



## Toronto's Early Years and Child Care Service Plan 2025-2030

# About the Artist

Jasmine Swimmer is an Afro-Indigenous digital artist whose work is deeply inspired by community, ancestral storytelling, and cultural resilience. Drawing from her rich heritage, she weaves themes of identity, empowerment, and collective healing into her digital creations. Her art serves not only as personal expression but also as a powerful tool for advocacy and connection. Beyond her creative practice, Jasmine plays an active role on advisory councils, helping shape funding decisions that support arts and youth-driven initiatives. Through this work, she uplifts marginalized voices and fosters spaces for underrepresented communities to thrive. By bridging the worlds of art, culture, and social impact, Jasmine continues to create work that resonates deeply and inspires meaningful change.

## About the Art

This art illustration for Children's Services of Toronto celebrates the vital work of staff and community leaders who strive to see and deliver services from a child's perspective. The artwork centers children as the heart of the community, emphasizing their need for care, safety, and joy. It highlights the importance of adding play and green spaces—critical for healthy development—and reflects a commitment to culturally responsive services. Indigenous representation is woven throughout, honouring the original caretakers of the land and recognizing the diverse communities Children's Services serves. The illustration uplifts the shared mission of building nurturing, inclusive environments where every child can thrive. Staff, families, and leaders are portrayed working together with compassion and creativity, reinforcing the vision of a city that grows with its children. Through this art, we honour those who champion equity and child-centred care every day across Toronto's diverse neighbourhoods.







The Toronto Sign, Nathan Phillips Square



# Land Acknowledgement



The City of Toronto acknowledges that all facets of its work are carried out on the traditional territories of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. These territories are currently covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands.

These acknowledgements are in keeping with the spirit of the City of Toronto's Reconciliation Action Plan, underscoring our commitment to ongoing truth, justice, and reconciliation. We commit to translating this acknowledgement into action through reconciliation-based service planning, meaningful partnerships with Indigenous communities, and the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges across all aspects of our early years and child care work.

**The Turtle in the Spirit Garden at Nathan Phillips Square honours Turtle Island, a name many Indigenous Peoples use for North America. Shared through sacred creation stories, the Turtle symbolizes life, resilience, and the enduring relationship Indigenous communities hold with the land, waters, and all living beings. Its presence in this public space serves as a reminder of the strength and resilience of the survivors of Ontario's residential schools.**



# African Ancestral Acknowledgement



**The Black Liberation Flag symbolizes the enduring struggle, resistance, resilience, and hope of Black communities. Raised to mark Emancipation Month every August at Toronto City Hall, the flag affirms the City's ongoing commitment to addressing systemic barriers faced by Black communities in Toronto.**

The City of Toronto acknowledges all Treaty peoples—including those who came here as settlers—as migrants either in this generation or in generations past, and those of us who came here involuntarily, particularly those brought to these lands as a result of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and Slavery. We pay tribute to those ancestors of African origin and descent.

We recognize the enduring strength, resistance, and contributions of Black communities in Toronto. This acknowledgement is made in the spirit of the Toronto Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism, which guides our efforts to address systemic anti-Black racism and create a more equitable early years and child care sector for Black communities, children, and families.

# Note of Gratitude

Toronto Children’s Services extends sincere appreciation to all who made the Early Years and Child Care Service Plan possible by sharing their time, experiences, and ideas. This collaborative approach reflects our commitment to reconciliation, equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (REDIA), ensuring that every voice is heard. Thank you to:

Indigenous-led organizations, Black-mandated agencies, child care operators, community-based organizations, EarlyON providers, Every Child Belongs agencies, Francophone service providers, home child care agencies, parents and caregivers, and school board partners. Thank you also to City of Toronto staff and our regional colleagues. This Service Plan reflects your partnership and collaboration. Special thanks to organizations that supported family engagement: ENAGB, Black Moms Connection, The 519, Centre for Immigration and Community Services, the Daily Bread Food Bank, École élémentaire Gabrielle-Roy, FCJ Refugee Centre, The Neighbourhood Organization, and South Asian Women and Immigrants’ Services.

These partnerships were vital in engaging Indigenous, Black, 2SLGBTQ+, newcomer, and equity-denied communities in developing the plan.

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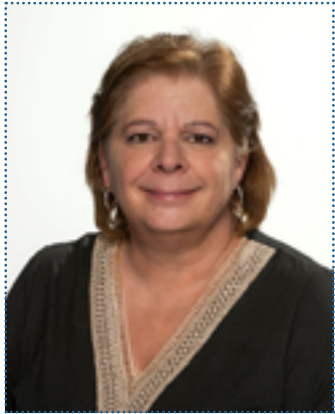
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# Message from the General Manager



I am pleased to share Toronto's 2025–2030 Early Years and Child Care Service Plan, an important milestone in our work to expand high-quality, affordable, flexible, and inclusive early years and child care programs and services.

The past few years brought unprecedented challenges, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Toronto Children's Services (TCS) responded with resilience, ensuring emergency child care was available to children of essential workers providing critical services. The pandemic disproportionately impacted Indigenous, Black, and equity-denied families and underscored the essential role of child care, not only in supporting early development, but also in enabling economic participation, particularly for women and communities facing systemic barriers.

The Ontario-Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreement, signed in 2022, has been transformative. This once-in-a-generation investment aims to improve access to affordable child care, enabling many parents to participate in the workforce. The recently announced agreement-in-principle between the Government of Canada and the Province of Ontario for \$16.8 billion to extend current early learning and child care agreements until March 31, 2031 will, once signed, help us expand access and support inclusive economic growth. Investments from both levels of government are essential for TCS to achieve our goals.

We have much to celebrate. I want to first acknowledge the incredible early years and child care workforce. Your dedication through disruption and change has been vital, and this Service Plan reflects our commitment to support a thriving workforce.

Looking ahead, we are strengthening our commitment to reconciliation by co-developing an Indigenous-led Service Plan, grounded in the principles of autonomy, cultural continuity, and trust. This approach prioritizes Indigenous self-determination and traditional knowledge, anchoring our shared work in reconciliation and respect.

Finally, thank you to the families and organizations who contributed to this Service Plan. Your insights were instrumental in shaping a responsive, inclusive path forward. With this Service Plan, we will continue building a cohesive early years and child care system that supports every family in Toronto.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "S. McNamee". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "S" and a stylized "McNamee".

Shanley McNamee, General Manager  
Children's Services, City of Toronto

# Toronto's Evolving Service System Landscape



An adult and child stand on the beach at Bluffer's Park, Lake Ontario



# About the Service Plan

This Service Plan is a responsive and equity-driven strategic plan with clear actions to support the sector as it adapts, expands, and enables children and their families to thrive. Informed by extensive outreach and engagement with families, communities, and sector partners, it reflects a shared commitment to advancing positive outcomes for children and families in Toronto.

High-quality early years and child care programs are critical forms of social infrastructure that benefit child and family well-being in Toronto. Participation in these programs has a positive impact on the health and development of children, particularly for communities facing systemic and accessibility barriers, such as Indigenous, Black, racialized, newcomer, low-income, 2SLGBTQ+ families, and persons with disabilities. Programming also facilitates labour force participation, enabling parents and caregivers to pursue employment and education opportunities and progress in their learning and careers.<sup>1</sup> In turn, this supports family well-being and plays an important role in advancing gender equity, poverty reduction, and economic stability and growth, particularly for women.<sup>2</sup> The economic benefits of child care are clear: for every dollar invested in affordable, high-quality early learning and child care, there is an economic return of \$1.60 to \$5.80.<sup>3</sup> Strengthening and ensuring universal access to inclusive, high-quality child care is crucial in addressing the inequities faced by Toronto's underserved communities and meeting Toronto's poverty reduction goals.

Children and families are at the heart of Children's Services' work. The Service Plan is grounded in the lived realities and insights of diverse Toronto families, whose voices were uplifted through focus groups and reflected in four vignettes, or short stories, found throughout this document. These stories are fictional but were developed by drawing from the real experiences of multiple families from each focus group; they aim to represent the realities, challenges, and hopes of parents and caregivers navigating the child care and early years system in Toronto.



# About the Service Plan

Our Service Plan is aligned with the City of Toronto's commitments to reconciliation, equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (REDIA), and Ontario's Access and Inclusion Framework. It is shaped by several corporate strategies focused on equity, human rights, and accessibility, including the Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism (CABR), Two-Spirit, Trans, and Non-Binary (2STNB) Access Plan, the Multi-Year Accessibility Plan, Poverty Reduction Strategy, Newcomer Strategy, and the Data for Equity Strategy, among others. These corporate strategies also recognize the important role of early years and child care in advancing equity, reducing poverty, supporting social determinants of health, and improving child and family well-being. They emphasize the importance of inclusive, culturally responsive programming, representation, and centring the voices of Indigenous, Black, 2SLGBTQ+, disability, newcomer, and additional equity-denied communities. Together, these commitments reflect a shared vision for an early years and child care system that is responsive to community, grounded in fairness, and built so that all children and families in Toronto have the opportunity to thrive. The Service Plan is both a strategic roadmap and a reflection of lived experiences and frontline expertise gathered through deep engagement.



For a list of terms and definitions used throughout the Service Plan, please see the [Glossary of Terms \(Appendix A\)](#).





# Roles and Responsibilities

## Government of Canada

In 2022, the Government of Canada signed the Ontario Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreement aimed at reducing child care fees, expanding access, and improving quality across Canada. With CWELCC, the federal government is now a significant funder and policy driver in licensed child care serving children under age 6. The current responsibilities of the federal government are to:

- Oversee the implementation of the CWELCC system through agreements with the provinces
- Provide tax benefits to families (e.g., Canada Child Benefit)
- Work in collaboration with provinces and territories, Indigenous governments, and Indigenous organizations and service providers to implement the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework



Parliament of Canada, Ottawa

# Roles and Responsibilities

## Province of Ontario

The Province of Ontario has authority to direct and manage early years and child care services in the province. The Ministry of Education is responsible for legislation, funding, and policy for the early years and child care sector through:

- Legislation and regulations (e.g., Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014)<sup>4</sup>
- Licensing of child care operators
- Policy and pedagogical frameworks (e.g., *How Does Learning Happen?*)<sup>5</sup>
- Allocating funding for child care, EarlyON programs, fee subsidies, and special needs resourcing
- Investments in the early years and child care sector, including the workforce and professional learning

In Ontario, the Province is responsible for overseeing the CWELCC system and is accountable to the federal government. The Ministry of Education issues specific guidelines for service system managers, including direction about eligibility for CWELCC funding, how funding can be used, and the ratio of not-for-profit, publicly operated, and for-profit operators.



