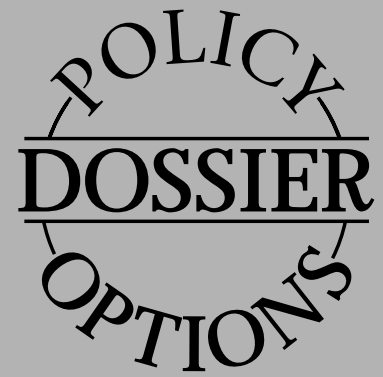


STRENGTHENING CANADA'S SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FOUNDATIONS: NEXT STEPS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CHILD CARE



Martha Friendly

Compared with Western European countries, Canada is a laggard in terms of progress toward a system of universal, high quality early childhood education and child care (ECEC). Martha Friendly, one of Canada's most ardent advocates of such a system, reviews Canada's evolution in this domain and, most importantly, charts the way to creating a universal daycare program. The first step is for the federal government to make a clear, public commitment to achieving a coherent, accessible and high quality system, says Friendly. Then, a specific action plan and a well-crafted public policy framework requiring close federal-provincial/territorial collaboration will be needed, as well as adequate public financing. Such a system she points out, would require a doubling of current spending over the next 10 to 15 years. Investing in ECEC, she argues, is fundamental to healthy child development and lifelong learning, and will pay off in its contribution to improving Canada's social fabric, competitiveness and productivity.

Comparativement aux pays d'Europe de l'Ouest, le Canada tarde sérieusement à se doter d'un système universel de services de garde et de développement de l'enfant. Connue pour son ardeur à défendre cette cause, Martha Friendly décrit l'évolution du Canada en la matière et propose une stratégie en vue de combler notre retard à ce chapitre. Le premier pas consisterait pour Ottawa à annoncer qu'il s'engage à mettre en œuvre un système intégré de qualité et accessible. Avec l'étroite collaboration des provinces et territoires, il s'agirait ensuite d'élaborer un plan d'action et un cadre politique détaillés, puis d'établir le financement nécessaire à leur application. Ce système universel nécessiterait de doubler au cours des 10 à 15 prochaines années le budget que les deux niveaux de gouvernements consacrent présentement à ce dossier. L'auteure juge cet investissement indispensable au développement des enfants, affirmant qu'il contribuera à long terme à l'amélioration du tissu social, de la compétitivité et de la productivité du pays.

On an ordinary weekday, in any French suburb or town, remote Norwegian fishing village, or Spanish city, virtually all three-year-olds (and many two-year-olds) will be found at play in early childhood programs with other preschoolers from their neighbourhood or village. Indeed, in the 1980s and 1990s, early childhood education and child care programs (ECEC) became a mainstream policy and program area in most industrialized countries. Today in continental Europe, most children begin publicly funded ECEC programs sometime between their second and third birthdays, whether their mother

is in the labour force or not. In some countries, these full school-day programs are free with some fees for infant/toddler programs and for "top-up" portions of the day that accommodate parents' work hours. In Britain, one of the European Union's ECEC stragglers, the ruling Labour Party has recently made a series of commitments to improvements in ECEC programs.

Not so in Canada. Even in the United States, considerably more three-year-olds attend early childhood programs than is the case here. Though the federal and provincial governments have introduced several reforms to the family policy package

in recent years, Canada has failed to make progress toward a system of universal high quality ECEC.

Today “early learning and child care” or “early childhood education and care” refers to child care (or daycare), nursery schools and kindergarten, ideally delivered as one seamless program. There is strong support for the idea that ECEC should be available to all children whether they are poor or middle class, whether or not the mother is in the workforce, abled or disabled and whether they live in Montreal, rural Manitoba or a remote Inuit community, that is, it should be universal. In Canada today only kindergarten for five-year-olds, usually part-day, is universal and the main ECEC programs, kindergarten, nursery school and child care — are separated, not integrated.

Why has Canada been such a laggard when it comes to ECEC? Two political elements help explain how this has developed. The first arises from the nature of Canadian federalism in which responsibility for social programs is provincial/territorial. While the respective roles and responsibilities of the two orders of government have shifted and changed over the years, Canada underwent a deconstructing trend in the 1990s. As the federal government relinquished its 1960s and 1970s leadership role that created the modern social safety net, the challenges of devising a new, costly social program began to seem insurmountable in a decentralized, downsizing Canada.

