



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

Community Engagement, Literature Review, and Environmental Scan Summary

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Background

Toronto's 2025-2030 Early Years and Child Care Service Plan (Service Plan) guides the planning and delivery of early learning and child care services in the city. As Service System Manager, Toronto Children's Services is required to consult and cooperate with sector partners in the development and implementation of the Plan. Accordingly, the Service Plan reflects the needs of community and sector partners and outlines strategic priorities for a five-year period.

The development of the Service Plan was informed by an environmental scan, literature review, and community engagement activities. More specifically, learnings from these activities were key drivers in the development of the strategic priorities and actions included in the Service Plan. This document accompanies the 2025-2030 Service Plan and summarizes the key findings from the environmental scan, literature review, and community engagement.

Methods: Engagement and Research Process

In developing the 2025-2030 Service Plan, Toronto Children's Services engaged directly with families, service providers, and system partners and completed a review of Indigenous-focused literature, sector research, census information, and internal administrative data. The following sections detail the research and community engagement approach.

Indigenous-Focused Literature Review

Service planning included a review of Indigenous-led research and community-based reports. This involved reviewing 29 Indigenous-led reports outlining actions and recommendations on early years and child care called for by Indigenous communities. This approach sought to respect Indigenous self-determination by integrating community-driven recommendations as the basis for service planning.

Reports that responded to Indigenous needs in the provincial and national context were reviewed alongside reports that were specific to local early years and child care needs for urban Indigenous communities. Several key reports reviewed included the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions Final Report, The Journey Together, All Our Voices Final Report, and the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, along with other reports produced by local Indigenous

communities.^{1,2,3,4} Reviewing the needs of Indigenous communities in Toronto was done in response to recommendations from community, to avoid over-consulting Indigenous families and service providers, and to ensure questions asked during any engagements were meaningful and informed.

Environmental Scan

The environmental scan explored the key factors impacting families and the early years and child care system in Toronto. This scan reviewed the social determinants of health that influence how families and children interact with the early years and child care system. It also reviewed data on the most influential drivers shaping the sector, illustrating the connections between the regulatory, policy, and funding landscape and the lived realities of operators, staff, and families and children in Toronto.

The scan included primary, secondary, tertiary, and grey literature as well as Children's Services administrative data. Information on the early years and child care sector was sourced from government, academic, and community-based publications to reflect experiences of all sector partners. The literature search was guided by challenges and opportunities identified via community engagement and consultation with Children's Services staff.

Community and Sector Engagement

Community engagement for the 2025-2030 Service Plan focused on reaching parents and caregivers, operators, staff, and system partners. Family engagement included a combination of surveys and focus groups, with a particular focus on hearing from parents and caregivers of children aged 0 to 12 who had experience using or attempting to access early years and child care services. Understanding that the voices of families excluded from the system are often overlooked in strategic planning processes, recruitment for the focus groups intentionally sought families not accessing early years and child care programs and services.

The online survey of parents and caregivers was available in June 2024 and featured questions about child care arrangements, the Assessment for Quality Improvement (AQI), Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC), EarlyON, and family supports. Family focus groups aimed to understand the needs, opportunities and barriers experienced by families with diverse backgrounds in Toronto when interacting with child care and early years services. Family focus groups were organized in collaboration with community-based organizations serving Indigenous, Black, and

¹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to action*. <https://nctr.ca/publications-and-reports/reports/>

² Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council . (2017). *Journey together needs assessment: Expanding Indigenous-led early years programs in Toronto*. https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/978b-CS-Indigenous_needs.pdf

³ Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council & Well Living House. (2019). *All our voices: Final report*. <https://tassc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/All-Our-Voices-Complete-v3.pdf>

⁴ National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered indigenous Women and Girls. (2019). *Reclaiming power and place: The final report of the national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls* (Volume 1a). https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final_Report_Vol_1a-1.pdf

equity-denied groups as well as organizations providing early years and child care across the city. The process utilized an intentional approach to hearing from Indigenous, Black, Francophone, newcomer, undocumented, 2SLGBTQ+, and low-income parents and caregivers, as well as families of children with disabilities.

Sector engagement included focus groups and facilitated discussions with 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, Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Roundtable participants, and Children's Services staff.⁵

Key Learnings

The following sections discuss the key findings from the Indigenous-focused literature review, environmental scan, and community engagement. Findings are organized into key themes that represent opportunities and challenges which align with strategic priorities in the Service Plan.

Indigenous-Focused Literature Review

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

As a starting point, over 30 reports related to Indigenous child care and early years programs and services were reviewed. Based on the review, the need for Indigenous-specific programming that takes a holistic family-centered approach, inclusive of multiple generations, and age groups was clear.⁶ The need for welcoming, inclusive, and culturally appropriate programming for Two Spirit children and families is well known but remains a major gap in the early years and child care system in Toronto.⁷ Indigenous families live and work in all parts of Toronto; when planning these programs, addressing geographic barriers must be taken into consideration. A key step is ensuring geographic equity by creating multiple Indigenous-led programs across the city, accompanied by transportation subsidies or shuttle services to mitigate barriers for

⁵ Note that the perspectives of the workforce (e.g., Registered Early Childhood Educators, early childhood assistants, etc.) were the focus of a recent TCS study and the Knowing our Numbers initiative. To avoid duplication of efforts and over consultation, these inputs were used to inform the Service Plan.

