

EDUCATOR MENTAL HEALTH IS A WORKFORCE RETENTION ISSUE



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Policy discussions on educator recruitment and retention in child care often focus on wages and benefits. Those factors matter. But mental health is not a secondary concern; it is a workforce retention issue that helps determine whether educators stay or leave.

In a recent mixed-methods study of more than 3,300 early childhood educators in Ontario, nearly half reported that mental health issues affected their decision to continue working with children. This is not a marginal issue—it is a defining feature of the workforce. Educators who reported mental health concerns were more than five times as likely to consider leaving the profession.

But mental health does not exist in isolation. It is shaped by the everyday realities of the job.

When educators described their experiences, five issues emerged that were influencing their decision to leave:

- demanding working conditions
- challenging relationships with families and colleagues
- policy constraints that made their work more difficult
- spillover effects leading to stress affecting their home lives
- serious psychological and physical impacts, including burnout and anxiety

As one educator put it, *“Working in child care is very demanding both physically and emotionally,”* while another described *“juggling too many things at one time.”*

The study shows that these experiences are not individual problems; they translate into systemic problems with turnover. Two factors in particular—job satisfaction and psychological safety—help explain the pathway.

When working conditions are poor, educators report lower job satisfaction and feel less safe speaking up or making mistakes. In turn, they are more likely to consider leaving. Supportive workplace environments are not just “nice to have.” They are mechanisms through which the system retains or loses its workforce.

The human cost of these conditions is stark. Educators described reaching a breaking point: *“I burnt out as an ECE”* and *“I was physically and emotionally drained... it was common for me and others to cry on lunch breaks.”*

Compensation is essential, but it is not sufficient. A retention strategy focused only on wages risks missing the working conditions that shape educators’ mental health and their day-to-day ability to do their job well.

A more comprehensive approach is needed—one that addresses workload, administrative burdens, staffing levels, support for children with additional needs, and the realistic expectations placed on educators. It also requires workplaces where educators feel respected, supported, and safe to voice concerns.

Policies aimed at improving child care access and affordability must be assessed not only by coverage and cost, but by whether they create sustainable working conditions for the educators expected to deliver care.

Ultimately, workforce sustainability is not just about bringing people into the sector; it is about creating conditions that enable them to stay.

If we want a high-quality early childhood system, educator mental health must be treated as a structural policy priority.

That means acting on the conditions that drive distress and turnover: staffing pressures, administrative burden, inadequate support structures, and workplaces where psychological safety is too often fragile. Without those changes, retention efforts will remain incomplete.

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