Second, as a liberal democracy with a relatively weak welfare state, Canada has traditionally relied on the marketplace for development and provision of child care. This means that public investment in child care has been limited and there is high use of informal care; reliance upon parent fees with subsidies for those who qualify; and private, often for-profit provision. Perhaps the clearest symbol of

the private nature of Canadian child care is that almost all responsibility for developing and managing it (even finding capital funds) is assumed by the private sector — parent groups, voluntary organizations or entrepreneurs. International research (such as

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that of the OECD) shows that, in comparison, ECEC is provided more equitably in countries where there is a much stronger state role in funding, policy setting and service delivery.

These two factors have shaped the current situation: a hodgepodge of ECEC policies and programs, most of which are sparsely supported with limited public funding and unevenly distributed across regions and family circumstances. At a practical level, this means scarcity and inequality of opportunity for children and families in virtually all regions of Canada.

Beginning in the 1980s, successive federal governments did attempt to initiate national strategies for developing child care in collaboration with provinces/territories but none of these was successful. ECEC even stalled in the 1990s as the federal government withdrew the limited support for regulated child care that had been available through the Canada Assistance Plan. Federal transfer payments were reduced and most provinces/territories balked at spending more and more funds for these programs. Child care and kindergarten programs were sometimes eroded, sometimes strengthened as the provincial/territorial govern-

ments who are responsible for them changed political stripes with almost bewildering frequency. Differences among provinces/territories in access and quality grew even greater, but overall the ECEC situation was essentially stagnant in the 1990s.

In March 2003, six years after adopting a National Children's Agenda that promised to produce a “comprehensive strategy to improve the well-being of Canada's children,” the federal government and all provincial/territorial governments except Quebec (which had already begun putting its own universal program in place) agreed to a Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Care. This framework agreement restricts federal funds to regulated child care and requires public reporting in key areas, but it has no national goals, objectives, legislation, targets and timetables or implementation plans. At the time, the initiative was described by then Human Resources Development Minister Jane Stewart, credited with securing the agreement, as “the first step to a national child care program.”

If Canadian provincial/territorial and federal governments are to meet the commitment of the National Children's Agenda, a number of well-crafted next steps must follow this “first step.” In addition to the Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Care, the groundwork for these next steps has been laid by the vision statements and principles already agreed to by federal, provincial and territorial governments in the National Children's Agenda and the Early Childhood Development Agreement (2000).

In this context, the obvious key question is: When will we move to the next step? A second, less obvious question is: What is the next step?

Observers believe that the time is ripe for the next steps on ECEC. There are two compelling reasons for this. First, abundant child development research has reinforced ideas that were — until recently — new to many Canadians: learning begins at birth, young children learn through play, development in the early years forms a platform for future success, and early childhood education programs have an important role to play in how children develop. The strength of this research has convinced observers from diverse areas of interest such as economics, politics and health to embrace the idea that high quality ECEC is the foundation for lifelong learning and fundamental for a prosperous society.

Parents also seem convinced that ECEC programs are valuable. Experience in all regions of Canada shows that when kindergarten, nursery school, preschool and child care centres are available, affordable and of high quality, families do enroll their children in them. Indeed, some parents line up for hours on kindergarten registration day and put their names on child care and preschool waiting lists before the child is born. This signals that Canadian parents from all social, economic and cultural groups and from all regions seek opportunities for their children to get the best start in life.

A second — and equally important — reason the time seems ripe for ECEC has to do with the labour force participation of mothers of young children, which has been steadily increasing for at least twenty-five years. It rose from 68 percent to 73.4 percent between 1995 and 2001 (for mothers with youngest child 3-5), with the majority employed full time. It seems clear that while a growing number of women and men take paid parental leave in the year after birth, the prevalence of family arrangements whereby children were mostly in their mother's care until they

reached school age is no more: women are in the workforce to stay. Given this reality, and the compelling evidence on the importance of the early years, the haphazard way Canada has responded to this fundamental social change is neither appropriate nor sensible.