⁶ Raising the Village. (2016). *Measuring the well-being of children and families in Toronto: Part 2 Indigenous outcomes*. <https://raisingthevillage.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Raising-the-Village-Part-2-Indigenous-Outcomes-April-2016-AODA.pdf>

⁷ National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered indigenous Women and Girls. (2019). *Reclaiming power and place: The final report of the national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls* (Volume 1a). https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final_Report_Vol_1a-1.pdf

families. Such supports help urban Indigenous families living outside the downtown core and reflect recommendations from the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council.^{8,9}

Much of the findings in the Indigenous-focused literature review echoed what we heard from Indigenous families and Indigenous early years and child care service providers (see [Community Engagement](#) below). Services for Indigenous children and families must be based in self-determination, an inherent right that is underscored in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).¹⁰ Calls from community emphasize the importance of Indigenous-led planning to expand child care and early years services. 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 the Indigenous community.

Environmental Scan

Several interconnected factors shape the policy and planning landscape for early years and child care services in Toronto. The introduction of Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system, supply and demand for child care, affordability, access, and family preferences for child care arrangements and types of early years services all act as drivers that influence local policy decisions and planning considerations.

Toronto's child care system must expand to meet the needs of families

Demand exceeds supply of spaces

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.¹¹ This includes 42,707 spaces for infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children and 39,852 spaces for kindergarten and school-age. In 2017, Children's Services' Licensed Child Care Growth Strategy aimed to create 30,000 more child care spaces for children aged 0-4 by 2026, for a total of 70,000.¹² This target would serve 50% of all children aged 0 to 4 in the city. While Toronto's CWELCC allocation (as of March 2025) of 12,387 supports this goal, it does not meet the city's current and projected demand for child care. Research estimates suggest that at daily rates of \$20

⁸ Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council. (2011). *Toronto Aboriginal Research Project (TARP): Final report*. <https://tarp.indigenousto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/tarp-final-report2011.pdf>

⁹ Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council. (2016). *Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council: Community scan summary*. https://tassc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/community_scan_summary.pdf

¹⁰ United Nations (General Assembly). (2007). *Declaration on the rights of Indigenous people*. https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

¹¹ Toronto Children's Services. (2024). *Fact sheet on early learning and child care in Toronto*. Retrieved June 16, 2025 from <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/data-research-maps/research-reports/children/>

¹² Toronto Children's Services. (2017). *Toronto's licensed child care growth strategy for children under 4 2017 – 2026*. <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/9791-Torontos-Licensed-Child-Care-Growth-Strategy.pdf>

per day, nearly 87,000 child care spaces would be needed to meet demand, potentially serving 52% of children aged 0 to 5.¹³

The gap between space availability and demand creates significant challenges in securing child care for families living in Toronto. In a 2024 survey of Toronto child care operators, 71% reported somewhat or much longer waitlists since the introduction of CWELCC, suggesting that more affordable spaces are needed in Toronto.¹⁴

Limited capital investments restrict growth

Despite new investments with CWELCC, longstanding barriers to expansion persist. Expansion efforts are limited by insufficient capital funding, especially for not-for-profit operators who face substantial barriers in accessing resources to build and grow their operations. Additionally, staffing new CWELCC spaces requires a robust workforce, but the sector continues to experience significant recruitment and retention challenges. TCS continues to advocate for the additional funding from higher orders of government to meet the growing demand from families.¹⁵ In addition, the implementation of new spaces requires an equity-based approach to ensure access across all neighbourhoods, particularly in historically underserved areas with low access rates.¹⁶

Toronto's families face systemic barriers to accessing affordable child care

Many families 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.^{17,18} Indigenous, Black, and newcomer families have been disproportionately impacted by these economic stressors.^{19,20} Given the historically high child care fees in Toronto, the CWELCC goal of reducing fees to an average of \$10 per day by 2026 is a positive change for families and the child care

¹³ Cleveland, Krashinsky, Colley, & Avery-Nunez. (2016). *City of Toronto licensed child care demand and affordability study*. <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/8d0a-Community-Services-and-Facilities-Toronto-Demand-Affordability-Study-2016.pdf>

¹⁴ Toronto Children's Services. (2024). *Operator survey*. Internal report: unpublished.

¹⁵ City of Toronto. (2024). *Implementation of the Canada-wide early learning and child care system and 2025 to 2029 child care and early years service plan: Update*. <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2024/ec/bgrd/backgroundfile-250457.pdf>

¹⁶ Government of Ontario. (2023). *Ontario's access and inclusion framework*. <https://files.ontario.ca/edu-access-and-inclusion-framework-en-2023-07-07.pdf>

¹⁷ Statistics Canada. (2025). *Consumer price index portal*. https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/subjects-start/prices_and_price_indexes/consumer_price_indexes

¹⁸ Center for Demographics and Policy. (2024). *Demographia international housing affordability*. Chapman University. <https://www.demographia.com/dhi.pdf>

¹⁹ Statistics Canada. (2025). *Poverty and low-income statistics by selected demographic characteristics*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110009301&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.8&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2015&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2022&referencePeriods=20150101%2C20220101>

