitments made in the statement by engaging in collaborative planning with the Aboriginal Advisory and Planning Committee of the Child and Family Network. We continue to build cultural competency within the division and the broader child and family sector, and work to strengthen the capacity of the Toronto Public Service and our Aboriginal partners to meet the needs of the community together.

★ See actions 12 (pg. 57); 18 (pg. 58)



ONTARIO EARLY YEARS POLICY FRAMEWORK

The 2013 *Ontario Early Years Policy Framework* provides strategic direction to all early years partners in the province. It envisions a system that is integrated, responsive, and high quality. As the service system manager, Children's Services applies the framework in a way that makes sense for Toronto. The framework includes key initiatives discussed below.

Legislative Changes

The *Day Nurseries Act* was first introduced in 1946, and licensing standards have not been comprehensively reviewed since 1983. The *Child Care Modernization Act, 2014*, passed in December 2014, updates the legislative framework governing child care by repealing the *Day Nurseries Act* and replacing it with the *Child Care and Early Years Act*. Among other things, the new legislation strengthens the role of the service system manager, and amends the *Education Act* to provide out-of-school-time programs for school-age children in schools where there is demand. It also recognizes the need for age-appropriate programming for older children that may not be licensed child care. Children's Services acknowledges that change will require transitions for child care programs, which will take time, support, and collaboration.

★ See actions 5 (pg. 56); 31 (pg. 60)

Child and Family Centres (CFCs)

Child and Family Centres (CFCs) are a way of organizing services to be simpler, more coordinated, and better integrated. While some commitments were made in the *Ontario Early Years Policy Framework*, Children's Services anticipates further direction from the Province on CFCs. In the meantime, we are working with the Child and Family Network and three model "sites of practice" to develop a shared concept of CFCs that meets community needs. We have consistently identified the importance of municipal authority in planning and managing a more integrated child and family system. This should include responsibility for CFCs, Ontario Early Years Centres, and associated resources like Data Analysis Coordinators.

★ See actions 27, 28 (pg. 59)

How Does Learning Happen? (HDLH)

In April 2014, the Province introduced a new resource to guide pedagogy for early years programs called, *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years*. Building on the principles of Early Learning for Every Child Today, the guide is a professional learning resource for anyone working with young children and their families. *HDLH* focuses on how children, families, and educators interact and learn from each other, citing research that demonstrates that children in high-quality programs with supportive relationships are happier and more motivated to learn. Children's Services will work with early years programs across the city to help them integrate the practices and goals of HDLH.

★ See action 8 (pg. 56)

SPECIAL NEEDS & MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGIES

Families of children with special needs often face challenges in accessing the right services. Two Provincial strategies are addressing these challenges. *Putting it All Together: A Strategy for Special Needs Services that Make Sense for Families* promises a new developmental screen for children before they enter school; new Service Planning coordinators for children and youth with complex special needs; and more integrated rehabilitation services. *Moving On Mental Health: A system that makes sense for children and youth* aims to increase and simplify access to mental health services for children and youth as well as their families. As these strategies are implemented, they will redefine the role of service delivery agencies and the way in which families access supports. Children's Services will help local agencies to incorporate these changes so that families are well-equipped to take advantage of them.

★ See action 10 (pg. 57)



School boards are key partners in delivering early years services. The *Child Care and Early Years Act* solidifies the importance of the relationship between the City and school boards. Now that child care is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, this relationship will continue to grow. Children's Services works with all four Toronto school boards to plan capital investments, coordinate program development, and implement provincial initiatives. There have been a number of recent successes through City-school board partnerships. For example, implementation of the Provincial Schools-First Child Care Capital Retrofit Policy will result in a substantial increase in child care spaces for the early years.

At the same time, we know from community stakeholders that there are opportunities to further improve this relationship that will lead to more successful programs and partnerships on the ground. Key areas for improvement include: shared space; capital development; professional learning; and transitions for children with special needs. Clarifying expectations, processes, and roles with each school board will also lead to more effective planning. Currently, Children's Services is working with the Child and Family Network to update and consolidate "Working Together" documents that were first produced in 2005. An updated "Working Together" document will use what we have learned over the last 10 years to provide guidance on enhancing relationships and environments in school settings for the benefit of the children.

★ See actions 20 (pg. 58); 31 (pg. 60)

Lack of access to affordable high-quality child care affects the majority of families across Canada. International organizations such as UNICEF^{xxvi} and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development^{xxvii} have drawn attention to Canada's poor performance in terms of the availability and affordability of child care. Sector experts, professionals, and families have long advocated for a national child care system that would meet families' needs and lift us to a higher international standard.^{xxviii} This would contribute to higher levels of employment, economic prosperity, and equitable determinants of health, education, and social inclusion nation-wide. All levels of government have a role in the planning, funding, and provision of child care. A national policy framework – accompanied by sustainable and predictable funding – would promote a cohesive and equitable child care system. Children's Services continues to support national child care initiatives that support the well-being of children and families across the country.

★ See action 30 (pg. 60)

The concept of vulnerability is unfolding at an international, academic, and municipal level. In recent City Council decisions, the term “vulnerability” has evolved to include many challenges, barriers, and precarious situations an individual or community might face. In consultation with the community, the City has defined vulnerability as “a service gap, context or situation, not a characteristic or feature of a person.”^{xxxi} Factors that contribute to vulnerability may include poverty, structural inequality, discrimination, geographic location, and limited social and personal supports. Throughout our engagement process, stakeholders identified many challenges that families face, and identified steps that Children's Services can take to remove barriers and alleviate vulnerability, including inclusive policies and operational practices.

★ See strategic direction 2 (pg. 57)

broader social context

Thanks to local and international research, there is compelling evidence to illustrate the developmental benefits of child care, family support, and other early learning programs. However, programs are only effective for child development if they are high quality.^{xxix} In this way, universal quality is an equity issue, helping to reduce intergenerational poverty and promote equal educational, economic, and social outcomes for all children.^{xxx} Our understanding of what constitutes quality is constantly evolving. While pedagogy is one of the most important factors, there are also structural components of how services and programs are delivered, as well as socio-economic and cultural considerations. Our concept of quality is informed by global advancements in the field. Children's Services regularly engages in research with academics and community experts to advance a robust discourse on quality and ensure that we are continuously improving.

★ See action 34 (pg. 60)