Two overarching policy issues characterize Canada's current ECEC situation. First, public policy at both national and provincial/territorial levels is incoherent, shifting and poorly developed. Second, the amount of public financing devoted to ECEC programs overall is severely inadequate. These two issues not only go hand-in-hand but are also directly linked to the main program issues — the problems with access to programs and the

uneven quality of child care that pervade all regions of Canada.

For ECEC programs to be *accessible* to families requires an adequate supply of services, affordable fees (either very low cost, geared to income or free to the user) and services that fit the needs and characteristics of the family and the child (for example, they must be responsive to parents' work schedules and to children's needs). While kindergarten for five-year-olds is free through the public education system, it is usually provided only for 2.5 hours a day, a time span that suits few parents who are employed (or training) full time or even those who are employed part time. In addition, some kindergartens rotate morning/afternoon

What would a mature system of Canadian ECEC look like?

- All families would have access to an ECEC program in their community.
- There would be comparable provincial/territorial systems of ECEC services that complemented family policy, especially maternity/parental leave.
- ECEC systems in the different provinces/territories might employ different policy options or models but would have common, pan-Canadian principles and goals (like the medicare concept).
- ECEC programs would be of high quality; staffed by qualified, well-paid early childhood educators; and educational in the nondidactic, play-based sense.
- Programs would be multifunctional in that they would provide care in parents' absence, early childhood education, and family support at the same time (for example, incorporating child care, nursery school and kindergarten). They would be available to families with a parent at home (perhaps for a shorter day) and those with parents in the labour force, training or education.
- Parents would have a reasonable choice of high quality centre-based or well-supported family childcare services that would be noncompulsory, available on a full-day or part-time basis and offer flexible hours, as the parents chose.
- ECEC programs would be part of a sustained, well-resourced, publicly funded and provincially organized system everywhere in Canada. There would probably be parent fees but they would be affordable (at least for portions of programs or for certain age groups) and programs would be accessible to all.
- Rather than relying on parents or volunteers to initiate, fund and operate programs or relying on business operational principles, there would be public infrastructure (such as school boards or local governments) for ECEC.
- Programs would be responsive to and involve parents and would be shaped and delivered at the local level.
- In order to ensure public accountability, federal funding would be directed to public and community-based early ECEC programs.
- Consistent with Canadian values, programs would include families and children across the socio-economic spectrum, cultural diversity would be respected and children with disabilities would be fully included.

shifts, and still others are offered full-day, every other day, especially in rural communities.

Provincially/territorially regulated child care (this includes child care centres, nursery schools and regulated family child care) is available only for an estimated 12 percent of children aged 0-12 or 15 percent of children aged 0-6 (coverage by province ranges from 4.2 percent (Saskatchewan) to 21.1 percent (Quebec) (2001 figures). Child care is especially scarce for infants and toddlers, for those in rural and remote communities and for children with special needs. Note also that regulating a "space" usually does not mean attaching public funding to it. While some provinces provide some funding for child care programs, such as wage and equipment grants, this is usually too limited to bring parent fees into the affordable range. Additionally, while all jurisdictions except Quebec provide fee subsidies, eligibility is limited so many families are excluded. Thus, in all provinces except Quebec, regulated child care is primarily a user-pay program. This, together with the short supply of fee subsidies, even for eligible low income families, and surcharges that even subsidized families have to pay means that most low-, modest- and middle-income families cannot afford regulated child care.

Yet it is the *quality* of ECEC programs — not merely whether children participate in them — that is critical in determining how developmentally beneficial they are. This pertains to all children, both from low-income and from affluent families (although children from low-income homes may benefit more from high quality ECEC). Research shows that the quality of ECEC programs is pivotal in determining whether they are beneficial or potentially harmful. If an ECEC program is of poor quality, it does not provide early childhood education or "the best possible start in life."

While there are various ways of conceptualizing quality, there is considerable knowledge about what makes an ECEC program high quality in the "school readiness" and social competency sense. The importance of teacher

training in early childhood education, good working conditions and wages and low turnover are well documented. Equally well known are the connections between quality and structural features of programs like regulation, funding and operational basis (i.e., not-for-profit or for-profit). Studies show that while the quality of regulated child care programs varies considerably between and within Canada's provinces and territories, generally, the quality is often too mediocre to be termed "developmental." It is also important to note that the large majority of Canadian children whose mothers are in the paid labour force are in unregulated care arrangements such as unregulated family child care or are in the care of a babysitter or nanny. While these are of unknown quality, it is generally agreed that they do not provide developmental early childhood education.