²⁰ Statistics Canada. (2025). *Poverty among racialized groups across generations*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2023008/article/00002-eng.htm>

sector.^{21,22,23} However, even at \$10 per day, many families cannot afford child care without the financial support of a child care fee subsidy. In 2024, approximately 74% families in receipt of fee subsidy could not afford child care at a rate of \$10 per day, illustrating the continued importance of financial support even with reduced fees.²⁴ Families in receipt of fee subsidy largely come from equity-denied communities. A 2023 survey of families in receipt of fee subsidy (n=1,197) showed that many respondents self-identified as women (88%), were from one-parent households (47%), were Black (30%), and were born outside of Canada (75%).²⁵ Presently there are 30,700 fee-subsidies available for eligible low-income children in the city, but the demand for subsidies greatly exceeds availability. The ongoing implementation of CWELCC must be strategic to ensure the most vulnerable children have access, especially as reduced fees increase demand.

CWELCC has contributed 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, increasing school-age fees to cover those costs is the only recourse for many operators. Between 2021 and 2025, the median daily school-age fee has increased by 11% (while all other age groups have seen decreases ranging from 49% to 75% over the same period).²⁶ At the same time, the number of school-age spaces is declining. Part of this decline may be due to a change in demographics, shifting preferences for child care (especially after the pandemic and the rise of working from home), or rising fees. Higher fees for school-age care can worsen access for families in low-income or racialized communities and may lead to a further decline in demand. Such cascading impacts increase concern for the stability and viability of the school age system.

Access to care varies across the city

The availability of child care spaces varies across Toronto. While improvements have been made to increase service levels across the city, certain areas, particularly parts of

²¹ Macdonald, D., & Friendly, M. (2014). *The parent trap: Child care fees in Canada's big cities*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2014/11/Parent_Trapp.pdf

²² Macdonald, D., & Friendly, M. (2020). *In progress: Child care fees in Canada 2019*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. https://www.policyalternatives.ca/wp-content/uploads/attachments/In%20progress_Child%20care%20fees%20in%20Canada%20in%202019_march12.pdf

²³ Macdonald, D., & Friendly, M. (2021). *Sounding the alarm: COVID-19's impact on Canada's precarious child care sector*. <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/wp-content/uploads/attachments/Sounding%20the%20alarm.pdf>

²⁴ Toronto Children's Services. (2024). *Client Services*. Internal data: unpublished.

²⁵ Toronto Children's Services. (2023). *Client survey report*. Internal report: unpublished.

²⁶ Toronto Children's Services. (2025). *Strategic Business and Financial Services*. Internal data: unpublished

Scarborough and Etobicoke where there tend to be a greater number of people from equity-denied groups, continue to be underserved.²⁷ Communities with a higher prevalence of low-income residents, fewer English-speaking households, and more residents from Black and racialized communities have fewer licensed child spaces per child.²⁸ These data highlight the importance of equity-based planning and directed growth in licensed child care in underserved communities with high socio-economic needs.

Lack of access disproportionately impacts equity-denied families

Lack of access to child care can have significant impacts on families; many have to change their work schedule, balance different care arrangements, or work less.²⁹ Low-income and one-parent families are more likely to postpone or discontinue their educational pursuits or delay their return to work compared to higher-income or two-parent families, perpetuating a vicious cycle of poverty.³⁰ Child care shortages also deprive low-income and precariously employed parents of the ability to choose a space that aligns with their needs, preferences, and quality standards, as they are often forced to accept the first space that becomes available in order to keep their job.³¹

Service navigation compounds access challenges

High demand for services, coupled with limited availability, is further compounded by the difficulties of navigating the early years and child care system. These challenges may include barriers to accessing information, finding care that meets the specific needs of a family, securing a space, and covering the costs of care. Service navigation can be insurmountable for families whose first language is not English, who are new to Canada, unfamiliar with the system, or experiencing any combination of income, resource, or time scarcity.^{32,33} In response to these barriers, service navigation support can help parents and caregivers find their way in complex systems of information and resources available to them. These services may include interpretation and translation of information, referrals, help with planning, connections to peers, and help with building the skills needed to take advantage of difficult-to-access supports. Service navigation is

²⁷ City of Toronto. (2023). *Update on Canada-wide early learning and child care agreement implementation in Toronto*. <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2023/ec/bgrd/backgroundfile-236633.pdf>

²⁸ Fox, T. (2024). *Exploring equity in child care: A data-driven analysis of access and demand*. <https://open.toronto.ca/exploring-equity-in-child-care-a-data-driven-analysis-of-access-and-demand/>

²⁹ Zhang, S., Garner, R., Heidinger, L., & Findlay, L. (2021). *Parents' use of child care services and differences in use by mothers' employment status*. Insights on Canadian Society. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00007-eng.htm>

³⁰ Zhang, S., Garner, R., Heidinger, L., & Findlay, L. (2021). *Parents' use of child care services and differences in use by mothers' employment status*. Insights on Canadian Society. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00007-eng.htm>

³¹ Davidson, A. M., Burns, S., Hampton, D., White, L., & Perlman, M. (2022). Policy frameworks and parental choice: Using conjoint analysis to understand parental decision making for child care. *Journal of Family Issues*, 43(5), 1335-1363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X211022386>

³² Perlman, M., Varmuza, P., & Burns, S. (2023). *Ontario needs to remove barriers to child-care subsidies for low-income families*. <https://theconversation.com/ontario-needs-to-remove-barriers-to-child-care-subsidies-for-low-income-families-208396>

³³ Toronto Children's Services. (2024). *Toronto parent and caregiver survey*. Internal data: unpublished.

most helpful when it simplifies complex systems to help families secure services. Navigation should aim to reflect families' evolving needs and be delivered through relationships based on trust and connection.³⁴ Addressing barriers and inequities is of utmost importance to ensure that lower-income families and families not yet enrolled in child care have the option to access care, regardless of neighbourhood or socioeconomic status.