# Roles and Responsibilities

## Municipalities

While the Province sets the legislation and overall funding, municipalities in Ontario are service system managers, ensuring that child care and early years services are accessible, equitable, high quality, and responsive to local needs. Service system managers are responsible for service planning, local policies, capacity building, quality improvement, and financial administration (including the delivery of fee subsidies to help with the cost of child care). Municipalities also have the option of directly operating child care centres.





# About Toronto Children's Services

As the service system manager, Toronto Children's Services (TCS) is responsible for the planning, management, and oversight of a continuum of licensed early years and child care programs and services for children up to 12 years of age in the city. This role includes addressing equity gaps, providing strategic advice for systemic change, and ensuring that the most underserved communities have access to high-quality services. Our emphasis is on building an accessible system that supports healthy child development and family well-being. TCS is responsible for delivering the fee subsidy program to offset costs of child care for up to 30,700 children and directly operates 39 child care centres across the city, focusing on serving historically underserved neighbourhoods.

## Our Vision

Toronto Children's Services envisions a city where all children and their families benefit from a range of services that promote healthy child development and family well-being.



## Our Mission

Toronto Children's Services promotes equitable access to high quality early years and child care supports for children and their families through a well-planned and -managed system.



# Connie's Story

Hailing from Western Canada, Connie's fun-loving energy and vibrance emanates from her kind eyes and smile. As a proud First Nations person, she is a direct descendent of the people who first inhabited this land. Today, Connie finds herself living in Toronto with her 2-year-old son, her sister, and her 9-year-old niece.

Like all parents, Connie wants a warm, safe, and inviting child care environment for her young son. Ideally, she would value finding a child care program that is culturally safe and Indigenous-led but prefers a program that is not in any way connected to the child welfare system. She is also considering nearby child care options in her community and close to home, but needs to know that this child care program will be safe and welcoming for Indigenous families.

For now, Connie has decided that the best arrangement for her son is for her to stay at home with him. She loves the sense of community and helpful supports EarlyONs have provided her, especially the Indigenous-focused EarlyON programs. For her, these are places to build relationships and connect with her ceremonial community. As someone from outside of Ontario, this community has been a vital support, allowing her to feel like she belongs in her home away from home.



**“Being urban Indigenous and far away from home, it’s nice to be with my people and have the same ideologies and ideas.”**



**“When you find your ceremonial family, you stay with them, you don’t just go do it with anyone, which is why I want to stay with [Indigenous EarlyON]. This is why I want [Indigenous EarlyON] to have programs for children 6-12, so when they get to that age then I can stay with my people.”**

**- Connie**

The EarlyONs have been so beneficial that she wishes she could bring her school-age niece with her to programs. But it feels as if there are no programs available for school-age children. Connie worries how she and these children will maintain their sense of community when there’s no place for them to gather after they turn six. Even if they were available, Indigenous-specific services always seem so limited and finding adequate transportation across the city to get to the programs is not always easy, especially with a toddler by her side. It can take Connie over an hour on buses and streetcars to reach Indigenous EarlyON programs, especially in bad weather or when buses are delayed.

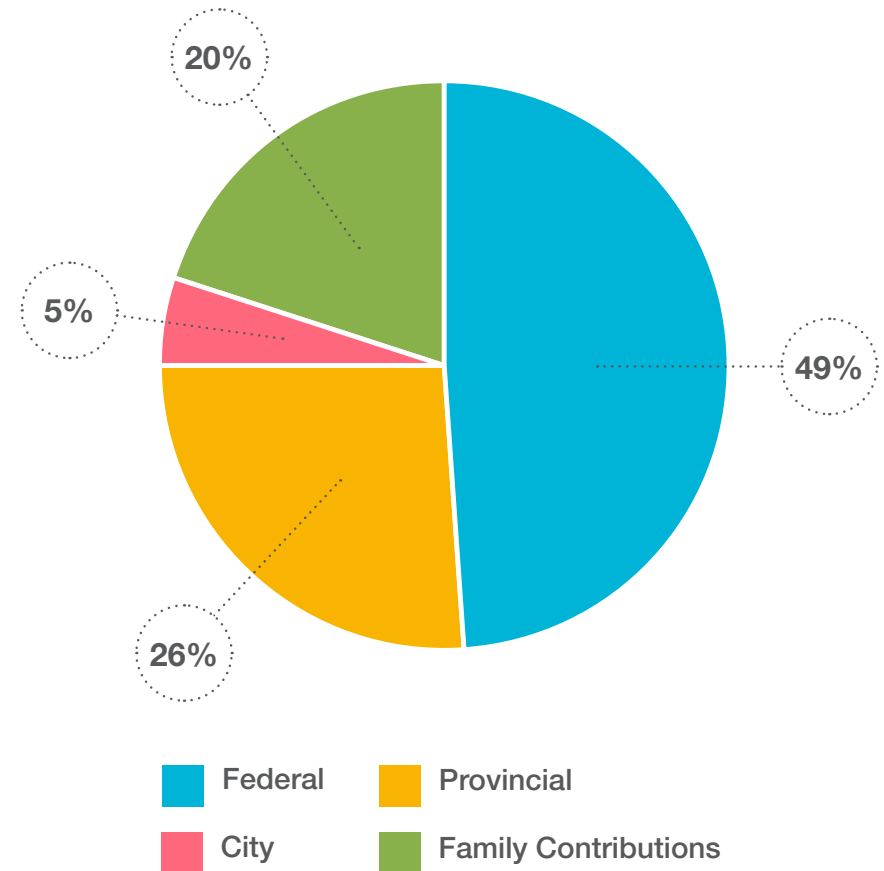
***Please note:*** These stories are fictional but were drawn from real experiences of Toronto families navigating the child care and early years system in Toronto.

## Sources of Funding for Early Years and Child Care

Funding for the sector is built from a combination of government funding from the federal, provincial, and municipal levels, as well as family contributions. Continued and predictable funding from all levels of government is essential to meeting the goals outlined in this Service Plan. In March 2025, the Government of Canada and the Province of Ontario reached an agreement-in-principle for \$16.8 billion to extend current early learning and child care agreements until March 31, 2031. At the time of writing, a final deal has not been signed.

With the implementation of CWELCC, the federal government has moved from a limited role in child care to contributing nearly half of the total investment in the early years and child care sector. For 2025, total annual funding amounts to nearly \$2 billion.

One of the most significant policy changes under CWELCC has been the new provincial cost-based funding model. Operational funding is now provided exclusively to centres and agencies enrolled in the CWELCC system who serve children aged 0-5. As of January 2025, licensees who are not enrolled in CWELCC are no longer eligible to receive general operating funds, wage enhancement grants, or new fee subsidy funding. These policy decisions by the provincial government change the way funding is provided and the scope of influence service system managers have over the sector.



**Figure 1. Sources of Operating Funding for the Early Years and Child Care Sector, 2025<sup>6</sup>**



# Toronto's Programs and Services for Children and Families



Children and caregivers in circle time

# Service Overview

The child care and early years system comprises a suite of programs and services that provide a continuum of care for children from birth to age 12. Information below provides an overview of programs and services across the sector, including those overseen by Toronto Children’s Services and those not. For more details on programs and services overseen by Children’s Services, see Appendix C.

Programs overseen by Children’s Services	Programs not overseen by Children’s Services	Additional supports and services*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Licensed centre-based child care</li><li>• Licensed home child care</li><li>• Toronto Early Learning and Child Care Services</li><li>• Before-and-after school programs</li><li>• EarlyON Child and Family Centres</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• School Board Extended Day Programs</li><li>• After-school recreation care</li><li>• Authorized recreational and skill building programs</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Child Care Fee Subsidy</li><li>• Assessment for Quality Improvement (AQI)</li><li>• Every Child Belongs</li></ul>

\* Administered by Children’s Services according to eligibility criteria and/or policy guidelines.



## 2024 Service Highlights

**EarlyON:** 254 sites operated by 50 agencies, including two public school boards and four Indigenous-led organizations. In 2024, Toronto EarlyON programs delivered a total of 185,500 hours of programming. In that same year, families made over 588,000 visits to EarlyON centres across Toronto.

**Every Child Belongs:** served 4,129 children with extra support needs across 18 agencies in Toronto in 2024. Service requests for Every Child Belongs Resource Consultation staff increased by 6% from 2019 to 2023. The number of children accessing any level of supports through Child Care Support Funds has increased by 19% from 2022 to 2023.

**Fee subsidy:** the number of available fee subsidies for children in Toronto is 30,700 for 2025, up from 25,116 in 2015.

**Licensed Child Care:** 1,070 centres with a capacity of 82,559 spaces in 2024 (an increase of 25% since 2015) and 23 licensed home child care agencies with 1,036 home child care providers.

### Toronto Early Learning and Child Care Services

**(TELCCS):** 39 sites across the city with a capacity of 1,750 children aged 0-4. The Toronto Home Child Care Agency contracts with over 130 home child care providers across the city, serving children from infants to school age.

**Quality and Capacity Building:** the average AQI rating (out of 5.0) was 4.4 for child care centres and 4.0 for home-based child care. Over 4,000 educators participated in professional learning opportunities.





# Services for Families

## Indigenous Services

TCS is committed to advancing truth, justice, and reconciliation to promote culturally relevant, safe, and high-quality Indigenous-led early years and child care programs and services. In alignment with the City of Toronto's Reconciliation Action Plan and calls from Indigenous communities in Toronto, TCS continues to advocate to the provincial and federal governments for more capital funding dedicated to Indigenous-led child care expansions, acknowledging the unique cultural and linguistic needs of urban Indigenous families.

Currently, there is one not-for-profit licensed Indigenous child care centre in Toronto. A second Indigenous-led, not-for-profit combined licensed child care and EarlyON centre operated by ENAGB will be opening at Miziwe Biik Aboriginal Employment and Training Centre in 2025.

Four agencies operate a total of seven Indigenous-led EarlyON programs across the city. Mobile language- and land-based EarlyON programs are offered as a way to address geographic barriers to access.



Children and adults dressed in orange t-shirts marking the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation, Spirit Garden, Nathan Phillips Square

## Francophone Services

In the city of Toronto, there are 30 Francophone child care centres offering a total of 2,800 spaces for children, as well as three French language EarlyON programs (ON y va) through Le Centre Francophone du Grand Toronto. Between 2016 and 2024, operating capacity in Francophone child care centres increased from 1,633 to 2,800 spaces. In these centres, children can develop and enrich their knowledge in a Francophone environment. Ensuring the availability of French-language programs advances inclusive and equitable services, especially for equity-denied families.