What are the next steps? The *first* step toward the long-term goal (10 or 15 years) of a universal ECEC system would be for the federal government to make a clear public commitment to achieving such a system. Once the long-term goal of universal ECEC has been established, a specific action plan and a well-crafted public policy framework are absolutely fundamental to success — steps that will require close federal/provincial/territorial collaboration.

The ECEC policy framework should include: a) pan-Canadian principles; b) national legislation; c) timetables establishing service targets and plans for

meeting them; d) pan-Canadian standards and strategies for meeting them; e) definition of roles and responsibilities for management and funding; f) clear plans for accountability including effective tools for monitoring and, finally, (g) adequate funding for the initiative.

An important next step for the federal government would be to designate new multi-year funds to support the long-term goal and shorter-term targets. For the first phase of a national child care strategy, the federal Liberal caucus Social Policy Committee has proposed an initial four-year budget, with \$1 billion in year 1, rising to \$4.5 billion in year 4.

It is assumed that, in addition, existing funds would continue to be spent on ECEC. As table 1 shows, currently provinces/territories spend more than \$3 billion (estimated) on regulated child care and kindergarten, with some (notably Quebec) spending much more than others, and the federal government spends an additional \$700 million. Thus, in 2001 public spending on ECEC totalled almost \$4 billion (the value of private spending by parents is unknown).

Although a detailed costing would require clarification of assumptions about factors that determine the public cost such as parent fees, teacher/child ratios and teachers' wages, it is estimated that the public cost of a mature, universal ECEC program will be more than \$10 billion at the end of 10 or 15 years. This figure would be consistent with Canadian estimates such as those of Cleveland and Krashinsky (1998), as well as with proposals from the European

TABLE 1: ESTIMATED PUBLIC SPENDING ON ECEC PROGRAMS, 2001

Federal		Provincial/territorial	
Program	Amount	Program	Amount
Child Care Expense Deduction	\$560 million (foregone tax revenue)	Kindergarten	\$1.5 billion
Aboriginal ECEC programs	\$137 million	Regulated child care	\$1,889.8 million ¹

¹58 percent of this was in Quebec.

Source: M. Friendly, J. Beach, and M. Turiano, *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2001* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2002). www.childcarecanada.org/ECEC2001/index.html



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Union's Child care Network, which recommends spending at least 1 percent of GDP for ECEC for 0-5 year olds. It should be noted that the absence of a coherent ECEC policy in Canada reduces the effectiveness of the (not inconsiderable) current spending.

In addition to designating funds, Ottawa has several other policy tools it could employ to meet its responsibilities. Important next steps include:

- Establishing an Early Childhood Education and Child Care Secretariat within the Department of Social Development. This would be charged with a) putting the vision and public policy framework into action; b) co-ordinating strategies with other departments, jurisdictions and sectors; c) developing and maintaining strong ties with the community and experts to facilitate knowledge-sharing; d) determining resource and research needs; and e) ensuring public accountability.
- Developing a national plan for col-

lecting and analyzing ECEC data. This would use vehicles such as existing provincial/territorial administrative data and Statistics Canada to collect basic national data on new topics (e.g., ECEC enrolment and coverage, the quality and the status of the current ECEC workforce).

- Supporting a long-term research and evaluation agenda. This would be supported by sustained annual investment and build on previous federal research programs. The agenda would include research to support key policy goals and ongoing evaluation of policy initiatives and resource allocation. It would involve multiple disciplines and methodologies.

While setting national goals and targets demands a strong federal leadership role and resources, progress in areas fundamental to ECEC such as quality, access, planning and human resources requires energetic, co-operative provincial/territorial collaboration. These pro-

posals for collaboration on ECEC are very much in the spirit of federal/provincial understandings, described in the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFAs) as "working in partnership for Canadians." But the interplay between the two levels of government is always a delicate balancing act that requires considerable political will and creative solutions.