New funding guidelines have contributed to unpredictability in the system

While CWELCC funding is a welcome and much needed investment, frequent changes to CWELCC guidelines and funding approaches have led to uncertainty about the sustainability of the system. One of the most significant policy changes has been the new provincial funding guidelines, especially the cost-based funding model which funds the typical costs of providing high-quality child care in a particular geographic region. However, provincial funding is limited to centres and agencies enrolled in the CWELCC program serving children aged 0 to 5 and centres and agencies exclusively serving children aged 6-12. As of January 2025, licensees exclusively serving children aged 0 to 5 who are not enrolled in CWELCC were ineligible to receive routine funding such as general operating and wage enhancement grants, as well as new fee subsidy funding. Ultimately, the early learning and child care continuum is interconnected; funding and policy changes in one area of the sector can result in unexpected impacts in other areas.

Families need options that are inclusive and high quality

Families have unique preferences for early years services

A high quality and inclusive system needs to consider the range of family needs and preferences. Parents choose child care based on a number of factors including work hours, available kin and community support, cost, and culturally-rooted ideas about raising children.^{35,36,37} Convenience in location is among the top factors driving child

³⁴ Ramos, M.F., Ryberg, R., Warren, J., Wernstedt-Lynch, C., & Martinez, M. (2022). *Supporting young parenting students with navigation services: Research brief*.

<https://www.childtrends.org/publications/supporting-young-parenting-students-with-navigation-services>

³⁵ Sanson, A., & Wise, S. (2000). *Child care in cultural context: Issues for new research* (Research Paper No. 22). Australian Institute of Family Studies. https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/RP22_0.pdf

³⁶ Dow, D. M. (2015). Caring for them Like family: How structure and culture simultaneously influence contemporary African American middle- and upper-middle-class mothers' kin and community child care choices. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 2(1), 72-86.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2332649215598785?journalCode=srea>

³⁷ Kingsbury, M., Findlay, L., Arim, R., & Wei, L. (2021). Differences in child care participation between immigrant and non-immigrant families. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 46(4), 46-58.

<https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/jcs/article/view/20123>

care choice, with many parents preferring child care near their home or child's school.^{38,39}

The notion of preference and choice for child care and early years services becomes more complex for families who require flexible hours of service. Precarious employment is on the rise, especially among women from Indigenous, Black, and equity-denied communities.⁴⁰ Precariously employed parents struggle to find child care that accommodates their work schedule.⁴¹ As the labour market continues to shift, extended hours and flexible models of care need to ensure working parents can equitably access child care and early years services.^{42,43}

Parents and caregivers also vary in their preferences for centre- or home-based programs. At the same time, others prefer informal care regardless of cost or convenience.⁴⁴ 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.^{45,46,47} Regardless of care needs, preferences, and the nuances driving these choices, all parents and caregivers value trust and safety of their children in any child care arrangement. The child care system must be responsive to the diverse needs of families.

³⁸ Kingsbury, M., Findlay, L., Arim, R., & Wei, L. (2021). Differences in child care participation between immigrant and non-immigrant families. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 46(4), 46-58. <https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/jcs/article/view/20123>

³⁹ Zhang, Garner, Heidinger, Findlay. (2021). *Parents' use of child care services and differences in use by mothers' employment status*. Insights on Canadian Society. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00007-eng.htm>

⁴⁰ Salter, K., Yasar, S., Bedell, J., Davis, A., Cole, C., Halperin., D., McGibbon., E. (2023). *Precarious employment, gig work and gender-based violence in Canada: Executive summary of a knowledge synthesis and recommendations for policy decision making*. https://womenconnect.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Summary-Report_Gig-Work-and-GBV-in-Canada-Nov-2023.pdf

⁴¹ Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario. (2013). *It's more than poverty: Employment precarity and household well-being*. https://pepso.ca/documents/2013_itsmorethanpoverty_report.pdf

⁴² Perlman, M., Varmuza, P., Burns, S. (2023). *Ontario needs to remove barriers to child-care subsidies for low-income families*. <https://theconversation.com/ontario-needs-to-remove-barriers-to-child-care-subsidies-for-low-income-families-208396>

⁴³ Statistics Canada. (2024). *Working in the gig economy – Statistical concepts and initial survey results*. https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/subjects-start/labour_working-gig-economy

⁴⁴ Smith, L., & Owens, V. (2023). *The Illusion of Parent Choice: Lessons Learned from BPC's Parent Survey Series*. Bipartisan Policy Center. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=wp-content/uploads/2023/05/BPC_ECI-Parent-Report_R04.pdf