Under the French Language Services Act<sup>7</sup> and related provincial directives, municipalities must ensure Francophone children and families can access services in their first language. Recognizing that many Francophone families face intersecting and compounding challenges as members of newcomer, Black, and equity-denied communities, French-language programs and services must incorporate anti-racism and inclusive principles to fully serve all French-speaking communities in the city of Toronto.



An outdoor Francophone classroom

# Kimberley's Story

Kimberley is a Black woman and devoted mother to her five-year-old daughter. She is also an experienced educator and graduate student who works part-time. Becoming a parent during the COVID-19 pandemic was an isolating and intensely stressful experience for Kimberley as a first-time mom.



Kimberley's husband works full-time, which allowed her to extend her maternity leave so that Kimberley could spend extra time with her daughter and focus on building a strong relationship. Ideally, when her daughter was younger, she would have liked a child care option that was part-time to support her daughter's socialization while still allowing time for her and her daughter to bond.

As a Black mother, Kimberley makes child care decisions that reflect her lived experience, her awareness of the unique experiences Black children may face in early learning spaces, and the need for culturally safe and affirming environments. Her trust in a program is shaped by how well it affirms children's identities.

Kimberley seeks diverse programming and has had great experiences with Black early childhood educators who helped her daughter reach many milestones. Her desire for Black-

**"No one should be touching a child's body without need. Hair is especially important to our community... but staff often touch hair out of curiosity rather than need. If the hair comes back different, then an adult was in their hair. Why? Sometimes they'll, for example, take out their hair beads because it was making too much noise. This is inappropriate. Who is doing these teachings about EDI [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion]?"**

**- Kimberley**



led and Black-focused programming also stems from hearing stories from her friends and family of bullying, inappropriate behaviour, and anti-Black racism in child care programs. For example, Kimberley's daughter has come home from child care with her hair re-styled, and in Kimberley's culture, hairstyles like braids or beads are not just fashion; they represent heritage, pride, and personal identity. Kimberley would like to see more Afrocentric programming in child care. Ideally, she would like her daughter to attend a Black-led and Black-focused program but would also appreciate a child care program bringing in Afrocentric experts.

**Please note:** These stories are fictional but were drawn from real experiences of Toronto families navigating the child care and early years system in Toronto.



# Transforming the System in a Diverse and Evolving City



Children planting in soil at a community garden

# Transforming the System in a Diverse and Evolving City

## The Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (CWELCC)

The Ontario-CWELCC agreement represents a landmark investment in affordable child care. Signed between the Government of Canada and the Province of Ontario in March 2022, the objectives of the agreement include:

- Lowering child care fees to an average of \$10 a day by the end of March 2026
- Increasing access to high-quality licensed child care spaces for children aged 0-5 (emphasizing not-for-profit providers)
- Addressing barriers to inclusive and flexible child care
- Better valuing the early childhood workforce

As of the end of 2024, 87% of centres in Toronto opted into CWELCC.

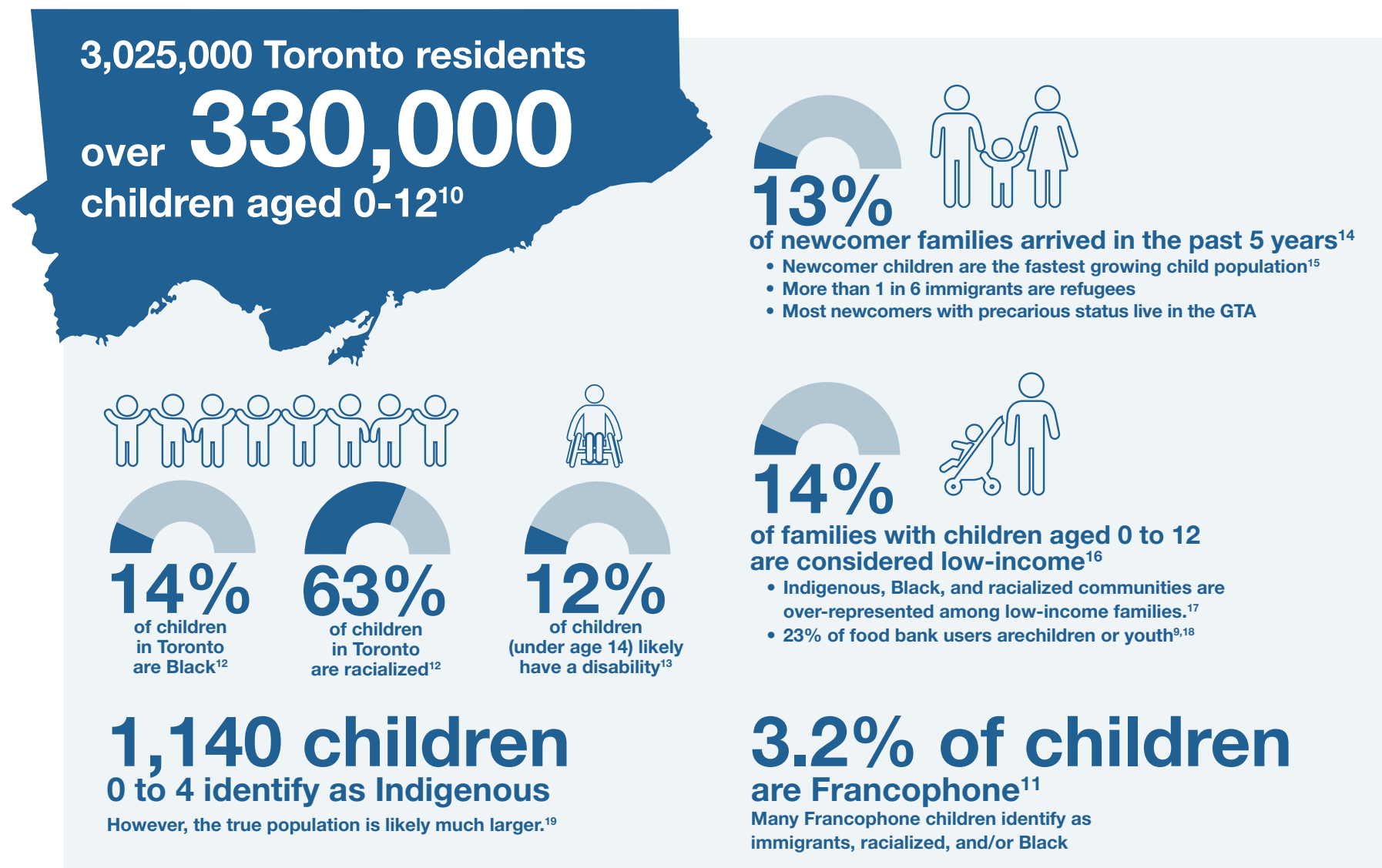
To support equitable expansion of child care spaces, the Ministry of Education requires service system managers to develop Directed Growth Plans that ensure new CWELCC-funded spaces are prioritized in alignment with the Province's Access and Inclusion Framework. The Access and Inclusion Framework provides guidance to service system managers, ensuring the system grows to be more inclusive and better serves children and families from Indigenous, Black, and equity-denied communities.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 2. The five pillars of Ontario-CWELCC Agreement<sup>9</sup>

# Infographic: Toronto's Children and Families

Figure 3. Children and Families in the City of Toronto





## Key Factors Impacting Early Years and Child Care in Toronto

### Services for Indigenous children and families must be based in self-determination.

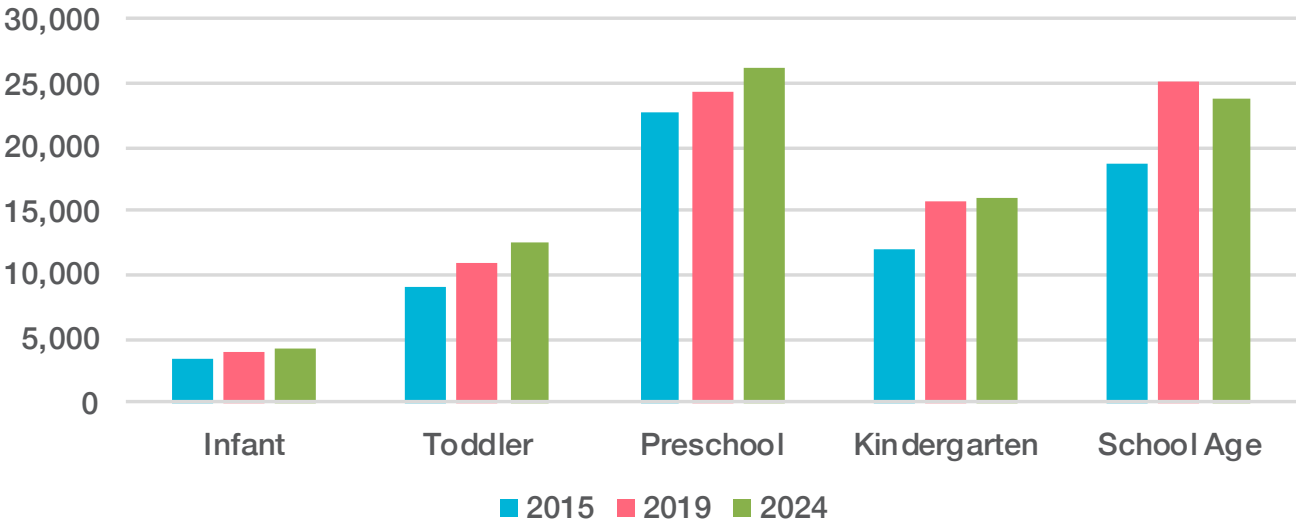
The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) underscores the inherent right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination.<sup>20,21</sup> In Toronto, Indigenous service providers stress the importance of Indigenous-led planning to expand child care and early years services that reflect their values and cultural knowledge. As an essential step forward, Indigenous leaders continue to call on governments to affirm their commitment to truth, justice, and reconciliation, build relationship with the urban Indigenous community in Toronto, and act as partners in enabling the goals of Indigenous communities.

age fee increased by 11% while all other age groups have seen decreases ranging from 49% to 75% over the same period. At the same time, the number of school-age spaces is declining (Figure 4). Plus, with child care staff shifts split by the school day, recruiting and retaining qualified staff to fill school-age programs is challenging. Ensuring staff are available and equipped to provide programming that meets the current needs of children in their middle years is crucial as this age group faces unique challenges in an increasingly digital world. Sustaining school-age care will require a reimagining of how best to serve school-age children.