To facilitate the intergovernmental processes, a federal/provincial/territorial ECEC working group would work with the Early Childhood Education and Child Care Secretariat and provincial/territorial departments. The group would work together to develop policy options within the national ECEC strategy. Important key steps include:

- Overcoming the current fragmentation of services and resources by developing blended, coherent ECEC systems in each province/territory. This process would include formulating effective options that use knowledge of best ECEC practices and would make the best use of

existing provincial/territorial funds for regulated child care and kindergarten together with new federal funds that could be earmarked to encourage best practices. Provincial/territorial models might vary according to regional needs and situations. For example, one model used in Quebec for putting in place a uni-

improving quality, increasing the qualifications of staff and developing provincial/territorial ECEC curricula that consider the whole child.

- Setting targets for improving wages, benefits and working conditions for ECEC employees. This would take into account existing wage levels, staff/teacher education

designing policy approaches that have been shown to reliably deliver the most desirable outcomes. This is important both in terms of serving families and children and in terms of making the best use of public finances.

Investments in early childhood development are central to evidence-based strategies for lifelong learning that will contribute to Canada's social fabric, competitiveness and increased productive growth in the 21st century. And a system of high quality ECEC is fundamental to healthy child development and lifelong learning. It is also key to labour strategy, the urban agenda, equality for women, social integration of newcomers, strengthening social cohesion and is a social determinant of health.

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versal, more blended ECEC system over time includes a) full-day kindergarten for all five-year-olds, with after-school care programs (Ministry of Education) and b) full-day child care programs (Centres de la petite enfance under the Ministry of the Family and Children) at a low flat fee (originally \$5 a day, now \$7) for all children aged 0-4 as space permits.

- Developing long-term provincial/territorial plans for achieving target levels of service. This would take into account national targets and timetables, existing levels of ECEC coverage, diversity and the needs of special populations (children with disabilities, Aboriginal Canadians and people in rural areas) and the quality of existing services.
- Developing plans for making ECEC financially accessible to parents. There could be a variety of options for balancing public funding with parent fees (e.g., low flat fees such as in Quebec, sliding fee scales as in Sweden or no-fee full-school day programs with wrap-around programming to meet labour force needs as in France) but financial accessibility for all would be the ultimate goal.
- Bringing provincial/territorial regulatory and pedagogical regimes into line with the best available knowledge about ECEC quality. This would include developing clear provincial/territorial strategies for

levels, existing wage levels in the region, and specific situations such as provincial/territorial pay equity.

The political context for these next steps on ECEC is the accession of a new prime minister in Ottawa. As Jane Jenson observes in the December/January *Policy Options*, Prime Minister Paul Martin will have to overcome the legacy of Finance Minister Martin — a legacy that has left Canada's social safety net in tatters, increased income inequality, and increased the social exclusion of Aboriginal people, immigrants and the poor. However, Prime Minister Martin's promises of "new era" for Canada, commitments to "strengthening our social foundations," to "building a 21st century economy" as well as to a "New Deal for cities," to Aboriginal people and to preserving medicare auger well as a system of ECEC could well play a transformative role in each of these. In other words, if it is well-designed, ECEC is a value-added program that provides tremendous "bang for the buck." It would indeed make a convincing centrepiece for recommitment to social policy in Canada.

I stated at the outset that a strategy for a well designed national system of ECEC must be at the heart of a renewed social policy mission for Canada. A critical part of such renewal is getting key elements — the goals and objectives, who the programs are for and how they are delivered — right from the start and

Since the 1970s, the question of an effective system of ECEC has risen to the top of Canada's social policy agenda a number of times but has failed to become a reality. Other nations with a variety of histories, cultures, fiscal capacities and political arrangements have set the enabling public policy for ECEC programs for their people in motion. In Canada — as in other nations — taking these steps requires vision, commitment and the political will to turn aspirations into reality. Most observers — even the strongest advocates — agree that building a universal system of high quality ECEC programs across Canada will take some years. They are equally clear that doing so requires a process beginning with long-term vision and employing a planned approach with goals, targets and timetables.

Ultimately, whether Canadians will come to have the ECEC programs they want and need will be a statement about how we see our fellow citizens, our country, and ourselves.

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