⁴⁵ Dow, D. M. (2015). Caring for Them Like Family: How Structure and Culture Simultaneously Influence Contemporary African American Middle- and Upper-Middle-Class Mothers' Kin and Community Child Care Choices. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 2(1), 72-86. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2332649215598785?journalCode=srea>

⁴⁶ Kingsbury, M., Findlay, L., Arim, R., & Wei, L. (2021). Differences in child care participation between immigrant and nonimmigrant families. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 46-58. <http://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/jcs/article/view/20123>

⁴⁷ Wise, S., & Sanson, A. (2000). Child care in cultural context: Issues for new research (Research Paper No. 22). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/child-care-cultural-context>

Children with disabilities and extra support needs have a right to quality care

Families of children with extra support needs and disabilities face additional barriers securing child care that meets their needs and preferences. According to Every Child Belongs program data, the number of children requiring extra support has increased in recent years.⁴⁸ In addition to the number of children requiring support, operators report that the intensity of needs in child care programs is rising, evidenced by increased access to the highest level of Child Care Support Funds (CCSF).⁴⁹ Staff shortages, however, have made it challenging to provide high quality care for children with extra support needs and disabilities. These trends point to a risk of declining quality of inclusion for children with disabilities; indeed, reports of child care operators needing to send children with disabilities home due to staffing shortages are already emerging.⁵⁰ 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 care that will meet the diverse needs of children across the city.

The early years and child care workforce is in urgent need of support

Enhancing compensation and improving working conditions

Toronto's early years and child care workforce has faced significant challenges, which were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Low compensation and burnout are among the primary concerns for the early years and child care workforce. Wages have not kept pace with inflation and average annual salaries for ECEs and Early Childhood Assistants (ECAs) fall well below the "cost of thriving".⁵¹ Staff in non-child care settings, such as EarlyON and Every Child Belongs programs have not benefitted from recent provincial workforce wage enhancements. In a 2022 survey among early years and child care workers, 70% of educators identified pay and benefits as the most significant challenge of working in the sector, with low wages making it difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff.⁵² Early years and child care staff voiced that wages are insufficient to meet the cost of living in Toronto, and many lack workplace benefits such as health insurance, paid sick leave, and pension plans⁵³. As well, 60% of survey

⁴⁸ Toronto Children's Services. (2023). *Every Child Belongs individual requests*. Internal data: unpublished.

⁴⁹ Toronto Children's Services. (2023). *Every Child Belongs Child Care Support Funds data*. Internal data: unpublished.

⁵⁰ Akbari, E., McCuaig, K., Schurter, M. Varmuza, P., Akbari, S., Mudie, S. (2024). *Knowing Our Numbers: A provincial study with a local lens on the early childhood education workforce in Ontario*. City of Toronto. https://knowingournumbers.ca/media/filer_public/regional-reports/kon-toronto.pdf

⁵¹ Akbari, E., McCuaig, K., Schurter, M. Varmuza, P., Akbari, S., Mudie, S. (2024). *Knowing Our Numbers: A provincial study with a local lens on the early childhood education workforce in Ontario*. City of Toronto. https://knowingournumbers.ca/media/filer_public/regional-reports/kon-toronto.pdf

⁵² Toronto Children's Services. (2023). *Early years and child care workforce project: Workforce perspectives, deepening challenges, and pressing opportunities*. <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/8ebc-tcs-ssppd-workforce-report-2023.pdf>

⁵³ Toronto Children's Services. (2023). *Early years and child care workforce project: Workforce perspectives, deepening challenges, and pressing opportunities*. <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/8ebc-tcs-ssppd-workforce-report-2023.pdf>

respondents reported burnout and stress from their work due to long hours with few breaks and demanding workloads.⁵⁴ In a more recent survey, over 40% respondents from Toronto reported unfair treatment or discrimination while on the job.⁵⁵ Given these compounding challenges facing the workforce and in recognition of the value of their contributions to supporting child development and labour market participation for parents, it is essential that the early years and child care workforce is well supported. Further, as more than half of ECEs and non-ECEs in Toronto identify as racialized and the vast majority identify as women, supporting the workforce is a major equity issue.^{56,57}

Addressing workforce shortages and retention challenges

Recruitment and retention are a significant challenge for operators in Toronto. Many staff (nearly 40%) have reported an intent to leave the sector in the next five years.⁵⁸ This aligns with evidence indicating that by 2026, Ontario is projected to face an Early Childhood Educator (ECE) shortage of about 8,500.⁵⁹ In Ontario, about 4,200 new students enroll in an ECE program each year; the average graduation rate is about 72%, but only about half of registered ECEs choose to work in licensed child care.⁶⁰ This severe labour shortage needs to be addressed with strategic and coordinated efforts between post-secondary institutions, operators and agencies, service system managers, the Province, and other workforce partners.

