

Early Learning and Child Care For All

A tool kit to bring about public policy change

Introduction

About this document

This toolkit has been developed to support advocacy for equitable access to inclusive licensed early learning and child care. It is one of several resources produced through the [*Inclusive Child Care for All project*](#) carried out collaboratively by Oxfam Canada, Child Care Now and the Childcare Resource and Research Unit and funded by Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) Canada and the generous Canadian public.

The kit provides background information on the state of early learning and child care (ELCC) in Canada, and sets out proposals to make licensed child care programs more equitably accessible and inclusive of all children, parents and other caregivers. Additionally, the toolkit gives tips on how to advocate for these changes.

The Inclusive Child Care for All project, which is funded to run from 2022-2024, has two objectives:

- (1) advance effective inclusive ELCC policy solutions to address barriers experienced by underrepresented women, primarily newcomers to Canada, racialized women, and mothers with disabilities, and
- (2) raise the participation of under-represented groups of women in the child care advocacy movement.

In the ELCC field, the term “inclusive” refers to full and equitable participation of children with disabilities. This toolkit, like the project it supports, uses the term more broadly. It is used to describe high quality ELCC that is explicitly designed to be relevant, culturally significant, and responsive to, and welcoming of, all First Nations, Inuit and Métis families and children, and of parents and children of all races, ethnicities, gender diversities, and other identities as well as all situations including, socio-economic status, employment, citizenship, language, religion, and geographic location.

There is no better time for child care advocacy than NOW

In 2021, the federal government announced an ambitious program to build a Canada-wide system of early learning and childcare in partnership with the governments of each province and territory. The federal 2021 budget allocated \$27.2 billion for the project for the first five years and promised that after the five years, starting in 2026-2027, it would transfer a minimum of \$9.2 billion annually to the provinces and territories to support early learning and child care. Also, the federal government reaffirmed its commitment to the [Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#), and ear-marked significant funding to support its implementation.

Canada's provinces and territories have agreed to be part of a new Canada-wide system of early learning and child care and to support the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework. (Quebec is not opposed to what the federal government is trying to achieve through its new initiative but, for a variety of reasons, the province signed an asymmetrical funding agreement with the Government of Canada, and will use its share of the federal funds to expand and improve its own publicly funded system of low-fee child care.) This consensus, brokered by the largest ever federal investment in history, opens an unprecedented opportunity for child care advocates to push for policy changes that will lead to inclusive child care for all.

Background

Canada has a big gap between supply and demand for licensed child care

The demand for licensed ELCC far exceeds supply. There are enough licensed child care programs for only 29 per cent of children under 13 years old. The availability is very limited in rural and northern areas but there is also a scarcity of spaces in urban and suburban neighbourhoods. Waiting lists for programs are long. Infant child care is especially difficult to find and that means mothers in the paid labour force must either quit their jobs when their parental leave runs out, or, if their employer allows, take an extended leave without pay.

Access to spaces that exist is also inequitable for reasons beyond availability. The relatively high cost of licensed child care puts it out of the reach of most low-income and many medium-income families. Often, the location of child care centres or home-based providers make it inaccessible to families, especially those who must rely on public transportation. Children who need additional or specialized learning and care support are often excluded. Children and parents with physical disabilities can be prevented from using licensed child care

because facilities are not accessible. Culture and language can play a role especially if families do not see their culture and language reflected in the pedagogy, or in the staff.

The accessibility gap is inequitable

All these barriers to access are particularly high for parents and families who experience systemic and inter-sectional discrimination impacting every aspect of their lives. These include children and families who are Indigenous, Black, racialized, LGBTQ2S+, refugees, recent immigrants, linguistic minorities, and/or those who have disabilities. For example, we know that marginalized people and communities are more likely to be low-income, and more likely to require non-standard child care which is not as available as child care that is offered full-day, Monday to Friday, 7 am to 6 pm.

Also, members of groups that suffer historic and ongoing discrimination are more likely to live in neighbourhoods with lower access to public services, including child care. They are more likely to encounter cultural and language challenges. Many parents who regularly experience overt and systemic discrimination are understandably wary of accessing child care programs that don't have the resources or capacity to ensure full inclusion broadly defined.