### CWELCC has led to instability in the school-age system.

One unintended consequence of CWELCC has been the fragmentation of the child care system, with programs serving children aged 0 to 5 facing a separate set of requirements and funding guidelines than programs exclusively serving children aged 6 to 12. As the costs of providing child care rise due to inflation, operators have no choice but to increase school-age fees to cover those costs. Between 2021 and 2025, the median daily school-

Figure 4. Total number of spaces (operating capacity) by age group<sup>42</sup>



# Transforming the System in a Diverse and Evolving City

## **Due to high costs of living and high rates of poverty, families still need financial support with child care costs.**

Inflation hit record highs in 2022, increasing the costs of basic needs and leaving families with little left to spend on child care. Indigenous, Black, and newcomer families have been disproportionately impacted by these economic stressors.<sup>22,23</sup> Even at \$10 per day, child care would still be out of reach for many families. Consider, for example, that in 2024, approximately 74% of families in receipt of fee subsidy would not be able to afford child care even at \$10 per day. For those facing the deepest levels of poverty, financial assistance is still required to support access to child care. On top of this, eligibility for fee subsidy is based on the ability to file taxes, which creates barriers to affordable child care, especially for those with precarious immigration status. The stress of financial insecurity and scarcity of spaces can make navigating a complex early years and child care system especially difficult as well.<sup>24,25</sup> Meeting the needs of low-income families includes providing financial support for child care and service navigation supports tailored to each caregiver's needs.

## **Precarious work necessitates flexible hours of service.**

Precarious employment is on the rise,<sup>26</sup> especially among women from Indigenous, Black, and equity-denied communities.<sup>27</sup> Precariously employed parents struggle to find child care that accommodates their work schedules.<sup>28</sup> As the labour market continues to shift, flexible models of care need to be explored to ensure working parents can equitably access child care and early years services.<sup>2,29</sup>

A two-parent family with two children living in the City of Toronto, with only one parent working full time in a minimum wage job, would struggle to make ends meet. Based on 2022 data, while paying average market rent for an apartment, they would be **in a deficit of \$628 each month.**<sup>43</sup>



## **Families have varying preferences for early years services.**

Parents choose child care based on a number of factors, including location, available kin and community support, cost, work hours, and culturally rooted ideas about raising children.<sup>30,31,32</sup> Some parents and caregivers may prefer centre- or home-based programs. Estimates suggest that at daily rates of \$20, up to 50% of Toronto families with children aged 0 to 5 would choose licensed child care.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, others prefer non-traditional care regardless of cost or convenience.<sup>34</sup> A variety of child care options can be desirable for families who wish to speak home languages or engage in cultural practices without fear of discrimination. Culturally safe care that is reflective of a community's values is particularly important for families who have experienced subtle or overt discrimination such as racism or disability discrimination in formal care settings. Creating a high-quality and inclusive system means considering the range of family preferences.

# Transforming the System in a Diverse and Evolving City

**New funding guidelines has created unpredictability in the system.** While CWELCC funding is a welcome and necessary investment, frequent changes to CWELCC guidelines and funding approaches have led to uncertainty about the sustainability of the system. Recruitment and retention remain challenging, and expansion efforts are constrained by limited capital funding, especially for not-for-profit operators who face substantial barriers to accessing capital. Without stable, long-term funding and clear policy direction, the sector's ability to plan for and meet the needs of families and communities remains challenging.

**The early years and child care workforce is in urgent need of support.** Toronto's early years and child care workforce has faced several challenges, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Recruitment and retention are significant challenges with many staff (nearly 40%) reporting an intent to leave the sector in the next five years. By 2026, Ontario is projected to face an Early Childhood Educator (ECE) shortage of about 8,500, making recruitment a major concern.<sup>35</sup> Wage increases have not kept pace with inflation and average annual salaries for ECEs and Early Childhood Assistants (ECAs) fall well below the "cost of thriving".<sup>36</sup> Staff in EarlyON and Every Child Belongs programs did not benefit from recent provincial workforce wage enhancements. Given that more than half of ECEs and non-ECE early years and childcare workers in Toronto identify as racialized,<sup>37</sup> and the vast majority identify as women, supporting the workforce is a significant equity issue.<sup>38</sup> These challenges require strategic efforts among the Province, service system managers, post-secondary institutions, service providers, and other workforce partners to ensure that the early years and child care workforce is well supported.

Staff shortages make it difficult to support inclusion for children with disabilities and extra support needs. Every Child Belongs program data show an increase in the number of children requiring extra support in recent years; operators have also noted a perceived increase in the intensity of extra support needs in early years and child care programs. These trends signal a risk of declining quality of inclusion for children with disabilities. In fact, there are reports emerging of child care operators needing to send children with disabilities home due to staffing shortages.<sup>39</sup> When children with disabilities are sent home or demitted from care entirely, this reduces continuity of care for children, places strain on parents and caregivers, and creates uncertainty in their children's access to care. This highlights the need for ongoing investments to ensure inclusive services that will meet the diverse needs of children across the city.



Children playing blocks on the carpet



# Transforming the System in a Diverse and Evolving City

Supply of child care in Toronto does not meet demand. There is a growing need for more affordable, high-quality child care spaces in Toronto. By the end of 2024, Toronto had a total of 82,559 spaces in the centre-based licensed child care system. Many operators report growing waitlists since the introduction of CWELCC, suggesting that more affordable spaces are needed in Toronto. As well, the availability of child care spaces varies across the city (see Appendix B for more details). Neighbourhoods in Scarborough and Etobicoke continue to be underserved, with fewer licensed spaces per child despite high proportions of racialized and low-income families.<sup>40,41</sup> This highlights the importance of equity-based planning of early years programs and services and directed growth in licensed child care in underserved communities.



Children engaging in sensory play

**Table 1: Number of licensed child care centres and spaces by auspice**<sup>44</sup>

Auspice	2015	2019	2024
Not-for-profit	684	750	744
For-profit	269	308	326
Total	953	1,058	1,070

Note: Not-for-profit includes publicly operated centres. Data represents December of each year.

**Table 2: Number of child care spaces (operating capacity)**<sup>45</sup>

Auspice	2015	2019	2024
Not-for-profit	48,898	61,174	61,139
For-profit	16,966	18,994	21,420
Total	65,864	80,168	82,559

Note: Not-for-profit includes publicly operated spaces. Data represents December of each year.

# Service Plan Development



A toddler in a walker blows bubbles through a wand with the help of a caregiver



# Service Plan Guiding Principles

This Service Plan presents seven strategic priorities and 47 actions that respond to the needs of children, families, the workforce, and service providers in Toronto. The strategic priorities are broad areas of opportunity and challenge that require focused action to achieve change over a five-year period. The development and implementation of strategic priorities and actions is guided by a set of eight principles:

<b>Truth, Reconciliation, and Justice</b>	Respect Indigenous communities’ inherent right to self-determination and advance commitments to truth, reconciliation, and justice.
<b>Inclusive</b>	Build safe and welcoming spaces for families, with attention to supporting Indigenous, Black, and equity-denied communities.
<b>Child-centred</b>	Prioritize positive child and family outcomes.
<b>Equitable</b>	Instill equity in the planning and delivery of all programs and services.
<b>Responsible</b>	Act as responsible, accountable, and transparent stewards of public funds and resources.
<b>Evidence-informed</b>	Embed evidence- and data-informed approaches to decision-making, monitoring, and evaluation.
<b>Collaborative</b>	Foster partnerships and collaboration across the continuum of early years and child care services.
<b>Innovative</b>	Strive for excellence in the early years and child care sector and respond to emerging needs.





# Engagement Process and Research

Engaging directly with families, service providers, and system partners has been a crucial step in the development of the 2025-2030 Service Plan. Engagement approaches included a combination of surveys and focus groups, emphasizing the voices of parents and caregivers of children aged 0 to 12, including families using early years and child care services and those not accessing programs and services. In alignment with the principles of inclusion, collaboration, and equity, engagement relied on partnerships with community-based organizations serving Indigenous, Black, and equity-denied groups as well as organizations providing early years and child care services across the city.

The development of strategic priorities was also informed by an environmental scan and analysis of sector research, census information, and internal data. This included a review of 29 recent Indigenous-led reports outlining actions and recommendations on early years and child care previously called for by Indigenous communities. This approach sought to respect Indigenous self-determination by integrating community-driven recommendations into our planning. Key reports reviewed included the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Final Report,<sup>46</sup> The Journey Together,<sup>47</sup> and the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls,<sup>48</sup> along with reports produced by local Indigenous communities. Reviewing the needs of Indigenous communities in Toronto was done so that questions asked during any engagements were meaningful and informed and to minimize the impact of over-consulting Indigenous families and service providers.




Children playing in an outdoor child care space

# Who We Heard From

**Over 4,000 people** have provided input at over 28 different engagement opportunities over the course of the Service Plan development process.

Engagement included parents and caregivers, with a focus on hearing from Indigenous, Black, Francophone, newcomer, undocumented, 2SLGBTQ+, and low-income parents and caregivers, as well as families of children with disabilities. In addition, sector engagement included Indigenous-led organizations serving children and families, early years and child care staff, child care supervisors and operators, English- and French-language Toronto school boards, licensed home child care agencies, Every Child Belongs service providers, CWELCC Roundtable participants, and Children's Services staff.



**2,878 parents and caregivers with children under 12**

Survey on their experiences with child care and EarlyON



**594 child care operators**

Survey on waitlists and workforce challenges




**200 child care supervisors**

Workshops on child care access



**104 parents and caregivers**

9 focus groups on the needs, barriers, and opportunities experienced by families with diverse backgrounds when accessing child care and early years services



**220 early years and child care program staff**

Survey on priorities for the sector

# Elena's Story

Elena is a resourceful person. She arrived in Toronto from Central America two years ago with her infant and her partner. At the time she mostly spoke Spanish but now speaks English fluently and feels confident in her ability to communicate in her newly acquired language. Today, she and her partner live in Toronto with their daughter, who is two-and-a-half years old.



**My family income was low, [I] could only send [my child to child care] a few days a week and then had to quit because it was too expensive—\$75 a day.”**



**- Elena**

One thing you cannot see about Elena is her precarious immigration status, a constant but invisible source of stress. Elena is exhausted by the mental calculus she needs to do when deciding whether and how to access services as someone with “unofficial status.” Elena feels anxious, worrying that asking for help might lead to questions about her immigration status. Elena needs help with the cost of child care, but due to her precarious status, she cannot access a child care fee subsidy because she cannot file the tax documents required to confirm eligibility. She recently decided to stop working and remain home with her daughter because her child care fees exceeded her daily wages. Since Elena can’t afford child care, she sometimes asks neighbours or friends to watch her daughter for short periods when she needs to run important errands. As a stay-at-home parent, Elena would value having a part-time care option for her daughter for a few hours when attending appointments and keeping up with the demands of life.