⁵⁴ Toronto Children's Services. (2023). *Early years and child care workforce project: Workforce perspectives, deepening challenges, and pressing opportunities*. <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/8ebc-tcs-ssppd-workforce-report-2023.pdf>

⁵⁵ Akbari, E., McCuaig, K., Schurter, M. Varmuza, P., Akbari, S., Mudie, S. (2024). *Knowing Our Numbers: A provincial study with a local lens on the early childhood education workforce in Ontario*. City of Toronto. https://knowingournumbers.ca/media/filer_public/regional-reports/kon-toronto.pdf

⁵⁶ Akbari, E., McCuaig, K., Schurter, M. Varmuza, P., Akbari, S., Mudie, S. (2024). *Knowing Our Numbers: A provincial study with a local lens on the early childhood education workforce in Ontario*. City of Toronto. https://knowingournumbers.ca/media/filer_public/regional-reports/kon-toronto.pdf

⁵⁷ Toronto Children's Services. (2023). *Early years and child care workforce project: Workforce perspectives, deepening challenges, and pressing opportunities*. <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/8ebc-tcs-ssppd-workforce-report-2023.pdf>

⁵⁸ City of Toronto, Children's Services (2024) "Analysis of Knowing Your Numbers Dataset for Toronto 2024. *Knowing Our Numbers: A provincial study with a local lens on the early childhood education workforce in Ontario*. City of Toronto. Dataset provided by Akbari, E., McCuaig, K., Schurter, M. Varmuza, P., Akbari, S., Mudie, S. (2024). *Knowing Our Numbers: A provincial study with a local lens on the early childhood education workforce in Ontario*. knowingournumbers.ca

⁵⁹ Jones, A. (2023). *Government officials estimate Ontario could be short 8,500 early childhood educators*. CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ontario-early-childhood-educator-shortage-1.6714274>

⁶⁰ Jones, A. (2023). *Government officials estimate Ontario could be short 8,500 early childhood educators*. CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ontario-early-childhood-educator-shortage-1.6714274>

Community Engagement

The following section summarizes key learnings from engagement with parents, caregivers, operators, staff, and sector partners.

Who we Heard From

Over 4,000 people provided input at over 28 different engagement opportunities over the course of the Service Plan development process. This included 2,878 parent and caregiver survey respondents as well as over 100 parents and caregivers who participated across nine different family focus groups. Children's Services also heard from 594 child care operators and 220 early years and child care program staff via survey, and 200 child care supervisors via workshops.

What we Heard

Parents and caregivers, service providers, and system partners identified immediate needs and challenges and long-term opportunities for early years and child care programs and services in Toronto. The opportunities included developing an Indigenous-led Service Plan, growing spaces in the system, enhancing inclusive supports for all children, enabling flexible models of care, providing high-quality programming options for school-age children, and delivering culturally safe and responsive programming for Indigenous, Black, and equity-denied communities. The challenges included the lack of access to child care spaces, workforce shortages, persistent unaffordability of care for many families, and service navigation barriers especially among equity-denied families. The priorities identified through stakeholder engagement are described in greater detail below.

Indigenous Self-Determination in the Early Years and Child Care Sector

Indigenous service providers emphasized that Indigenous-led planning was essential for creating early years and child care systems that reflect their values, languages, and ways of knowing. These service providers highlighted the following key priorities:

- Language Programming: Protecting and revitalizing Indigenous languages through culturally grounded curricula.
- Two-Spirit Inclusion: Creating safe, affirming spaces and programming for Two-Spirit children and families.
- Middle Years Programs: Addressing the gap in culturally specific, land-based, and intergenerational programs for children aged 6-12.
- Addressing Geographic Barriers: Providing transportation supports free of cost and expanding Indigenous-led programming more equitably across the city.

These priorities align with findings from local Indigenous-led reports^{61,62} and showcase the urgency of dedicated resources to translate them into action. Indigenous partners in early years and child care emphasized the necessity for these programs to be designed

⁶¹ Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council. (2011). *Toronto Aboriginal Research Project (TARP): Final report*. <https://tarp.indigenousto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/tarp-final-report2011.pdf>

⁶² Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council. (2016). *Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council: Community scan summary*. https://tassc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/community_scan_summary.pdf

and delivered by Indigenous communities for Indigenous communities. Indigenous service providers expressed that reaching long-term and immediate goals in a good way was heavily dependent on building strong relationships among Indigenous service providers and the City, grounded in trust.

Through a focus group, Indigenous parents and caregivers shared comments on the importance of seeing their community represented in early years and child care programming. They described the positive impact of culturally specific and diverse EarlyON programming led by Indigenous people. In turn, Indigenous parents expressed a desire for culturally relevant and specific programs and services. They also shared about experiences of exclusion in early years and child care and voiced concerns about lack of inclusion for their children. In addition, Indigenous parents expressed a desire for more programming for children in the middle years, as well as the need for extended hours of service and flexibility in care. Indigenous parents and caregivers also reported that they rely on financial assistance with transportation supports to access programs and consider this an important resource to address geographic barriers.

The needs of Indigenous children and their families, and the approaches to meet those needs, are already well known by the Indigenous community. All levels of government must honour the right to self-determination to ensure those needs are met. To address community priorities in a self-determined way, Indigenous service providers called for the development of an Indigenous-led Service Plan for the early years and child care system in Toronto that is based on fulsome community engagement.

