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A starting point for discussions on a new federal/provincial/territorial early childhood agreement

At the turn of this century when a “National Children’s Agenda,¹” featured in intergovernmental and public dialogue, a handful of federal/provincial/territorial (f/p/t) initiatives propelled the interests of young children forward.² These agreements still influence public policy and discourse today.

Yet by any standard, Canada’s supports for its youngest children are underdeveloped. Compared to our counterparts in the Organization of the Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), our children are far less likely to attend an early childhood program.³ Even by the benchmarks of the *Early Childhood Education Report*, which compares Canadian provinces and territories (p/t) to one another, p/t early childhood services are revealed as fragmented, of variable quality, and access is uneven.⁴

The success of f/p/t early childhood agreements are traditionally measured by the counting of new child care spaces or the size of financial transfers per child. These are inadequate measures, which on their own do not improve child outcomes. Can the pending talks open a new dialogue, informed by the best research, and centred around the best interests of young children? Can these discussions be a catalyst for turning provincial/territorial service patchworks into effective early childhood systems which finally tackle access and quality challenges while addressing the educational inequities children experience, especially those of Aboriginal heritage?

Research identifies the following features in early childhood systems that deliver their promise to children, families and society.

- Enough children attend from across the socio-economic spectrum
- Children attend regularly and for long enough to experience benefits
- Have high quality programs

The following recommendations start to operationalize the pan-Canadian vision for early learning found in the *Early Learning and Development Framework* developed by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, and the quality framework document produced by the Provincial/Territorial Directors of Early Childhood Education and Care. Both are aspirational positions designed to foster continuity across jurisdictions and across all early childhood settings and to promote a common understanding and shared values regarding what is most important in the early years.

¹ An intergovernmental framework and vision for working together to improve the well-being of children.

² The Early Childhood Development Initiative (2000) the Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care (2003), the 2005 Bilateral Agreements with provinces as well as the 2006 Universal Childcare Benefit. Although the Government of Québec did not participate in developing these initiatives or sign the f/p/t agreements it supports the general principles of the Early Childhood Development Initiative and the Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care.

³ OECD (2015). *PF3.2: Enrolment in childcare and pre-school*. OECD Family Database OECD - Social Policy Division - Directorate of Employment, Labour and Social Affairs. <http://www.oecd.org/social/family/database.htm>

⁴ Timeforpreschool.ca

While these first talks are unlikely to fully address Canada's cumulative early childhood deficit, they can be a good start; first, by not placing barriers to early childhood system development and secondly by providing some of the basic infrastructure necessary.

1. Make federal funding available for early childhood programs operated by schools.

Neighborhood schools are a community's biggest resource in meeting the educational needs of its children. Jurisdictions using their publicly-funded education systems to rationalize program delivery and expand access to early education and care (ECEC) for young children need access to new federal funding.

Today the majority of Canadian children receive their early education through schools.⁵ Eight out of 13 jurisdictions offer universal full-day kindergarten for five year olds. Schools in nine jurisdictions provide at least some junior kindergarten or other preschool programming for infants to four year olds. While early childhood programs in schools are generally not tied to parents' workforce participation, school-offered programs do double duty as a labourforce support. For example where full day kindergarten is available, mothers of kindergarten-aged children are in the workforce at the same rate as those with children in primary schools. Jurisdictions are increasingly recognizing the efficiencies of growing education down to include younger children.

2. Fund the capital costs for early childhood programming out of the capital infrastructure fund.

Building costs are a major barrier to the expansion of early childhood programs, particularly for programs located in neighbourhood schools and in First Nations communities. ECEC has both a capital and a social infrastructure component. Any new f/p/t early childhood agreement should include access to Ottawa's infrastructure fund to support capital costs. This addresses immediate needs while building sustainable capacity in communities.

3. Invest in research, evaluation, and innovation.

In a federation such as Canada, with distinct f/p/t and Aboriginal jurisdiction over early childhood services there is an important role for the federal government in supporting research, accountability and innovation. Merely counting the number of children attending programs provides no assurances to families or the public that children's lives are improving or whether services are meeting goals. Evidence-based decision-making must inform program development and delivery, especially in years of financial austerity. Drawing on assessment tools already in use and introducing new measures where necessary should create a collaboratively established, reporting format to provide a comprehensive assessment of how children and families are doing and why. This should be complemented by research into interventions that can make a difference in children's lives.

Innovation funding should also be available to allow provinces to rationalize their early childhood services to promote quality, accessibility and oversight. These types of processes allow governments to set informed targets for improvements and effectively measure progress.

⁵ Timeforpreschool.ca

4. Expand paid parental leave to 18 months. Raise payments to match Québec’s levels. Incorporate a “use it or lose it” period for fathers and same-sex parents.

Adequate parental leave is the foundation of an early childhood strategy. It supports child and maternal health and allows the parents to develop the essential attachments infants need to thrive.

A robust parental leave strategy supports parents desire to spend time with their infants and relieves provinces/territories of the pressure to provide infant care – a service that is both very expensive and very difficult to provide well.

Instituted in 2006, Québec’s parental leave provisions are more generous than the plan delivered in the rest of Canada through Employment Insurance. A Statistics Canada’s study⁶ revealed that 90% of working mothers outside Québec took some type of leave following the birth of their child. On average, the leave lasted 44 weeks. Only 26% of these children had working fathers who took leaves, with the average leave being 2.4 weeks.

The situation differed quite dramatically in Québec, with almost 99% of working mothers taking some form of leave; on average, the leave lasted 48 weeks. 76% of Québec fathers took almost twice as much parental leave (5.6 weeks). The higher portion of Québec leave taking can be attributed to Québec’s higher income replacement levels and the proviso of six weeks of leave for the exclusive use of fathers.

Ten years have passed since the bilateral agreements on early learning and child care came and went. Much in the early childhood landscape has changed since then. We have many made-in-Canada examples of good practice and the steps jurisdictions took to achieve results. A new f/p/t agreement should not suggest that there is only one route to success. Yet everywhere there is ample room for improvement.

These talks are taking place in an environment where there is a greater understanding of early education and its ability to leverage the best from other family policies. Still to be hammer out are the numbers, timing and who gets the credit and how. But this is an historic and not a cynical moment. It is another chance for Canadians and their governments to get it right from the start for our children.

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⁶ *Canadian Social Trends*, no. 94 (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2012002/article/11697-eng.pdf>).