Elena has heard about licensed home child care from her friends and likes the idea that it is a smaller learning environment in her community. However, she is still unsure about navigating the system and accessing care given her immigration status. Despite her fluency in English, Elena still finds the City’s website very difficult to use and finds it hard to access accurate and timely information about services. Elena would value assistance with system navigation and clear information from trusted sources.

**Please note:** These stories are fictional but were drawn from real experiences of Toronto families navigating the child care and early years system in Toronto.



# Engagement Process and Research

## What We Learned

Families, service providers, and partners named immediate and long-term opportunities and challenges for early years and child care in Toronto. The lessons learned from the engagement process largely informed the strategic priorities and actions. Priorities and actions respond to:

- The need for an Indigenous-led Service Plan
- Lack of access to child care spaces and early years services and the necessity of equitably expanding the system
- Persistent unaffordability of care for many families
- The need for flexible and expanded hours
- Recruitment and retention challenges facing the workforce
- The impact of systemic barriers and importance of system navigation
- Demand for high-quality programming options for school-age children
- The urgent need for inclusive supports for children with disabilities
- The critical importance of culturally safe and responsive programming



Lessons learned through these engagements informed the development of our strategic priorities for the next five years. A summary of learnings from family and service provider engagement is detailed in the staff report attachments accompanying the Service Plan.

# Priorities, Actions, and Monitoring Impacts



Children playing in an outdoor child care space



# Strategic Priorities and Actions for 2025-2030

Key findings from stakeholder engagement and an environmental scan have shaped the development of strategic priorities and actions for the Service Plan. These priorities continue to build on those established in our 2015-2019 Service Plan and respond to important challenges that impact multiple facets of the early years and child care sector. They are data-informed and reflect findings from community engagement. They also represent ambitious long-term outcomes for the sector. Based on the engagement and research process, Children's Services identified seven strategic priorities that reflect sector-wide needs:



**Advance self-determination with Indigenous organizations and families in the early years and child care sector**



**Expand the early years and child care system to meet the needs of children and their families**



**Remove barriers to accessing child care and early years services**



**Support a thriving early years and child care workforce**



**Champion a high-quality and well-managed early years and child care system**



**Centre inclusion in the early years and child care sector for children, families, and staff**



**Connect children and their families with essential family support services**



# Strategic Priorities and Actions for 2025-2030



## STRATEGIC PRIORITY 1: ADVANCE SELF-DETERMINATION WITH INDIGENOUS ORGANIZATIONS AND FAMILIES IN THE EARLY YEARS AND CHILD CARE SECTOR

**This priority is about:** A core value, recognized in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), is Indigenous Peoples' inherent right to self-determination and to freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development. Urban Indigenous service providers in Toronto have emphasized that Indigenous-led planning is essential for creating early years and child care systems that reflect their values, languages, and ways of knowing and being. Foundational to working together in a good way is building strong relationships among Indigenous service providers and the City, grounded in trust.

Indigenous parents, caregivers, and sector partners were engaged in the Service Plan and their insights strongly reflected long-standing research and community priorities. Indigenous sector leaders identified three key areas for immediate action: (1) revitalizing Indigenous languages through culturally grounded curricula, (2) ensuring safe, affirming spaces and programming for Two-Spirit children and families, and (3) addressing gaps in culturally specific, land-based, intergenerational programming for children aged 6 to 12. These priorities are not optional additions, they are fundamental rights.

Indigenous parents and caregivers have emphasized the importance of culturally-specific programs led by Indigenous people spanning multiple generations. They have called for greater representation, holistic family support, and accessible services, including transportation to overcome geographic barriers. Their voices highlight an ongoing lack of inclusion and a pressing need for culturally-relevant services.

The needs of Indigenous children and families—and culturally embedded approaches to meet those needs—are already well known within Indigenous communities. All levels of government must uphold Indigenous self-determination. Governments must also provide clear information on guidelines and, when needed, enact or advocate for policy change to advance self-determination. A critical step forward is the creation of an Indigenous-led Service Plan for early years and child care in Toronto. This plan should not be viewed as supplementary, but as a sovereign, community-defined framework essential to meaningful and lasting early years and child care transformation. Only then can authentic, meaningful reconciliation proceed.

# Strategic Priorities and Actions for 2025-2030

## Commitment to Indigenous Communities

Toronto Children's Services is committed to strengthening and expanding programming and services that meet the needs of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children and families in Toronto. This includes a commitment to creating culturally safe environments and embedding Indigenous knowledges and practices into programs and services. We acknowledge the unique challenges of urban Indigenous communities in Toronto and commit to addressing systemic barriers and promoting accessible, inclusive programming. We recognize that reconciliation requires sustained commitments to truth, trust-based relationships, accountability through transparent reporting and measurable outcomes, and action-driven partnerships with Indigenous-led organizations. Children's Services is committed to strengthening relationships that are transparent, trusting, and accountable, and will collaborate with Indigenous communities to uphold their sovereignty and self-determination in the early years and child care sector.

As an initial step in fulfilling this commitment, Children's Services will work with Indigenous partners to co-create an Indigenous-led Service Plan to meet the needs of Indigenous children and families in Toronto. Specifically, Children's Services will dedicate time, space, and resources to co-develop and implement the Indigenous-led Service Plan. Additionally, we intend to follow guidance from Indigenous organizations and families to inform our work, especially in implementing the actions in the 2025-2030 Service Plan that impact Indigenous children, families, staff, and organizations. Most importantly, we will work to find ways to empower Indigenous community members in shaping the collective goals.

As the City of Toronto, we acknowledge that we have an important role in advocating to higher orders of government to recognize the unique needs of Indigenous families and support service providers, and committing resources to respond to calls for action from community. We understand this work will be ongoing and need to remain flexible and responsive to changing needs. To strengthen accountability to this commitment, Children's Services will work with Indigenous-led organizations in the early years and child care sector to establish and track meaningful indicators of progress on specific goals. We understand that upholding this commitment and taking action is necessary, and strengthening relationships with Toronto's Indigenous community is foundational to advancing reconciliation.



A teepee adorned in a rainbow flag, Nathan Phillips Square

# Strategic Priorities and Actions for 2025-2030



## STRATEGIC PRIORITY 2: EXPAND THE EARLY YEARS AND CHILD CARE SYSTEM TO MEET THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

**This priority is about** growing the system in an equitable way and increasing the availability of early years and child care services across the city, especially in underserved areas and for specific communities. In addition to the expansion of early years and child care spaces, there is a need to expand services for Indigenous children, children with disabilities, children with extra support needs, and children and families accessing EarlyON programs. These services all need to be available across the city and delivered during a variety of hours to meet the needs of families.

**2.1** Advocate to all levels of government to secure additional and sustainable funding for capital investments in the public and not-for-profit sector to address the increasing demand for affordable child care.

**2.2** Prioritize child care expansion for underserved areas and age groups using an equity-based approach, with a focus on expansion through the public and not-for-profit sectors.

**2.3** Collaborate with Indigenous community partners to increase the availability of Indigenous-led child care spaces across Toronto.

**2.4** Centre equity in EarlyON system planning to prioritize growth in high-inequity neighbourhoods.

**2.5** Explore innovative strategies to leverage municipal assets, development opportunities, and community partnerships to support the growth of public and not-for-profit child care.

**2.6** Increase the number of diverse organizations operating licensed centre-based and home child care programs, with a focus on Indigenous-led and B3 (Black-led, Black-mandated, and Black-serving) organizations.

**2.7** Request that the Province of Ontario invest and recognize inflationary costs in EarlyON Child and Family Centres, including funding allocated for Indigenous-led and Black-mandated programming.

**2.8** Expand provision of licensed home child care and implement incentives for licensed home child care providers to operate at full capacity.

**2.9** Increase offerings that provide flexible and extended service hours in licensed centre-based and home child care to better support the diverse needs of children and their families.



# Strategic Priorities and Actions for 2025-2030



## STRATEGIC PRIORITY 3: REMOVE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING EARLY YEARS AND CHILD CARE SERVICES

**This priority is about** addressing barriers experienced by families accessing early years and child care services. This includes addressing the cost of care and enhancing culturally responsive service navigation supports for families, particularly Indigenous, Black, lone parent, newcomer, refugee, and Francophone households. It also recognizes that there are barriers to receiving and maintaining eligibility for fee subsidies, including hurdles created by policies that need to be re-examined, especially considering CWELCC. Meeting access needs in Toronto requires targeted approaches to reduce barriers for families facing the greatest inequities.

**3.1** Advocate to the Province to update the income threshold for a child care fee subsidy to make child care more affordable for families who are low income or living in poverty.

**3.2** Harmonize fee subsidy policies to align with changes resulting from the implementation of CWELCC, focusing on consistent and equitable experiences for families.

**3.3** Work with Indigenous community partners and child care operators to prioritize Indigenous families on waitlists for child care.

**3.4** Collaborate with sector partners to identify strategies that will enhance equitable access to child care for families in receipt of fee subsidy.

**3.5** Work with community partners to ensure children in the middle years have equitable access to an affordable, sustainable, and relevant range of care and supports.

**3.6** Collaborate with settlement partners to reduce barriers and enhance access to affordable early years services and child care for newcomers, regardless of immigration status.

**3.7** Collaborate with community-based organizations to develop the role of culturally responsive service system navigators to assist Indigenous, Black, racialized, and newcomer families in navigating services, obtaining information, and accessing early years and child care programs and services.

# Strategic Priorities and Actions for 2025-2030



## STRATEGIC PRIORITY 4: SUPPORT A THRIVING EARLY YEARS AND CHILD CARE WORKFORCE

**This priority is about** the critical need for increased wages, public recognition, professional development opportunities, recruitment and retention supports, and positive working conditions for the workforce. The early years and child care system relies on a well-supported workforce. Investing in and advocating for the people who care for and support children in Toronto—including Early Childhood Educators (ECEs), Early Childhood Assistants, EarlyON staff, Resource Consultants, people leaders, and new graduates—is critical to ensuring a thriving early years and child care system.

**4.1** Advocate to federal and provincial governments for significant new investments to increase wages and benefits, promote hiring, retention, and advancement, and improve working conditions for qualified early years and child care staff.

