

Vision Child Care 2020

Realizing our Vision: Principles and System Components

The national policy framework should be based on a set of overarching principles and include a number of system components covering roles and responsibilities, targets and timetables, and accountability measures to assess progress towards goals. We propose the following principles and components.

Principles

Principle 1: Universal Entitlement

ECEC is a public good, a human right and part of building the equal, just Canada we value. Young children are citizens in their own right, entitled to a fair share of society's resources, including appropriate high quality ECEC programs provided as a public good, not a commodity.

A key community and government role is to support families in their parenting role. Since well designed high quality ECEC programs benefit all children and families as well as enabling specific groups (women, low income families, children with disabilities, newcomers to Canada), they should be accessible for all children regardless of their ability, economic, cultural or linguistic circumstances, where they live in Canada or whether their parents are in or out of the workforce, studying or working non-standard hours. ECEC should be available in the local community or neighbourhood and participation should be voluntary—determined by parents.

ECEC should be available at affordable fees or no fee (like kindergarten). While there may be special measures to eliminate financial barriers for vulnerable children and families, universal entitlement means ECEC services should not be targeted only to the vulnerable—middle class and affluent children are also entitled to participate.

Principle 2: High Quality

The importance of quality for child development, wellbeing and happiness cannot be overstated. It must be central to all ECEC provision as it can have significant economic and social benefits through its effects on child development. Conversely, poor quality ECEC fails to meet the human rights test of “in the best interests of the child” and, indeed, may even be harmful.

Policy frameworks and services should follow the best available evidence about what contributes to high quality for children. Frameworks and programs should also incorporate human rights considerations such as full inclusion of children with disabilities and respect for diversity.

High quality ECEC is best assured through a system of linked elements. These elements—ideas, governance, infrastructure, planning and policy development, financing, human resources (such as good wages and working conditions for staff), physical environment, data/research—should be taken into account as part of an all-encompassing policy framework. Integrating child care and early childhood education as “strong and equal partners” is desirable from a quality perspective. While there are multiple ways to do this, integration across multiple domains including financing, training, pedagogy, and governance makes the system stronger.

Principle 3: Comprehensiveness

Comprehensiveness addresses the range and variety of ECEC services and the related policies and practices required to support young families. Since families come in all types, shapes and sizes, they should be able to choose from a reasonable variety of flexible, high quality ECEC service options including full- and part-time centres, regulated home-based care, emergency/respice/occasional ECEC and parenting support programs. These should be available at reasonably convenient locations. Policies and practices to ensure time and resources to help families balance work and family are also required and should include: adequately paid leaves for family responsibilities (flexible maternity, parental and paternity leave); pregnancy, health and parenting supports; flexible working arrangements; living wages; affordable housing; and income security to mitigate poverty.

System Components

Component 1: A National Policy Framework

The national policy framework should begin with the idea that ECEC is a public good rather than a private commodity and—while recognizing that jurisdictions have historically had a variety of approaches—commit to moving it to a public not-for-profit, publicly-managed, publicly-funded, publicly-accountable system. Development of the policy framework will require commitment to federal leadership—Canada’s “glue”—but must also be developed in collaboration with provinces, territories and Indigenous communities. The policy framework should be guided by the principles of universal entitlement, high quality and comprehensiveness. It should set Canada-wide goals for implementation, targets and timetables and strategies for ensuring accountability and assessment of progress. It should recognize early childhood educators as valued professionals with appropriate training, remuneration and career opportunities. The framework should include definitions of provincial/territorial roles and responsibilities and the elements of provincial/territorial policy frameworks such as: plans for expansion, transition to public management and base funding for services, ongoing quality improvement, human resource strategies, data collection/research/evaluation, and accountability measures. The policy framework should reference the roles of local governments such as municipalities and school boards, as well as the ECEC community. There should be a commitment to democratic participation that includes educators and parents at all levels.

Component 2: A Long-Term Sustained Funding Plan

The short- and long-term benefits of ECEC to children, families and society make it a valuable economic and social investment. Like public education and health care, high quality, accessible ECEC requires substantial public funding. The national funding plan should include: capital funding to expand the system; operational funding to sustain services and improve remuneration of the ECEC workforce while keeping parent fees affordable; and funds for data, research, evaluation, innovation and accountability measures. A transition to stable base funding must be a key part of system development. Commitment to this transition by provinces/territories must be spelled out in the national long-term funding plan. To support this, there must be sustained, predictable federal funding to provinces/territories and Indigenous communities for system expansion and maintenance. Funds should increase each year to ensure planned expansion until the program reaches maturity. A long-term public funding goal of at least 1% of GDP for children aged 0-5 is the common minimum international benchmark. A commitment to indexing ongoing public funds to inflation would promote

system stability.

Component 3: Shared Work on System Development

Since ECEC is a human right and a public good for all Canadians, federal/provincial/territorial and local governments should collectively accept responsibility for ensuring its development and delivery. Their respective responsibilities should be clearly stated in the proposed policy framework. Developing a high quality ECEC system is a complex task that will require the contributions of multiple stakeholders from across Canada—policy makers from all levels of government, researchers, service providers and educators. Specific elements of the ECEC system can best be carried out through ongoing collaborative work. These include:

- An ongoing national plan for data collection/analysis
- A national research agenda
- A plan for ongoing evaluation of progress towards meeting the system's principles
- A strategy for transparent public reporting and accountability
- Sharing and consideration of exemplary initiatives and practices
- Public education about the benefits of high quality ECEC and its components, such as staffing
- Finding opportunities for innovation in areas such as program development, pedagogy, ongoing quality improvement and early childhood training