

Evolving Legislation, Changing Times

Alberta's first Child Care Licensing Act and regulation was introduced in 2007. It came into force on November 1, 2008, after several years of stakeholder consultation and planning.* The act evolved from the 1977 Social Care Facilities Licensing Act, which covered the licensing and inspection of both adult care and child care facilities in Alberta. The Day Care Regulation that accompanied the 1977 act outlined facility-based standards for the licensing of day care centres, out-of-school care centres, nursery schools and drop-in centres.

The 2007 Child Care Licensing Act broke new ground in recognizing the “importance of ensuring the safety, *well-being* and *development* of children receiving child care.”† Nonetheless, like comparable Canadian legislation of its era, the focus of the act reflects a custodial-care-based emphasis on children's health and safety.

The 2007 Child Care Licensing Act specifies requirements for discipline, health and safety procedures, records management, nutrition, administration of medication, staff–child ratios, group sizes and physical space requirements (including standards for outdoor play space and for equipment and furnishings). It deals with program requirements in general terms—specifying that programs must be “in keeping with the physical, social, intellectual,

* Province-wide discussions about revising the Social Care Facilities Licensing Act, which preceded the Child Care Licensing Act, commenced in 2004, when Alberta Children's Services consulted with Child and Family Services Authorities across the province. Consultation about the Child Care Licensing Act included the *Building Quality Child Care Together* discussion guide and questionnaire, which were circulated for stakeholder feedback in the spring of 2007. A *What We Heard* report on the results of the stakeholder consultation was released in October 2007. In December 2007 the Alberta government circulated the *Building Quality Child Care Together* workbook and questionnaire on recommended standards. Copies of these consultation documents are available through the Legislature Library.

† Preamble to Alberta's 2007 Child Care Licensing Act.

creative and emotional needs of children in the program” without suggesting how this goal might be achieved. The act also sets out standards for the early learning and child care workforce, including requirements for first aid training, criminal records checks and minimum qualifications.

In the decade-plus since the Child Care Licensing Act came into force, researchers, legislators and policy-makers across Canada and around the world have increasingly recognized that children need much more than custodial care. They need rich, varied and nurturing learning experiences that help them develop and grow. As discussed later in this paper (see p. 13), the quality of these learning experiences is particularly important for young children. But high-quality out-of-school care for older children is also important. It provides children with opportunities for learning and skills development and contributes to their “growing maturity and independence” (ChildCare 2020 2014, 8).

Children start learning at birth and continue to develop and learn at a significant pace throughout their early years. Learning in the early years lays a foundation for all future learning and affects children’s health, development and well-being throughout their lives.

All children—regardless of their family circumstances, cultural background or socio-economic situation—need high-quality learning experiences in their early years.

There is a growing body of research that links healthy child development with high-quality early-learning-and-development-focused care. And there is a growing body of research that places well-educated, well-qualified, well-supported early childhood educators at the heart of any high-quality early learning and child care system.

The Evidence is Clear

The importance of high-quality early learning and child care delivered by competent early childhood educators is outlined in a host of publications and research studies by numerous national and international organizations, including the following:

- Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development
- Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
- Canadian Child Care Federation
- Child Care Human Resources Sector Council
- Child Care Now (Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada)
- Childcare Resource and Research Unit
- Council of Ministers of Education
- Employment and Social Development Canada
- End Poverty Edmonton
- The Muttart Foundation
- National Research Council (U.S.)
- Nutbrown Review (U.K.)
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
- Statistics Canada
- UNESCO
- UNICEF

The importance of high-quality early learning and child care is also addressed in the Alberta government's own policy documents, including the following:

- the 2013 *Together We Raise Tomorrow* policy papers on early childhood development and poverty reduction
- the 2019 *Well-Being and Resiliency: Evaluation Framework*

High-quality early learning and child care is much more than custodial supervision that keeps children safe and fed.

It is engaging, creative, age-appropriate, learning-through-play-based, developmentally focused programming. High-quality early learning and child care is delivered through an integrated child care system that includes early childhood educators, parents, families and communities. It supports children's physical health and well-being. It develops their social competence, language and thinking skills, communication skills and general knowledge, and emotional maturity.* It helps children grow into healthy, well-adjusted, self-reliant adults who have the skills they need to succeed at school, at work and in life.

All children have a *right* to high-quality early learning and child care.

High-quality early learning and child care depends on high-quality early childhood educators.

It is well-known that early childhood educators play a significant role in shaping and nurturing children's early learning. Research shows that they require a host of basic competencies to do this work well (Muttart 2014; National Research Council 2015).

