



# Early Learning and Care Must Be a Cornerstone of Edmonton's COVID-19 Recovery Plan



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As Edmonton considers its COVID-19 recovery efforts, early learning and care should be front and center. There are at least three reasons why.

## 1. For many parents, the recovery simply cannot happen without affordable and decent early learning and care in place.

Early learning and care (ELC) has direct positive impacts on the well-being of both children and families—and it *must* be available before many working parents can fully rejoin the workforce.<sup>1</sup> These two characteristics make ELC much more similar to K-12 education than to other sectors of the economy, such as retail or restaurants. However, ELC in Alberta is still delivered using a mixed-market model, without any of the core funding, planning, and management of K-12 education. This means that, unlike K-12 education, there remains considerable uncertainty around what ELC will look like in Alberta, including Edmonton, after the COVID-19 crisis. This is a serious problem because “[i]n the immediate term, the capacity of the economy to move from pause to restart hinges on childcare.”<sup>2</sup>

This point cannot be stated strongly enough. ELC is required for many parents of young children if they want to return work. *It is a mistake to think that because more people will be unemployed in the months after the COVID-19 crisis, ELC will not be needed; the reality is that many working parents—mostly women—could stay unemployed precisely because there is no decent, affordable ELC available.*<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Explicitly including early learning and care in Edmonton's recovery plan will create a more equitable recovery.

The COVID-19 crisis has hit some groups of people harder than others—in particular, women. In fact, the term “she-cession” has been coined to describe how the effects of the crisis have fallen more heavily on women, with one economist noting that there is “[n]o recovery without a she-covery, no she-covery without child

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<sup>1</sup> “Early learning and care” (sometimes also called “childcare”, though that term does not accurately reflect what happens in high-quality programs) is used here as an umbrella term for programs paid for by parents that take place in a regulated setting away from home. Although ELC is often seen as for pre-K children, it should be noted that many parents use out-of-school-care for children up to age 12.

<sup>2</sup> Bezanson, K., Bevan, A., and Lysack, M. (2020). Future proofing: Federal leadership for childcare system building, page 2. Available at <https://www.childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/Bezanson-Bevan-Lysack-Canada-childcare-system.pdf>. Though this paper argues for building a national early learning and care system in Canada, the arguments apply for any level of government that is attempting to assist in the post-COVID-19 recovery effort.

<sup>3</sup> There is robust evidence from Quebec that if decent, affordable early learning and care is available, parents (particularly mothers) will use it to join the labour force. See Fortin, P. (2018). Québec's childcare program at 20. *Inroads: The Canadian Journal of Opinion*, 42, 52-64. It stands to reason that the reverse will also be true: If early learning and care is not available, then parents—mostly women—will leave, or not rejoin, the labour force.

care.”<sup>4</sup> This statement reflects the observation that not only have economic sectors that employ women been hit harder but also the reality that with schools and ELC programs closed, women are taking on the bulk of early learning and care duties within the home, even while many continue to work.<sup>5</sup> Restoring early learning and care means restoring a degree of gender equity that has been lost during this crisis.

The equity issues around early learning and care during and after COVID-19 extend beyond gender; they slice across socio-economic lines as well. Wealthier families who can pay for individual care (such as nannies or babysitters) and those who have (typically higher-paying) jobs that allow them to work from home are the least hit by COVID-19.<sup>6</sup> Child care has to be made available *and affordable* for all, or else some families—particularly those with low income—will be left behind in Edmonton’s recovery.

### **3. It can’t just be about warehousing children—ELC has to be of high quality, especially as we come out of the COVID-19 crisis, to encourage short- and long-term benefits to Edmonton.**

In trying to restore ELC during the recovery, it will be easy to focus solely on simply re-opening or creating spaces. That is always the first natural reaction to a sudden shortage of anything: create as much of the product as quickly (and often as cheaply) as possible. But that instinct has to be tempered, especially with ELC, because the full cost of allowing low-quality programs to proliferate in the wake of COVID-19 is very high.

Some families must have ELC to work, and often people in those families have the types of jobs—retail, health care aides, and many others—that are both essential and poorly paid. The children of these families cannot end up being warehoused in low-quality programs that do little beyond providing basic needs. At the very least, this would discount the rights of all children, regardless of their socioeconomic class, to high-quality care and learning opportunities. As parents of young children re-enter the workforce at what is, and will continue to be, an extremely stressful time, they must be fully confident in the quality of the programs their children are attending. Support for ELC in the recovery needs to include strong requirements ensuring *all* ELC programs in Edmonton are high-quality.

The COVID-19 crisis has revealed the cracks in Canada’s early learning and care systems. But it has also revealed how essential they are. Creating a well-funded, high-quality ELC system in Edmonton could contribute to a faster, more equitable recovery while simultaneously moving us further down the path to eliminating poverty.

This brief is part of a series of documents created by the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care to address current topics in early learning and care that impact Edmonton. Robert Buschmann is a Research Associate at the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (CUP) at the University of Alberta. Correspondence can be sent to [info@ecelc.ca](mailto:info@ecelc.ca).

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<sup>4</sup> The Current (22 May 2020). Without more support for child care, economic recovery will be slow, says expert. CBC Radio, available at <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-may-22-2020-1.5580159/without-more-support-for-child-care-economic-recovery-will-be-slow-says-expert-1.5581464>.

<sup>5</sup> This increased unpaid responsibility appears to be taking a particular toll among women in this country, with 71% of Canadian women in a recent survey reporting feeling more anxious and depressed (among other issues) as a result of having to do this additional care work. See Oxfam (June 2020). Care in the time of coronavirus. Oxfam, available at <https://www.oxfam.ca/publication/care-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>.

<sup>6</sup> Messacar, D., Morissette, R., and Deng, Z. (2020). Inequality in the feasibility of working from home during and after COVID-19. *Statcan COVID-19: Data to Insights for a Better Canada*, catalogue no. 45280001, available at <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00029-eng.htm>.