Expanding and Growing the System

Parents and caregivers, child care operators, Home Child Care Visitors, and Resource Consultation staff all shared their observations that demand for child care had increased since the introduction of CWELCC. Families described prolonged time spent on waitlists for care and a lack of affordable programming options for school-age children. In a 2024 survey of parents and caregivers in Toronto, 27% of respondents indicated that they were on at least one waitlist, with one in five of those respondents reporting being on more than five waitlists.⁶³ Waitlists for infant, toddler, and preschool spaces are especially long. In 2024, 39% percent of operators indicated that they were rarely or never able to offer a family a space as soon as they needed it.⁶⁴ Parents, caregivers, operators, and staff expressed an urgent need to grow the system and increase the availability of licensed child care spaces in Toronto.

Removing Barriers to Affordable Child Care

Families and service providers described how access continues to be a significant challenge. This was particularly true for families from Indigenous, Black, and equity-denied communities. Parents and caregivers indicated that affordability continues to be a major barrier, especially for families with school-age children whose fees were not reduced through CWELCC. Forty-five per cent of families surveyed who only had school aged children reported that child care was unaffordable for their family's budget,

⁶³ Toronto Children's Services. (2024). *Parent and Caregiver Survey*. Internal data: unpublished

⁶⁴ Toronto Children's Services. (2024). *Operator Survey*. Internal data: unpublished

compared to 30% of respondents who had only infant, toddler, preschool or kindergarten aged children.⁶⁵ Child care operators and School Board partners also highlighted decreased enrollment among children aged 6 to 12 and noted the challenges of providing school-age programming that engaged children in the middle years.

Families reported significant challenges with service navigation and information availability as key barriers to accessing programs and services across the early years and child care sector. These barriers included difficulty in finding and understanding information on EarlyON offerings, licensed child care programs, and eligibility for child care fee subsidy; limited awareness of the Assessment for Quality Improvement (AQI); incomplete information on waitlists; and a lack of culturally-relevant support with service navigation.⁶⁶ The parent and caregiver survey revealed that only 31 per cent of respondents were aware of the City's AQI scores and 32 per cent of respondents reported having difficulty finding information from the City on early years and child care programs and services.⁶⁷

Some families indicated that standard hours of care did not meet their needs, requiring extended hours and flexible models of care, including part-time and respite options, particularly among Indigenous, Black, and equity-denied families and those in precarious employment. One out of every ten parent and caregiver survey respondents reported that the current standard hours of care did not work for their family.⁶⁸ In particular, standard hours of care were less likely to work well for respondents from equity-denied groups, including those who identify as Black, are from lone-parent families, are not employed full-time, and have lower incomes.⁶⁹

The Workforce is Facing Significant Challenges

Child care operators, EarlyON providers, and early years and child care staff, described a workforce in crisis and identified the need for improved compensation, benefits, and full-time roles for staff in EarlyON, child care, and before-and-after school care. Parents and caregivers commented on the essential role of early years and child care staff and also noted that workforce shortages and inadequate compensation were significant issues impacting quality of care. Operators reported significant challenges with recruitment and retention. For instance, through a 2024 survey of Toronto child care operators, 75% of respondents reported that filling staff vacancies somewhat or much harder than five years ago.⁷⁰ Operators pointed to prolonged time to fill job vacancies for all types of positions, difficulty retaining well-trained staff who pursue opportunities

⁶⁵ Toronto Children's Services. (2024). *Parent and Caregiver Survey*. Internal data: unpublished

⁶⁶ Toronto Children's Services. (2024). *Parent and Caregiver Survey*. Internal data: unpublished

⁶⁷ Toronto Children's Services. (2024). *Parent and Caregiver Survey*. Internal data: unpublished

⁶⁸ Toronto Children's Services. (2024). *Parent and Caregiver Survey*. Internal data: unpublished

⁶⁹ Toronto Children's Services. (2024). *Parent and Caregiver Survey*. Internal data: unpublished

⁷⁰ Toronto Children's Services. (2024). *Operator Survey*. Internal data: unpublished

for better compensation or leave the sector entirely, and anticipated waves of retirements as contributing factors to recruitment and retention challenges.^{71,72}

Consultations also highlighted the need to increase ongoing professional development focused on:

- Inclusive care for children with disabilities and extra support needs;
- Supervisor training;
- Enhancing reconciliation, equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility practice, especially with an intersectional approach;
- Developing engaging programming for school-age children;
- Providing school-age care in the context of increasing use of technology;
- Supporting newcomer and vulnerable families;
- Indigenous ways of knowing;
- Afrocentric ways of being; and
- Trauma-informed practices.

A High-Quality and Well-Managed System

A well-managed system requires consistent rules, clear expectations, administrative ease, and the opportunity to communicate questions and concerns. Child care operators expressed a great deal of uncertainty about operational expectations and financial viability in the context of CWELCC implementation. These uncertainties and new administrative requirements placed a strain on their programs which was worsened by frequent changes to program guidelines and the ongoing workforce recruitment and retention challenges.

The shift to a Canada-wide child care system that includes publicly-operated, not-for-profit, and for-profit operators raised questions from operators about how quality will be monitored, evaluated, and enhanced. As CWELCC includes expansion among for-profit operators, potential variability in quality across the child care system must be addressed to ensure all families in Toronto have access to high-quality child care. Stakeholders called for a mechanism to monitor and support quality improvement to ensure a consistent experience for all families, regardless of where they receive care.