Early childhood educators must be critical thinkers who are capable of exercising professional judgment, working cooperatively with other professionals and communicating effectively. They must have in-depth knowledge of how children develop and learn, and they must be able to apply this knowledge through effective early years pedagogy that links research to practice. They must be capable of working with technology and curricular resources. They must know how to work with children from diverse backgrounds and with children who have specialized

* These five areas of development are the focus of Canada's EDI (Early Development Instrument) questionnaire, which is the standard population-based tool for measuring and monitoring early childhood development across the country. Alberta's results are discussed on p. 12 of this document.

developmental and learning needs. And they must know how to work with parents and families in a way that engages them in their children's learning.

The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta believes that well-educated, well-supported and well-remunerated early childhood educators are the foundation of a high-quality early learning and child care system. **Legislative change is needed to raise minimum education standards for early childhood educators and to support early childhood educators in completing the education they need.**

For early childhood educators to be effective in their role, they need specialized education in early childhood development and early learning pedagogy. They need access and support for ongoing professional learning that keeps them current with the latest research and best practices in their field. They need a comprehensive early learning curriculum framework that informs and guides their work. They need workplace supports, including paid prep time for developing individualized programming for each child. And they need paid non-contact hours for engaging with families and with other professionals.

Alberta's educational standards for early childhood educators are among the lowest in Canada, and well behind many other countries' standards. Alberta has no professional development requirements for early childhood educators and no requirement for early childhood educators or early learning and child care programs to follow the province's recently developed early learning curriculum framework, *Flight** (Makovichuk et al.).

The upcoming review of the 2007 Child Care Licensing Act provides an opportunity to make much-needed changes that will help Alberta get its standards right. Legislating higher qualification standards and support for early childhood educators provides an important foundation for an

* See p. 95 for a brief description of *Flight*.

effective, high-quality early learning and child care system that can provide Alberta's children with the best possible start in life. As discussed later in this paper, it's also good for Alberta's bottom line. (See p. 17.)

About This Paper

This paper outlines the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta's recommendations for the legislative change required to support early childhood educators in delivering high-quality early learning and child care. AECEA has three priorities, each of which applies to all licensed and approved child care in the province:

1. raising education and education-related standards for early childhood educators across Alberta's early learning and child care system. This includes
 - legislating new certification classifications and new minimum education requirements
 - restricting the delivery of post-secondary programs in early learning and child care education to public institutions
 - eliminating the acceptance of educational equivalencies as a substitute for specialized early learning and child care education
2. legislating mandatory ongoing professional learning for early childhood educators. This includes
 - requiring early childhood educators to develop annual professional learning plans
 - introducing a credential maintenance requirement
3. adopting Alberta's early learning curriculum framework, *Flight*, within all licensed and approved early learning and child care programs in the province

This paper also outlines AECEA’s recommendations for legislating a number of related matters, including the following:

- recognizing the importance of high-quality early learning and child care as the foundation for children’s lifelong learning, well-being and success
- recognizing children’s right to high-quality early learning and child care
- updating outdated child-care-related terminology
- introducing minimum standards for unlicensed child care providers

AECEA’s recommendations for legislative change are supported by the most current research and best practices. They also have the support of AECEA’s members* and partner organizations.

The recommendations in this paper follow from the 2018 document *Quality Educators: Quality Care* (“[AECEA’s mandate document](#)”), which sets out AECEA’s mission, goals and mandate. The mandate document also details the system supports needed to make AECEA’s proposed legislative changes workable and effective. These system supports include wage enhancements, funding support, support for the post-secondary education sector and support for early childhood educators to improve their education and skills.

The recommendations in this paper are cross-referenced to two companion documents, which can be downloaded from AECEA’s website:

- *AECEA’s Redlined Changes to the Child Care Licensing Act*
- *AECEA’s Redlined Changes to the Child Care Licensing Regulation*

* AECEA regularly consults with its members and stakeholders and considers their ideas and opinions.

In 2018–2019, AECEA conducted a province-wide survey of more than 1,200 early childhood educators. In the spring of 2019, AECEA engaged close to 2,700 early childhood educators in face-to-face and online sessions during which the association shared its plans for professionalizing Alberta’s early learning and childcare workforce. AECEA also shared its recommendations for changes to the Child Care Licensing Act and regulations during these consultations.

The redlined companion documents use “tracked changes” to show AECEA’s proposed additions and deletions to the official versions of Alberta’s 2007 Child Care Licensing Act and regulation. In addition to noting the specific recommendations AECEA makes in the paper you are reading, the companion documents propose a number of suggestions related to program and staffing requirements, children’s well-being, nutrition, toys, child guidance practices and physical space (including vaping and marijuana use on program premises).