**4.2** Call for the provincial government to collaborate with service system managers to develop regional wage scales, including a set of guidelines for sustained increases to wages and benefits that address cost of living and reflect the value, training, and education of staff.

**4.3** Advocate to the provincial government to enhance staffing levels and the number of qualified educators in child care programs.

**4.4** In partnership with operators and service providers, create mentorship opportunities for the sector with a focus on Indigenous

and Black professionals in the child care and early years sector to facilitate professional development, advancement, and succession planning in support of a diverse and representative workforce.

**4.5** In partnership with community, explore options for more sustainable, full-time staffing models for school-age programs.

**4.6** Convene post-secondary partners, operators, and provincial employment programs to design pathways into the child care and early years workforce.

**4.7** Work with Indigenous-led organizations to support the development and retention of Indigenous ECEs, and explore opportunities to build pathways for those with lived experience as parents and caregivers (including extended family or kin), knowledge keepers, and language speakers into early years and child care workforce.

**4.8** Invest in innovative professional learning and capacity building opportunities, including training related to advancing equity and inclusion, to support a knowledgeable workforce and meet evolving learning needs.

**4.9** In collaboration with early years and child care staff and operators, develop an action plan to support workforce health, safety, and well-being.

# Strategic Priorities and Actions for 2025-2030



## STRATEGIC PRIORITY 5: CHAMPION A HIGH-QUALITY AND WELL-MANAGED EARLY YEARS AND CHILD CARE SYSTEM

**This priority is about** the fundamental importance of program quality to child development and the opportunities to be consistent and data-informed in system planning. Quality encompasses a range of domains, including safe and supportive learning environments, engaging learning experiences, and strong family and community connections that impact supports offered to children and families. A well-functioning system depends on clear standards, policy frameworks, and data to advance evidence-informed planning and ensure children and their families can expect a high-quality early learning environment wherever they go. This priority also identifies opportunities to meet legislative and quality requirements while also responding to the unique needs of Indigenous-led programs.

**5.1** Support all licensed centre-based and home child care programs in Toronto to achieve the highest standards of quality through ongoing quality improvement efforts and the application of the Assessment for Quality Improvement (AQI).

**5.2** Advocate for the adoption and expanded implementation of the AQI as the provincial and national standard for measuring program quality within the CWELCC system.

**5.3** Collaborate with Indigenous-led programs in other jurisdictions to identify opportunities to embed Indigenous ways

and practices within existing frameworks, and advocate for flexibility and policy change where needed.

**5.4** Enhance existing frameworks that outline consistent standards for operators and agencies that have a funding agreement with Toronto Children's Services.

**5.5** Modernize data collection and management to support the evaluation and planning of an equitable early years and child care system that reflects local community needs.

**5.6** Collaborate with child care programs to build and strengthen capacity in governance, program delivery, and board development.

**5.7** Collaborate with community partners to implement the Data for Equity strategy to collect consistent, high-quality sociodemographic data, including empowering and enabling Indigenous led-organizations to collect program data in alignment with Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) Principles.

**5.8** Champion opportunities to pursue early years and child care research initiatives in partnership with post-secondary institutions, community-based organizations, and sector partners.



# Strategic Priorities and Actions for 2025-2030



## STRATEGIC PRIORITY 6: CENTRE INCLUSION IN THE EARLY YEARS AND CHILD CARE SECTOR FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND STAFF

**This priority is about** creating experiences of inclusion and belonging in early years and child care programs and services for all children and families, with an intentional focus on children with disabilities as well as Indigenous, Black, 2SLGBTQ+, and Francophone children and families. It speaks to the importance of culturally specific programming for Indigenous and Black children and families, while also ensuring that Indigenous and Black families are safe and welcome in all programs. It is also about creating a sense of belonging for staff in the sector, celebrating diversity among operators, and supporting diverse service providers, who in turn can deliver safe, inclusive, and culturally relevant services and learning environments.

**6.1** Advocate to the Province for increased funding for Every Child Belongs (ECB) services.

**6.2** Review ECB services in licensed child care and EarlyON programs as they relate to priorities surrounding reconciliation, equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (REDIA).

**6.3** In collaboration with community, develop an enhanced professional learning strategy for licensed centre-based and home child care with a focus on inclusive support for all children through a REDIA lens.

**6.4** In collaboration with intersectional disability-led and disability-focused organizations, support training opportunities on disability inclusion, accessibility, and anti-ableism in early years and child care programs and services.

**6.5** Work in partnership with Indigenous-led organizations to build capacity for Indigenous cultural safety in all child care and EarlyON programs, and recognize that fostering Indigenous cultural safety is a shared responsibility across all partners.

**6.6** Work with Indigenous community partners to expand Indigenous-led EarlyON programs that provide intentional support for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children and families.

**6.7** Work with Black community partners to expand Black-led and Black-focused EarlyON programming that intentionally supports Black children and families.

**6.8** Champion an inclusive EarlyON system through professional learning and innovative pilots to develop culturally safe and responsive programming.

**6.9** Work with Black community partners and staff to better understand and identify sector-level solutions to address anti-Black racism experienced by child care and early years staff.

# Strategic Priorities and Actions for 2025-2030



## STRATEGIC PRIORITY 7: CONNECT CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES WITH ESSENTIAL SUPPORT SERVICES

**This priority is about** supporting service integration and connecting families with programs and human services to address diverse and holistic child and family needs. Early years and child care services are part of a network of support that contributes to a child's overall development and well-being. These supports encompass social determinants of health such as quality education, economic stability, food security, housing stability, community engagement, and culturally safe health care. Promoting integrated services and building a clear pathway to these services is critical in helping families respond to the challenges they face in Toronto.

**7.1** In collaboration with City divisions and community partners, work toward a more coordinated and integrated human services experience for all families entering the child care and early years system.

**7.2** Identify opportunities within the early learning and child care system to promote children's well-being across a broader range of outcomes.

**7.3** Increase families' awareness of and participation in EarlyON services through localized and intentional outreach.

**7.4** Work closely with school boards to coordinate resources and strategies supporting a seamless transition from child care into school.

**7.5** Continue to champion coordination, integration, and collaboration across sector partners that serve children and families through the Toronto Child and Family Network and other appropriate opportunities.

# Fatima's Story

With the promise of better opportunities for herself and her family, Fatima moved to Toronto from South Asia 12 years ago. She now lives in the city with her husband and two children, aged 8 and 2 years. A confident and practical individual, she is an internationally trained engineering professional. Since arriving in Canada, she has faced numerous hurdles in finding opportunities aligned with her skills and experience, leaving her to question her belief in the Canadian dream. Although

Fatima was an engineer in her home country, she hasn't been able to work in her discipline in Canada because her training and credentials are not recognized here. Realizing the need to adapt to her reality, Fatima enrolled in a college certificate program and also works part-time to support her family. Her husband works 14-hour days.

Her youngest child has speech and language development delays. Fatima has been advised to enrol them in child care but she cannot find an available space. She has heard about the tailored supports offered through the Every Child Belongs program, but has also been told that she needs access to child care in order for her youngest to benefit from these resources. Her oldest child needs after-school care but, again, no space is available. As a result, Fatima must pick up her school-age child at 3 p.m., which is very challenging for her work and school schedule.



**"I'm studying and doing a part-time job, I need day care for my career. In my area there is no [child care] seat available for my kid. For working women it is very difficult. At 3 p.m. we pick up our kids that is far from our home ...So either I need to quit my job or my spouse needs to quit his job."**

**- Fatima**



Fatima is considering quitting her part-time job. The extensive load she carries as mother, student, colleague, and wife is taking a toll on her mental health. She refuses to let her current challenges invalidate her past accomplishments and success, but it is hard not to feel discouraged. Having more child care spaces that offer extended hours to accommodate her family's work and schooling hours would make a big difference for Fatima and her family.

**Please note:** These stories are fictional but were drawn from real experiences of Toronto families navigating the child care and early years system in Toronto.



# Priorities, Actions, and Monitoring Impacts

## Implementation, Progress Monitoring, and Evaluation

Amid transformation, progress on these strategic priorities will depend on strong partnerships with all sector partners. Children's Services will work with the community and early years and child care system partners to develop plans to implement strategic actions. In developing these implementation plans, Children's Services is committed to working with Indigenous-led organizations, operators, agencies, English and French school boards, advocates, families, post-secondary institutions, other City divisions, and additional sector and human services partners. These plans will detail the deliverables and timelines associated with strategic actions over the term of the Service Plan.

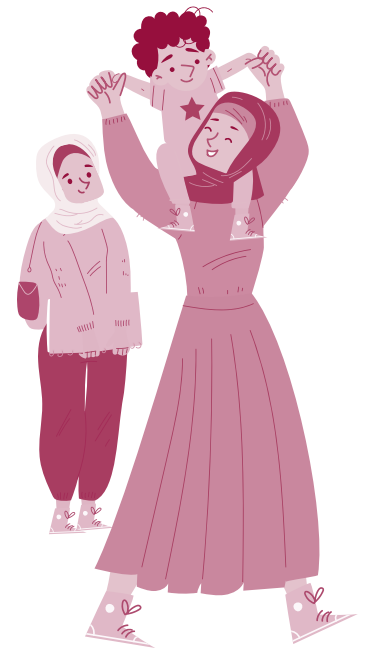
This Service Plan introduces select indicators designed to track systems-level trends related to the strategic priorities and their outcomes. These systems-level trends represent the collective result of multiple inputs that shape the early years and child care sector today. By monitoring the progress and trends in the sector, we can observe changes on an ongoing basis and detect emerging issues while they are still current. This enables Children's Services to respond in a timely manner and dedicate additional resources to areas of need.

While tracking indicators supports an understanding of the overall "health" of the sector, monitoring alone will not help determine the effectiveness of various policy and program interventions. Instead, well-designed evaluations will help assess the unique impacts of select policy and program

changes on specific outcomes, separate from wider economic, political, and sector-level forces. In this way, efforts to create change can be measured using rigorous research methods via qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Monitoring and evaluation activities will approach data collection and analysis in a responsible and equity-focused manner, being mindful of the historic and current impacts of sociodemographic data collection and other research on communities made vulnerable by systemic and institutional oppression.

The preliminary indicators presented in Table 3 are aligned with specific outcomes and actions that support the strategic priorities. Monitoring these indicators, coupled with rigorous evaluation plans, will support accountability, data-informed decision making, and early recognition and resolution of emerging issues. Following evidence-informed practices, the approach to monitoring and evaluation will remain flexible to ensure the best available data and indicators are applied.