Engagement with child care operators and Children's Services staff also highlighted that the consistency of family experiences between those with and without a fee subsidy needed careful consideration. CWELCC funding reduces the cost of child care for all families with children 0 to 5 years of age enrolled in participating CWELCC programs. However, in contrast to families paying a "full fee", families in receipt of fee subsidy are subject to legislative oversight and restrictions. For instance, families in receipt of fee subsidy must meet eligibility requirements including an income threshold and are required to demonstrate participation in a work or school activity. Families not in receipt of a fee subsidy face no such restrictions on their attendance or employment-related

⁷¹ Toronto Children's Services. (2024). *Operator Survey*. Internal data: unpublished

⁷² Akbari, E., McCuaig, K., Schurter, M. Varmuza, P., Akbari, S., Mudie, S. (2024). *Knowing Our Numbers: A provincial study with a local lens on the early childhood education workforce in Ontario*. City of Toronto. https://knowingournumbers.ca/media/filer_public/regional-reports/kon-toronto.pdf

activities despite fee reductions through CWELCC. With the introduction of a major policy change, a well-managed system requires a re-examination of policies to ensure consistency for families and operators.

Inclusion for Children, Families, and Staff

Parents and caregivers highlighted the importance of seeing their community represented in child care and EarlyON spaces. This included seeing their language visible in the program space, 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive images, and staff who shared part of their lived experience. This was emphasized by Indigenous, Black, 2SLGBTQ+, and Francophone parents. This was also reflected in the parent and caregiver survey; though the number of respondents who reported their child care arrangement was not welcoming of their family was low, it is noteworthy that 69 per cent who did not feel welcome identified as being part of a racialized group and one-third were newcomers.⁷³ In addition, parents identified that training in diversity, equity, and inclusion was necessary but not sufficient to prepare staff to support Indigenous, Black, and equity-denied children and families and called for spaces to be led and staffed by members of their own community.

Through consultations, many service providers and operators noted a perceived increase in the number of children with disabilities, though not always identified through an official diagnosis. Data from the Every Child Belongs (ECB) program further supports this, showing that the number of children requiring extra support has increased in recent years.⁷⁴ Child care operators, ECB Agencies, Home Visitors, and Resource Consultation staff identified retention and recruitment challenges impacted the quality of inclusion in child care programs and even lead to demission from care among children with disabilities and extra support needs.

Connections to Family Supports

A holistic approach to supporting the wellbeing and development of children involves addressing the range of needs affecting the overall wellbeing of families. Parents and caregivers identified examples of supports for themselves and their children including a desire to be supported with accessing health care, housing, education, language instruction, and food security services as well as transportation, internet and computer supports, and free or low cost activities and events for children. Parents also commented on the importance of a dedicated support person to assist with service connections and the value of relationships that are essential to providing effective support for families. Many parents also expressed other compounding factors that added intense stress to their lives. This ranged from discussions on the high cost of living in Toronto, long wait times for health and social services, and the prevalence of precarious work, to the challenges of settlement including culture shifts, social isolation, dislocation from family and community, and career adjustments for immigrants with unrecognized professional designations.

⁷³ Toronto Children's Services. (2024). *Parent and Caregiver Survey*. Internal data: unpublished

⁷⁴ Toronto Children's Services. (2023). *Every Child Belongs individual requests*. Internal data: unpublished

According to results from the parent and caregiver survey, families indicated that they had multiple and varying needs, necessitating family support, coordination, and integration with other human services, such as school-based resources (51%), nutrition programs (43%), health and dental services (41%), training and skills development (37%), and information on library services (27%).⁷⁵ Many parents and caregivers expressed the benefits of connecting to EarlyON at critical times in their child's development, although not all were aware of EarlyON offerings.⁷⁶ Parents and caregivers identified a need for information about EarlyON and child care programs, recreation, camps, school-based resources, and nutrition, among other programs.

Conclusion:

Community engagement and review of research and community literature have been a crucial step in strategic planning and has formed the foundation for Service Plan commitments. The findings from family focus groups, parent and caregiver, operator, and staff surveys, as well as focus groups and workshop discussions were the primary inputs for drafting Strategic Priorities and actions. As well, integration of findings from research literature, Census information, and administrative data served to contextualize the service system and contributed to the evidence base for the Strategic Priorities and actions.

Qualitative and quantitative analyses revealed a convergence of sector challenges and opportunities. There were clear parallels between the experiences shared by families and trends documented in research literature and census information. Based on the research and community engagement, sector partners have expressed a need to address the following priorities: advance self-determination with Indigenous organizations and families in the early years and child care sector; expand the early learning 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 learning and child care system; centre inclusion in the early years and child care sector for children, families, and staff; and connect families with essential family support services. In addition to the priorities in the 2025-2030 Service Plan, the research and community engagement process also led to the recommendation to develop and Indigenous-led Service Plan.

The early years and child care system in Toronto is at a critical juncture and thorough community engagement was critical to understanding the nature of the challenges and opportunities facing the sector. Moving forward, ongoing conversation and engagement, coordinated data collection, and robust evaluation of policy and program changes will be crucial to maintaining an accurate and nuanced understanding of the overall health of the early years and child care sector.

⁷⁵ Toronto Children's Services. (2024). *Parent and Caregiver Survey*. Internal data: unpublished

⁷⁶ Toronto Children's Services. (2024). *Parent and Caregiver Survey*. Internal data: unpublished