A detailed summary of AECEA’s recommendations for legislative change can be found on p. 98 of the paper you are reading. An at-a-glance summary is included in Appendix 3.

AECEA’s views on the policy changes needed to support its proposed legislative changes are outlined in the section that begins on p. 103. AECEA’s recommendations for a workforce strategy to support its proposed legislative and policy changes are outlined on p. 109.

A Note on Terminology

In the literature, “the early years” or “early childhood” is often defined as the period from birth to the age of five, when many children begin their formal education in school. Canada’s Council of Ministers of Education (2014) applies the term “early learning” to programs for children from birth to the age of eight.*

Research shows that the “prenatal months to age three are a critical period for laying the foundation for healthy development” (ECMap 2014, 30). However, older children also need stimulating, age-appropriate, developmentally focused out-of-school care programs delivered by qualified staff. The Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (2010, 2012) notes that early childhood educators develop, deliver and evaluate programs and services for children aged 0 to 12.

* Canada’s 2017 *Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework* also defines the early years as birth to age eight.

For convenience, this paper applies the term “early learning and child care” to children from birth to age 12 and to older children (13- and 14-year-olds) with special needs. This is consistent with the definition of a “child” in Clause 1(a) of Alberta’s 2007 Child Care Licensing Act.

The Importance of the Early Years

“The early years are increasingly viewed as the first step in lifelong learning and a key component of a successful educational, social, and family policy agenda.”

—Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2001), as cited in Friendly and Lero (2002), *Social Inclusion through Early Childhood Education*, p. 5

“Children’s early experiences have a powerful, lasting effect on their future success as individuals and on their ability to contribute to society.”

—Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (2018), *Quality Educators, Quality Care*, p. 7

Research shows that children are actively learning from the moment they are born—if not before. Throughout their lives, children’s capacity for learning is determined by a “continuous, dynamic interaction” between their biology and their environment—between “nature” and “nurture” (National Research Council 2015b, 4 and 205).

Children’s capacity for learning is “grounded in the development of the brain and brain circuitry” (National Research Council 2015b, 4 and 205). Children’s early experiences—both adverse and nurturing—affect how their genes are expressed and how their brains develop. Experiences in early childhood “determine whether a child’s developing brain architecture provides a strong or weak foundation for all future learning or health” (Harvard 2007, 3).

“Stress and adversity experienced by children can undermine learning and impair socioemotional and physical well-being” (National Research Council 2015b, 4).

Children’s early years—from birth to age 5—“are a critical period for developing the foundations for thinking, behaving, and emotional well-being” (Carlberg and Budney 2019, 10). Children’s learning experiences during their early years are a critical component of their education as a whole. Early learning experiences help children grow up to be lifelong learners and responsible citizens who can make a positive contribution to their families and communities.

Research shows that “a substantial amount of brain circuitry is constructed very early in life” (Harvard 2007, 3).

Between birth and the age of three, children’s social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic and motor development proceeds at an explosive rate. Children dramatically expand their vocabulary and learn to identify and regulate their emotions. “Language-rich, nurturing, and responsive caregiving fosters healthy development during this period, but not all children have such experiences” (7).

Between the ages of three and five, children develop complex social behaviours and pre-literacy skills. They learn to solve problems, to understand other people’s points of view and to negotiate with others to achieve common goals. These skills “build on earlier developmental achievements and are essential building blocks for a successful life” (7).

The science of child development and early learning is important for understanding children. It also has implications for early childhood educators who contribute to children’s early learning and development. The science has implications for “the knowledge and competencies that these professionals need, the infrastructure and systems in which they work, their systems for professional learning, and other supports that contribute to improving the quality of professional practice and developing an excellent, robust, and stable [early learning and child care] workforce” (National Research Council 2015b, 206).

“Secure and responsive relationships with adults (and with other children), coupled with high-quality, positive learning interactions and environments, are foundational for the healthy development of young children. Conversely, adults who are underinformed, underprepared, or subject to chronic stress themselves may contribute to children’s experiences of adversity and stress and undermine their development and learning” (4).

The learning foundations built in early childhood influence children’s development and learning as they age, and throughout their lives. The early years are a time when children develop language, literacy, numeracy, problem-solving, resiliency, self-confidence and host of other crucial skills. These foundations support children’s health, well-being and success in school. They set children on “a pathway for success that impacts their entire lives” (Early Years Study 4).

The research is clear. Children’s early years determine their success in life. And the success of our children determines the prosperity and success of our society.