# Priorities, Actions, and Monitoring Impacts

The indicators presented below are preliminary to allow for collaborative development and confirmation of system-level indicators. Where possible, analysis of these data will look at differences between sociodemographic categories, program age groups, wards, and auspices. Indicator development, as well as the data collection, analysis, and reporting process, will take an equity-focused approach to ensure that this work benefits all families and children, particularly those from equity-denied communities.

**Table 3: Preliminary indicators intended to measure systems-level trends**

Strategic Priorities	Preliminary Indicators
1: Advance self-determination with Indigenous organizations and families in the early years and child care sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children's Services will work with Indigenous partners to co-create indicators that reflect the priorities and desired outcomes of Indigenous children, families, and service providers in Toronto. These indicators will be included in the Indigenous-led Service plan.</li> </ul>
2: Expand the early learning and child care system to meet the needs of children and their families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of spaces (operating capacity)</li> <li>Number of licensed child care centres                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of Indigenous-led child care centres</li> </ul> </li> <li>Number of licensed home child care agencies and providers</li> <li>Number of EarlyON sites</li> <li>Number of EarlyON service hours</li> <li>Number of planned capital projects</li> </ul>
3: Remove barriers to accessing child care and early years services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child care access rate (number of spaces compared to the total child population by ward)</li> <li>Number and percentage of children in receipt of fee-subsidy compared to the total child population</li> <li>Number and percentage of children with an assessed fee of \$0</li> <li>Number and percentage of children accessing Childcare Support Funds</li> <li>Number and percentage of families that found:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the information from the City of Toronto about child care and early years services easy to understand and find</li> <li>child care when they needed it</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

# Priorities, Actions, and Monitoring Impacts

4: Support a thriving early years and child care workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Centre-level wage rates (average and range)</li> <li>• Number of Registered Early Childhood Educators in good standing</li> <li>• Average number of years as a Registered Early Childhood Educator before resignation</li> <li>• Number and percentage of workforce: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• satisfied with benefits</li> <li>• satisfied with compensation</li> <li>• satisfied with professional development and support</li> <li>• intending to leave the field in the next five years</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
5: Champion a high-quality early learning and child care system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number and percentage of group and home child care providers participating in the AQI</li> <li>• Average AQI score over time and by auspice</li> </ul>
6: Centre inclusion in the early years and child care sector for children, families, and staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AQI inclusion scores</li> <li>• Number and percentage of families self-reporting: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• feeling welcome and safe</li> <li>• experiencing discrimination</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Number and percentage of the workforce self-reporting: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• experiencing discrimination</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
7: Connect families with essential family support services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (In development) Number of referrals to and from family support services</li> <li>• (In development) Number of outreach and educational initiatives</li> <li>• Number and percentage of families whose child care connected them with the supports their family needed</li> </ul>



# Priorities, Actions, and Monitoring Impacts

## Moving Forward

The early years and child care system in Toronto is at a critical juncture, presenting many exciting opportunities for transformation. This Service Plan sets a path forward for Toronto Children's Services, working together with sector partners, families, and communities to grow and support an early years and child care system that is inclusive, accessible, and responsive to current and future needs. Grounded in commitments to reconciliation, equity, diversity, inclusion, accessibility, quality, expansion, workforce well-being, and family support, this Plan aligns with key City of Toronto corporate strategies and reflects our collective responsibility to nurture a system where every child and family can thrive.

Recognizing the dynamic nature of the sector, the 2025-2030 Service Plan is a living document intended to be responsive to changing needs in the early years and child care sector and shifting priorities among families, service providers, and system partners. Children's Services is committed to continued engagement with sector partners throughout the term of this Plan and will consult with families, staff, and service providers at regular and relevant intervals. We also recognize the importance of maintaining flexibility; as this plan is implemented, some new actions may be needed and others may be resolved. Together, we have an opportunity to continue shaping a more equitable and inclusive system that reflects the strengths and resilience of Toronto's children, families, and communities.



An adult caregiver holds a young child indoors

# Appendices



Children's name tags on wicker baskets upon a shelf

# Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

This glossary aims to define terms in the context of the 2025-2030 Service Plan. These terms may be used differently throughout the sector, in other sectors, and by other orders of government and are not necessarily universal definitions.

**2SLGBTQ+** – This acronym stands for Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer, with the plus sign (+) signifying additional sexual and gender identities not explicitly captured in the acronym. The term Two Spirit is used by Indigenous peoples for those who identify as having masculine and feminine spirit, or it can describe a person's sexual, gender, and spiritual identity. Two Spirit is a traditional role within Indigenous communities.

**Affordability** – The ability of families to pay for the child care they may want or need for their child(ren). The ability to afford child care is family-specific and can relate to other key factors such as housing, food security, income, and education.

**Age Groups** – Refers to groupings in licensed child care that include a certain range of ages. In the Service Plan, the age groups listed below may often be referred to more simply, not including the indication of a group. The various age groups are defined as follows:

**Infant Group** – Typically includes children aged 0 to 18 months.

**Toddler Group** – Typically includes children aged 18 to 30 months.

**Preschool Group** – Typically includes children aged 30 months up to 6 years.

**Kindergarten Group** – Typically includes children aged 44 to 68 months.

**School-Age Group** – Typically includes children aged 68 months to 12 years.

**Anti-Black Racism** – Policies and practices embedded in Canadian institutions that reflect and reinforce beliefs, attitudes, prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination directed at people of African descent and rooted in the history and ongoing legacy of enslavement and colonization in Canada.

**Auspice** – Refers to who owns and operates licensed child care. Auspices in child care include not-for-profit, for-profit, and publicly operated child care. According to provincial guidance, all home child care agencies are considered not-for-profit with respect to the auspice target, regardless of auspice. In practice, there are not-for-profit, for-profit, and publicly operated home child care agencies.

**B3 Organization** – Not-for-profit organizations that are Black-led, Black-focused, and Black-serving—there is a majority Black leadership and the majority of participants or service users identify as Black. These organizations have a clear, explicit mandate to serve Black communities using culturally grounded, African-centered approaches.



# Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

**Early Years and Child Care** – A system of programs and services managed by Children’s Services for children aged 0 to 12 and their families that promote the learning, development, health, and well-being of children.

**Publicly Operated** – Licensed child care that is delivered and operated by the municipality, in this case the City of Toronto.

**Early Childhood Educator (ECE)** – The professional designation for individuals with post-secondary qualifications in early childhood development. ECEs are registered with the College of ECEs, which is responsible for the planning and delivery of inclusive and play-based learning and care programs that promote healthy development for children aged 0 to 12.

**Extra Support Needs** – In the context of the Every Child Belongs (ECB) program, this term refers to the needs of a child with a permanent, temporary, or episodic disability, whether diagnosed or undiagnosed—including cognitive, physical, social, emotional, communication, and developmental disabilities—who requires tailored or additional support to ensure their full participation, access, dignity, and right to thrive.

**Equity-Denied** – Communities that have faced and continue to face systemic oppression, exclusion, and barriers to opportunities, resources, and power. These injustices are rooted in historical and ongoing discrimination, creating cycles of disadvantage. Achieving equity or fairness requires justice and reparation to address these harms and ensure full participation in society. Groups generally considered equity-denied include Indigenous peoples, Black communities, women, people with

disabilities, 2SLGBTQ+ persons, religious minority groups, racialized people, and newcomers. The term “equity-denied” is sometimes used interchangeably with the term “equity-deserving”. The choice between these terms should be guided by community preference and context.

**Family** – Defined broadly to encompass all cultural, biological, legal, and chosen relationships where individuals assume responsibilities for one another’s care and well-being. This includes parents and children (biological, adoptive, or foster), extended relatives such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, auncles, blended families, chosen kin, and community or cultural caregivers who share a bond of mutual support. This definition affirms that families may be created by choice, biology, adoption, or cultural ties, and includes 2SLGBTQ+ families, chosen kin, and multigenerational households.

**For-Profit** – Child care operating with a business model that aims to make a profit that can be distributed to the owners/shareholders of an organization.

**Home Child Care Provider** – Individuals who are contracted by licensed home child care agencies to provide child care for up to six children aged 0 to 12 in their homes. These providers operate under agency oversight and provincial standards.

**Indigenous Communities** – A collective term recognizing the diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples living in Toronto, each with distinct cultures, governance structures, and histories. While grouped together for certain policy or service delivery contexts, these communities represent varied identities



# Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

and traditions that must be acknowledged and respected individually.

**Indigenous-Led** – Describes an organization or initiative where a majority of the decision-making body self-identifies as First Nations, Inuit, or Métis. Indigenous-led organizations integrate Indigenous ways of knowing and being into their governance, programs, and services, ensuring that Indigenous perspectives drive the organization’s vision and activities.

**Indigenous Organization** – Refers to non-profit or community-based organizations founded by and for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, in which Indigenous members hold a majority in governance and leadership roles. These organizations operate for the collective, social, or cultural benefit of Indigenous communities, guided by Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

**Indigenous Self-Determination** – The inherent right of Indigenous peoples to freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development and to govern their own affairs, including community-controlled services, resources, and early years and child care programming.

**Licensed Child Care** – Child care that is regulated by the Ministry of Education. Licensed child care is provided in either a centre or through a home child care setting for children aged 0 to 12.

**Middle Years Programs** – Programs and services providing essential supports for children aged 6 to 12, including child care, before-and-after-school programs, Extended Day Programs, and authorized recreation programming.

**Newcomers** – Defined broadly as individuals and families who have arrived or settled in Toronto from outside Canada within the past ten years, including immigrants, refugees, refugee claimants, temporary residents, and undocumented persons.

**Not-For-Profit** – Child care organizations that operate for a purpose other than generating profit, including publicly operated child care. Organizations may generate a profit, but the surplus of earnings is reinvested toward enhancing child care services.

**Quality** – The effectiveness and impact of the environment, curriculum, educator interactions, cultural relevance, and overall support offered to children and families in early years and child care programs.

**Racialized** – Refers to individuals and groups who are assigned racial identities or meanings in ways that negatively affect their social, economic, and political opportunities. Often, it describes communities that do not identify as White, who face systemic barriers, discrimination, and inequities due to historically rooted and ongoing racism in society.

**Reconciliation, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Accessibility (REDIA)** – A guiding framework composed of the following five interrelated principles:

**Reconciliation** – Ongoing, active process of redressing colonial harms, grounded in truth-sharing and healing relationships with Indigenous peoples.

**Equity** – Actively identifying and removing systemic barriers so historically marginalized groups achieve just outcomes.

# Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

**Diversity** – Valuing and celebrating the range of human differences, such as culture, race, gender, ability, and more, as sources of strength.

**Inclusion** – Building environments and systems in which all people can meaningfully participate, recognizing that different groups require different supports and approaches.

**Accessibility** – Identifying, preventing, and removing barriers (physical, social, linguistic, economic, etc.) to ensure everyone can fully access and benefit from programs, services, and information.

**Service Access** – The ability to participate and enrol in early years and child care services and programs without facing barriers. Some of these barriers may include cost, location, availability of spaces, physical barriers, and culturally appropriate and relevant programming. In the report, this is often simply referred to as access.



A child's hand draws on construction paper with a crayon

# Appendix B: Directed Growth Plan

A key aspect of the ongoing implementation of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreement is the Ministry of Education's direction to service system managers to develop Directed Growth Plans that ensure new CWELCC-funded spaces are prioritized in alignment with the Province's Access and Inclusion Framework. The Access and Inclusion Framework supports service system managers with developing and implementing local service plans with an increased focus on access and inclusion. The Province's vision for access and inclusion is for more children of all abilities and socioeconomic backgrounds to actively and meaningfully participate in child care, and to be supported in forming authentic, caring relationships with their peers and educators.

Through CWELCC, the Province provides each service system manager with a five-year target for the creation of community- and school-based spaces. The Province also sets direction on an auspice ratio that each service system manager must minimally meet in order for Ontario to achieve its goal of ensuring at least 70% of total licensed child care spaces are delivered by not-for-profit licensed providers by the end of the Ontario-CWELCC agreement.

## Priority Areas:

Following provincial directives and the Access and Inclusion Framework, Children's Services has identified priority areas for CWELCC expansion. Using a combination of targets from the Licensed Child Care Growth Strategy, income, and demographic data from the Census, and population growth projections, Children's Services employed a data-informed and equity-driven approach to identify priority wards for expansion under

CWELCC. Based on the analysis, all 25 City of Toronto wards were identified as priorities and therefore eligible for expansion. The wards were subsequently grouped into high, medium and lower priority areas based on the degree to which the ward showed a shortfall in licensed child care spaces compared to the population of children 0 to 4 years, combined with higher proportions of the population of children 0 to 5 years living in low income and one or more of the following underserved populations identified in the Province's Access and Inclusion Framework: Francophone, Indigenous, Black, racialized, and newcomer communities (see Figure 5). These categories were developed to determine which wards would be considered the highest priority for expansion if sufficient funding is not available to approve all expansion requests.

## Expansion Applications:

The Directed Growth Plan is operationalized via the expansion process. Children's Services launched its first CWELCC expansion application window in 2023, which prioritized applications aligned to the Access and Inclusion Framework, auspice ratio considerations, and age and geographic equity of child care availability. In 2024, the division further refined its application criteria to prioritize Indigenous, Francophone, and not-for-profit agencies as well as for-profit agencies expanding in high priority wards. As new funding opportunities become available, information will be shared with the sector.



# Appendix B: Directed Growth Plan

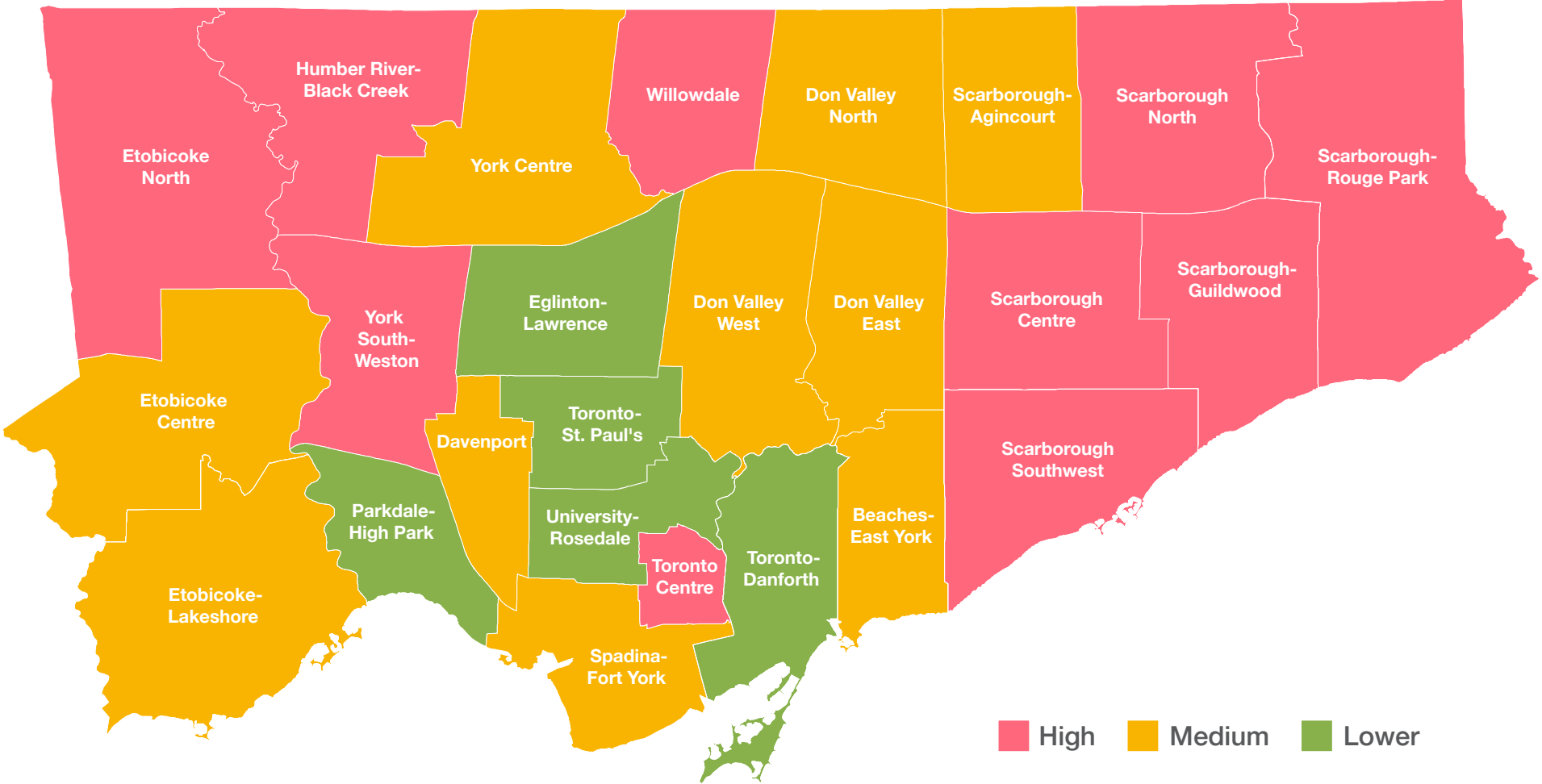


Figure 5. Priority Levels for CWELCC Expansion by Toronto Wards<sup>49</sup>

# Appendix C: Overview of Early Years and Child Care Services in Toronto

The child care sector comprises a suite of services providing a continuum of care and programming for children from birth to age 12.

Toronto's child care system includes centre- and home-based environments delivered by public, not-for-profit, and for-profit organizations. The not-for-profit sector makes up the majority of Toronto's licensed child care system. For school-age children, before-and-after programs are delivered by school board and community partners; they include licensed child care programs, after-school recreation care (ARC), extended day programs (EDP), and authorized recreational and skill-building programs.

## Licensed Centre-Based Child Care

Licensed child care centres offer services to children aged 0 to 12, including before-and-after school care. In licensed care, children are grouped based on their age so they are interacting, learning, and socializing with peers. To encourage safe, quality learning, licensed centres must adhere to provincial educator-to-child ratios and all rooms must be led by a Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE).

## Licensed Home Child Care

Licensed home child care agencies offer early learning and child care in approved provider homes for children aged 0 to 12. This model offers increased flexibility for families with non-traditional schedules, which may include those who work shifts or those who have a need or preference for part-time, weekend, or overnight care. Each licensed home child care provider may provide care for a maximum of six children in a mix of age groupings where siblings can be together.

## Spotlight: Promoting Quality Early Learning Experiences

The Assessment for Quality Improvement (AQI) is Canada's only validated quality rating improvement system for child care. Developed in partnership with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the AQI is an evidence-based tool used to assess, evaluate, monitor, and improve the quality of child care. Quality assessments are a requirement for licensed child care programs that hold a Service Agreement for Fee Subsidy with Children's Services.

The AQI assesses quality across three main areas: programming, the learning environment, and interactions between educators and children. Assessments take place annually and produce quality ratings that operators use to celebrate successes and set improvement goals.

AQI scores for infant, toddler, and preschool rooms in centres with a fee subsidy service agreement have seen continued improvements in quality since 2014.

# Appendix C: Overview of Early Years and Child Care Services in Toronto

## Toronto Early Learning & Child Care Centres (TELCCS)

TELCCS is directly operated by the City of Toronto, including 39 licensed centres and one licensed home child care agency (Toronto Home Child Care). Publicly operated care provides an environment to test innovative approaches in early learning. TELCCS centres are located primarily in high-need, under-resourced neighborhoods in Etobicoke, North York, and Scarborough. TELCCS is committed to providing high-quality, inclusive programs that support the health, well-being, and learning of every child.

## EarlyON Child and Family Centres

EarlyON centres provide free drop-in programs for children aged 0 to 6 and their caregivers. EarlyON centres follow a family support model rooted in community development, helping caregivers build confidence, reduce isolation, and strengthen early development. EarlyON offers programming that welcomes 2SLGBTQ+ families, fosters inclusive spaces for Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities, and celebrates linguistic diversity.

## Fee Subsidy

Child care fee subsidies help offset all or part of the cost of child care for eligible low-income families enrolled in licensed child care and Extended Day Programs. Fee subsidies are critical to help families with low income access child care even with CWELCC fee reductions.

## Every Child Belongs

Embedding a child- and family-centred approach, Every Child Belongs (ECB) works together with licensed child care and EarlyON programs in Toronto to provide services for children who need extra support, including those with an identified disability. ECB services—delivered by Resource Consultants who support program staff and home child care providers to build inclusive environments and develop strategies that enable meaningful participation of children—are available to licensed child care providers and EarlyON centres and are jointly funded by the City of Toronto and the Ministry of Education. Child Care Support Funds are also available to child care programs that require short-term staff support to relieve regular staff so they can assist children with extra support needs in the program.



A tub full of crayons

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