“When children thrive, they are likely to become adults who thrive and this contributes to the collective well-being of the province, now and into the future.”

—Government of Alberta (2013a), *Together We Raise Tomorrow*, p. 3.

The Importance of Getting the Legislation Right

Alberta’s early learning and child care system has made important strides since the proclamation of the Child Care Licensing Act. The province has invested in child care spaces; in wage enhancements, scholarships and professional development funding to support the workforce; in staff recruitment incentives to help program operators; in subsidies to help families access early learning and child care programs; and in funding to facilitate the inclusion of children with special needs. It has supported the

development of a new curriculum framework and introduced accreditation standards to foster program and process excellence.

In spite of these positive measures, Alberta’s children are falling behind. Alberta Education’s five-year Early Child Development Mapping Project (ECMAP 2014) analyzed early childhood development–related data for more than 70,000 kindergarten children in 100 Alberta communities.

The study used the standard EDI (Early Development Instrument)* to look at five areas of child development:

- physical health and well-being
- social competence
- emotional maturity
- language and thinking skills
- communications skills and general knowledge

The study found that 30% of Alberta five-year-olds entering kindergarten suffered “great difficulty” in at least one of these developmental areas. In other words, they scored between the tenth and twenty-fifth percentile of the Canadian norm. An additional 15% of children had great difficulty in two or more areas of development. **Less than half of Alberta’s kindergarten-aged children (46.4%) were developing appropriately in all five areas.**

Research on early childhood development suggests that many of the developmental delays in five-year-olds are already evident by age three: “it would appear that many children in this province are not getting the

* Developed in Canada, the EDI has been used to measure and monitor early childhood development across the country since 2000. The EDI questionnaire is administered at the kindergarten level. It provides an overall sense of children’s development before they start school and allows provinces to compare their results with a Canadian norm.

support they need during their crucial early development years” (ECMap 2014, 30).

The Early Child Development Mapping Project found that more favourable socio-economic status was generally linked to more positive early childhood development. But it also found that the *largest number* of children experiencing developmental difficulties were from middle-class households.* Clearly, there is much room for improvement: “Alberta children could and should be doing much better” (p. 30).

Decades’ worth of research clearly shows that high-quality learning environments and secure, responsive relationships with caregivers are the key to healthy child development. **“The goal of supporting children’s active learning and development...demands a well-educated and supported, professional early learning and care workforce. At present, the early learning and care workforces in Alberta and other Canadian provinces fall short of this requirement”** (Muttart 2019, 26).

*Quality Early Learning and Child Care Is Good for Everyone
...and for Alberta’s bottom line*

“The impact of high-quality child care cuts across numerous social policy domains, including workforce development, social development and infrastructure, health and family. High-quality child care is an important component of communities’ capacity to meet their citizens’ needs. It promotes social inclusion, combats poverty, stimulates the economy and promotes women’s equality.”

—Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (2018), *Quality Educators, Quality Care*, p. 18

* This is because the majority of Alberta households are middle class, so the largest overall number of children falls into this category. “Targeting supports only to communities with low SES [socio-economic status] will miss the majority of communities where the largest number of children are having difficulty” (ECMap 2014, 31).

“What happens to children affects us all. If our children do not thrive, our societies will not thrive.”

—Katherine Scott (2006), *Growing Up in North America*, p. 1

A growing body of research recognizes that investment in accessible, affordable, high-quality early learning and child care brings a wide range of benefits (Harvard 2007; Friendly 2008; OECD 2012; ChildCare 2020; Vandenberg 2015; Marope and Kaga 2015; Flanagan and Beach 2016; Alexander et al., 2017; Early Years Study 4; Alberta Federation of Labour 2018b).

High-quality early learning and child care generates exceptional returns on investment. Canadian economic studies calculate the cost–benefit ratio of such investment at between \$1.50 and \$2.78 returned for every \$1 spent (TD Economics 2012). International studies have found a return of \$10 to \$17 for every \$1 spent (Harvard 2007; Marope and Kaga 2015; Akbari and McCuaig 2017; Alexander et al., 2017). While some studies found larger returns on investment for disadvantaged children, many found consistent positive effects for *all* children.

Economists acknowledge that the benefits of early learning and child care investment are much higher than what can be shown in measurable economic analyses (Marope and Kaga 2015). Benefits that are difficult to quantify in dollar terms include lower child mortality, lower crime rates, reductions in substance abuse and mental illness, reductions in public spending associated with poor health and school failure, reduced social inequality (including gender inequality) and increased tax revenues.

“High-quality programs are costly. That said, there are countless studies that suggest that the benefits of early childhood education far outweigh the costs” (TD Economics 2012, 5).

Investing in high-quality early learning and child care creates jobs and stimulates economic development and growth (Scott 2006; Findlay and

Lord 2015; Vandebroek 2015). The Alberta Federation of Labour (2018b) reports that investments in child care generate 44% more direct and indirect jobs than the closest industry. The federation (2018c) also notes that, in Quebec, the economic activity generated by the child care system generated GDP growth of 1.7% and \$2.2 billion in tax revenue.

A 2012 report by TD Economics confirms that investment in early learning and child care provides a larger economic return than investment in other industries. The report notes that both the GDP multiplier and the employment multiplier for the child care sector are among the highest of all industries.

The GDP multiplier measures the change in overall output in Canada from a change in output of a given industry. The GDP multiplier for child care outside the home is 0.90,^{*} behind only financial services, education, retail trade and non-profit institutions.

The employment multiplier measures the number of jobs created per million dollars of increased output in a given sector. The employment multiplier for the child care sector, 36.92, “is by far the highest across all industries, suggesting that early childhood education does not only provide significant benefits to children, families and the economy, but it provides a better return on investment than many other sectors” (TD Economics 2012, 5).

High-quality early learning and child care develops crucial skills that can improve productivity and innovation and help to address future labour shortages (Friendly and Lero 2002; TD Economics 2012). Future prosperity depends on a skilled workforce.

^{*} Findlay and Lord (2012) note that a 2011 economic study for Nova Scotia found an even higher GDP multiplier for early learning and child care outputs in that province. Nova Scotia’s GDP multiplier was 2.23—67% higher than construction and 112% higher than manufacturing.

Learning and skills development in the early years prepares children for the 21st century workplace. It creates “knowledge economies” that are critical for future growth and competitiveness in a global marketplace. In addition, children who develop essential skills have better employment prospects and shorter durations of unemployment (Alexander and Ignjatovic 2019, 2).

High-quality early learning and child care is an important tool for eliminating poverty and getting parents back to work. The City of Edmonton has identified affordable, high-quality child care as one of six game-changers in its *End Poverty in a Generation* strategy.

High-quality early learning and child care increases female labour market participation. “The ability of women to participate in the work force is directly affected by the availability of affordable child care” (Alberta Children’s Services 2018a, 14).

The *quality* of available child care is also a factor. A 2013 Alberta study found that “some mothers would change their employment or drop out of the workforce rather than have their children in child care that did not meet their quality standards” (Breitkreuz et al. 2013, 2). Finding high-quality child care spaces was particularly difficult for parents who lived in cities and for parents who only needed part-time child care.

The 2013 study also found that the cost of high-quality care was sometimes prohibitive. “Some mothers left paid employment because they would be paid little more at their paid job than the cost of high quality child care. For them, it didn’t seem worthwhile to engage in paid work for such little net financial gain” (13).

The lack of accessible, affordable, high-quality child care has a direct and negative impact on women’s ability to contribute to the economy. In 2015 (Moyser 2017), labour force participation for women in Alberta was

77%, compared to 88.3% for men.* In Canada as a whole, labour force participation for women was 77.5%, compared to 85.3% for men.

An International Monetary Fund working paper (Petersson 2017) reports that Canada’s gender participation gap averaged 6.8 percentage points between 2010 and 2015. The paper demonstrates that a 1% increase in the labour force participation of educated women would increase Canada’s productivity growth by 0.2–0.3 percentage points per year. Eliminating the 7% gap between male and female labour force participation would increase Canada’s GDP by about 4%.

Increasing women’s participation in the labour market promotes women’s equality (Carlberg and Budney 2019) and improves the status of women. The Alberta Federation of Labour (2018c) reports that affordable child care for single mothers increased these women’s labour force participation by 22%, decreased their relative poverty rate by 14% and increased their median after-tax income by 81%.

High-quality early learning and child care helps to close the gender wage gap. The Canadian Labour Congress’s (2019a; 2019b) labour market snapshot for the third quarter of 2019 reports that men earn \$4 per hour more than women—even though women have higher levels of education. In 2018, 75% of part-time workers were women. Part-time workers earn approximately \$9 per hour less than full-time workers and often have low-wage jobs with no benefits. One-third of women who work part time cited child care and family responsibilities as the reason, compared to just 10% of their male counterparts. “Closing the gender wage gap will require broad-based policies that increase part-time wages” and ensure that women have access to affordable child care (Canadian Labour Congress 2019a, 1).

* The labour force participation rate for Alberta women with young children is lower than the provincial average. In 2016, 63% of mothers whose youngest child was under three and 73% of mothers whose youngest child was under six were employed outside the home (Friendly et al. 2018).

High-quality early learning and child care reduces stress and helps to build strong families. It links parents and families to community resources and helps them find a fulfilling work–life balance. The 2013 Breitreuz study found that parents who were not confident about the quality of their children’s care were more likely to be stressed. Their well-being and work–life balance suffered as a result.

High-quality early learning and child care promotes social inclusion and improves social integration. It helps newcomers integrate into their new neighbourhoods, fosters respect for diversity and helps to build strong communities. It supports and nurtures children’s cultural connections, resiliency and well-being* (Marope and Kaga 2015).

High-quality early learning and child care increases the likelihood that children will graduate and go on to post-secondary education. This has significant social and economic benefits. Research shows that “dropping out of high school is a major problem that can often have devastating effects” (Hankivsky 2008, 5).

The non-profit research and training organization Mitacs reports that 40,000 Canadian students drop out of high school each year.

A 2008 study (Hankivsky) funded by the Canadian Council on Learning estimates that a single child who does not complete high school costs Canada’s social assistance and criminal justice programs approximately \$4,500 per year, or about \$156,000 over a 35-year lifetime. On a national scale, this is the equivalent of just over \$1.3 billion a year. If the number of Canadians who completed high school increased by just 1%, this would save more than \$2.1 billion per year in social assistance and criminal justice costs. It would also save billions of dollars in health care costs, employment insurance costs and lost tax revenues.

* The Children’s Services business plan for 2019–2023 lists the enhancement of children’s, youths’ and families’ well-being, resiliency and cultural connections as one of three expected outcomes.

High-quality early learning and child care reduces the need for special education and remedial programs later in children’s lives. “Timely provision of appropriate intervention and support reduces the level, or prevents the incidences of, learning difficulties and disabilities” (Marope and Kaga 2015, 24).

Research shows that approximately 15% of Canadian schoolchildren need special education supports. Two years of quality early learning and child care lowers special education placement by 40–60% for children with cognitive risk and 10–30% for children with social or behavioural risk (Philpott et al. 2019, 4).

High-quality early learning and child care creates caring, capable, healthy, well-adjusted, responsible citizens who make positive contributions to their communities and to the world.

Investing in early learning and child care is “an indispensable investment in ‘building the wealth of nations.’” (Marope and Kaga 2015, 12, citing the 2010 World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education in Moscow).

Solid Legislation Supports Quality

Why Is Quality Important?

“The importance of quality for child development, wellbeing and happiness cannot be overstated. [Quality early childhood education and care]...can have significant economic and social benefits through its effects on child development. Conversely, poor quality ECEC fails to meet the human rights test of ‘in the best interests of the child’ and, indeed, may even be harmful.”

— ChildCare2020, *Child Care in Canada by 2020: A Vision and a Way Forward*, pp. 11–12

Decades’ worth of research has shown that early learning and child care can bring a host of benefits for children, for their families and for society as a whole (Friendly and Lero 2002; OECD 2012; Melhuish et al. 2015; OECD 2017). But the research also shows that the benefits of early learning and child care depend on the *quality* of the programs and

services that are provided (Friendly, Doherty and Beach 2006; OECD 2017; OECD 2018).

Poor-quality early learning and child care can in fact cause harm (McCain and Mustard 1999; Doherty et al. 2000; Melhuish et al. 2015). The lack of experiences that promote active learning can “limit the ways children respond to new stimuli or changing circumstances, with the result that their development may not reach its full potential” (Doherty et al. 2000, 2). Poor-quality early learning and child care can also be a risk factor for delayed language and cognitive development—particularly for children from low income families (Melhuish et al. 2015).

Alberta’s current legislation does not ensure quality.

The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta believes that the quality standards in Alberta’s current child care licensing legislation do not go far enough. AECEA is also concerned that *nearly one-third* of Alberta’s licensed early learning and child care programs do not even comply with the minimum standards currently on the books.*

Alberta’s children and families deserve better. But legislation alone is not enough.

Legislative standards can only be enforced within the context of an integrated early learning and child care system that includes sufficient funding to support it. Underfunding and non-compliance go hand in hand.

* Alberta Children’s Services (2018, 23) business plan for 2017–2020 reports that, in 2015–2016, only 70% of licensed child care programs complied with the Child Care Licensing Act and Child Care Licensing Regulation. Compliance targets of 72%, 73% and 74% were set for the subsequent three reporting periods (2016–2017, 2017–2018 and 2019–2020). Children’s Services business plans for these periods do not include compliance as a performance measure, and annual reports do not address the ministry’s success in meeting the compliance performance targets set in the 2017–2020 business plan.

What Do We Mean by Quality?

Quality child care addresses the physical, social, intellectual, creative and emotional needs of the children it serves. It “emphasizes the development of the whole child, attending to his or her ‘care’ and ‘educational’ needs in an integrated manner,” and laying the “foundation for lifelong learning and well-being” (Marope and Kaga 2015, 30).

Quality child care is child centred and learning rich. It “views children as capable, competent learners who are full of potential” (Government of Canada 2017, 2). It responds to the individual developmental needs of each child and “nurtures children’s curiosity, exploration, problem-solving and development” (AECEA 2018, 42). It provides stimulating learning experiences, fosters resiliency and nurtures self-worth and well-being (Marope and Kaga 2015).

Quality child care “values the importance of building strong, responsive and respectful relationships in which purposeful interactions support optimal learning for children” (Government of Canada 2017, 2). It respects the social and cultural diversity of Alberta’s families and engages families in their children’s learning. It acknowledges the need for parents, families, communities and governments to work together in the best interest of children. It honours Indigenous Peoples and values their many cultures, languages and ways of knowing.

Researchers recognize that quality is a relative concept that reflects values, beliefs, social and cultural contexts, and individual needs (Friendly, Doherty and Beach, 2006). Nonetheless, there is considerable “agreement about the factors that define quality regardless of circumstances” (Marope and Kaga 2015, 26). The consensus is that quality early learning and child care involves an integrated system of interlinked components that must be addressed together, as a totality (Friendly, Doherty and Beach 2006, 16).

Appendix 1 (see p. 123) illustrates a variety of system models for quality early learning and child care. The early learning and child care workforce is at the heart of every model.

*“High-quality means providing rich early learning experiences and environments. It means viewing children as capable, competent learners who are full of potential. It means valuing relationships that support optimal learning for children, and it **recognizes the importance of proper qualifications and training for those working in the field of early childhood learning and care.**”*

—Employment and Social Development Canada (2019b), *Investing in Our Future*, p. 6

The Components of Quality

Researchers generally agree that a high-quality early learning and child care system includes elements of “process quality” and “structural quality.”

Process quality relates to children’s actual daily experiences in an early learning and child care program (Doherty et al. 2000b; OECD 2011; European Commission 2014; Schleicher 2019). It is defined in terms of practice-related characteristics such as the following:

- instructional quality
- parental involvement
- curriculum, including the exposure of children to play and other developmental and educational activities
- day-to-day pedagogic practice, including strategies for engaging children in learning and approaches for managing children’s behaviour
- relationships and interactions between children, between children and staff, and between staff and parents

Structural quality relates to the specific conditions that “most directly influence caregivers’ behaviour” (Doherty et al. 2000b, 5). These include the following (Friendly, Doherty and Beach 2006; Marope and Kaga 2015; Garon-Carrier 2019; Schleicher 2019):

- funding and material resources
- child–staff ratios and group sizes
- standards related to space and physical environments
- staff qualifications
- training and professional development
- working conditions, wages and benefits

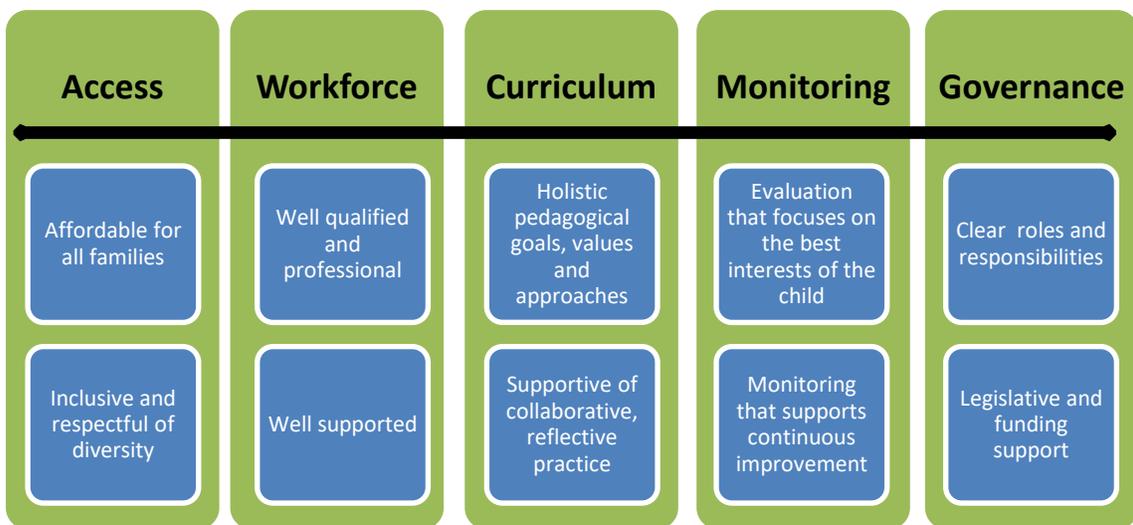


Figure 1. The 10 key principles of a high-quality early learning and child care system (European Commission Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014)

The structural components of quality early learning and child care are largely determined by legislation* and public policy. Structural elements are easier to regulate than process-related components of quality (Doherty et al. 2000). This is why child care–related legislation—including Alberta’s—has traditionally focused on structural quality.

* Not all the components of structural quality can be legislated (European Commission 2014).

However—as shown in Figure 1 and in the system models in Appendix 1 (see p. 123)—process quality and structural quality are interrelated. Furthermore, researchers generally agree that “process quality...is the primary driver of gains in children’s development” (Garon-Carrier 2019, 3).

In order for legislation to be effective, it must recognize the interrelationship between process quality and structural quality. For example, early childhood educators cannot create nurturing, supportive relationships with parents and children (process quality) unless they have specialized education and training (structural quality).

In recent years, Canadian jurisdictions have begun to embed process quality components into legislation. For example, section 39 of Prince Edward Island’s 2017 Early Learning and Child Care Act requires licensed centres to follow a ministry-approved curriculum framework.

AECEA recommends that Alberta follow suit.

How Do We Create Quality in Our Early Learning and Child Care System?

Research over the past several decades has uncovered a range of best practices that have proven to be effective for achieving and maintaining quality. **There is widespread agreement that the quality of the workforce—including educational qualifications and ongoing professional development—is an important determinant of a quality early learning and child care system** (OECD 2006; Friendly et al. 2006; Muttart 2014; Halfon and Langford 2015).

Early childhood educators “are the most valuable asset in any early years setting. They are the single biggest contributor to the quality of provision, and they can be the driving force towards improvement. They are also often what parents and carers value most when choosing early education and child care. It is absolutely essential that we have...[well-educated] practitioners working with babies

and young children. To do that, we need to ensure we recruit the best people and give them a high standard of training and support” (Nutbrown 2012, 35).

Legislation is an important tool for creating a qualified professional workforce.

Ontario and British Columbia both have legislation that makes ongoing professional learning mandatory for early childhood educators. And most Canadian jurisdictions—including Alberta—have legislated minimum education standards. In Alberta’s case, these standards are far lower than what current research shows is needed.

Five Policy Levers for Creating Quality

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2012) recommends using the following five “policy levers” to create a high-quality system:

1. *Setting out quality goals and regulations* helps to align resources with priorities. It also supports coordinated, child-centred services and help parents make informed choices.
2. *Designing and implementing curriculum and standards* ensures even-quality early learning and child care across different settings. It also helps parents understand child development.
3. *Improving qualifications, training and working conditions* supports good pedagogy and fosters the positive child–staff interactions required for healthy child development and learning. Specialized education and ongoing professional development are important components of improving staff qualifications.
4. *Engaging families and communities* ensures that early childhood educators, parents and communities work as partners toward the common goal of providing accessible, affordable, high-quality early learning and child care that serves the best interests of children.

5. Advancing data collection, research and monitoring improves children’s outcomes and drives continuous improvement in the delivery of early learning and child care services.

AECEA’s recommendations for legislative change focus on policy levers 2 and 3.

How Does Alberta Measure Up?

In 2008, UNICEF’s Innocenti Research Centre prepared a report card on 10 benchmarks (minimum standards) for early childhood care and education. Of the 25 countries that participated, Canada and Ireland shared last place—having met only one of the 10 standards. Sweden achieved all 10 benchmarks, and Iceland achieved nine (Adamson 2008).

Since 2011, the Atkinson Centre for Society and Development* has produced a triennial report (Akbari and McCuaig 2017) on early childhood education in Canada’s provinces and territories. The report covers 19 benchmarks in five categories: governance, funding, access, learning environment (including the existence of a curriculum framework) and accountability. In the 2017 version of the Atkinson Centre’s Early Childhood Education report, Alberta scored 6.5 out of a possible 15 points. Prince Edward Island and Quebec scored the highest, with 11 and 10 points respectively.

Clearly, Alberta has much room for improvement.

* The Atkinson Centre is part of the University of Toronto’s Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). The centre’s Early Childhood Education Report was established in 2011 as part of the McCain, Mustard and McCuaig *Early Years Study 3*.