Why do equitable access and inclusion matter?

High quality licensed ELCC enhances the well-being and unique development of children, often with lasting impact into adulthood. Research shows that children who are economically or otherwise disadvantaged do benefit but that positive effects depend on high quality services. Inequitable access to licensed programs, which are generally of higher quality, therefore goes against the rights of all children, and especially the rights of those who are marginalized.

Universal and equitable access to reliable licensed child care also gives all parents an opportunity to access education, training, and employment. It support parents with child-rearing and helps with work-life balance.

Research tells us that mothers who use child care participate more fully in the paid workforce resulting in higher family income and greater economic security. Higher participation rates translate into higher government tax revenue, lower rates of poverty, and other social and economic benefits. The economic benefits of universally accessible child care have been [calculated](#) to be far greater than what governments would have to pay to provide universal access.

Poor access to dependable child care, on the other hand, contributes to the exclusion of mothers from employment or education, increases their marginalization and isolation, undermines gender equality, and widens economic and social equity gaps. It is also a drag on the economy.

When licensed early learning and child care is inaccessible, parents are forced to look at informal and unregulated alternatives which are less reliable, generally of lower quality, and often expensive. Licensed child care programs are more likely to be staffed by qualified early childhood educators. The federal government's new early learning and child care policy and public investments are directed at reducing parent fees and improving quality of licensed programs. Inequitable availability means the benefits of this very large public investment are inequitably distributed.

Text Box:

[Statistics Canada research](#) published in 2021 found that participation in any kind of non-parental care (licensed and unlicensed) was much lower for both low income and low education parents, with no significant differences between lone-parent and two-parent families. When looking at type of child care, parents with higher incomes and more education were more likely to use (licensed) centre-based child care. When relevant characteristics were controlled for, such as employment, immigration status and child age, the differences in use of regulated child care by family income and parents' education levels were reduced but still statistically significant.

Text Box:

An [international study](#) of unequal access observed that in Canada access to ECEC is restricted for all families whatever their income, circumstances, or residential area. Researchers attributed this to a combination of: inadequate supply of child care places (at that time covering only 24% of 0 – 5-year-olds and unevenly distributed); parental fees for child care that are unaffordable for many families; kindergarten provision that doesn't begin until age five for most children; and child care quality shown to be mediocre at best.

Text Box:

[Research](#) shows that in addition to the general scarcity of licensed child care everywhere in Canada, inequities of access exists by community type (urban-rural), for Indigenous children, for children whose parents work non-standard hours, for newcomers to Canada (immigrants and refugees), for children with disabilities and for children living in low-income families.

Text Box:

“Low-income parents and lone parents were more likely to postpone or discontinue their schooling or training or their return to work because of the difficulties in finding a child care arrangement. This might be due to the nature or type of employment or because low-income parents and lone parents may have more difficulties in adjusting their working hours and schedules (Foley and Schwartz 2002) and are therefore more likely to sacrifice their return or their schooling and training opportunities.” ([Statistics Canada, Economic and Social Reports, Vol. 1, No.8, August 2021](#))

Early learning and child care should be a public good, not a commodity

Governments in Canada have historically regarded child care as a private responsibility. Parents are essentially on their own when it comes to finding child care and paying for it. This is the case also for private individuals or organizations who establish programs on either a not-for-profit or for-profit basis. Child care programs operators usually decide where programs are located, how many children will be served, which age groups will be included, what hours they will operate, who will staff the programs, how much they will pay staff.

Of course, provincial and territorial governments, which are constitutionally responsible for early learning and child care, all have legislation and regulations that govern operators. There are limits placed on how many children can be in the care of unlicensed child care providers. Licensed providers must maintain minimum staffing levels and hire a minimum number of qualified early childhood educators. And there are rules on health and safety standards, and minimum space allocations. But Canada’s legislated minimum standards, like public funding and support for child care, fall short of measures that exist in many other countries.

The overall approach to early childhood education and care in Canada is known as a market-approach. It stands in marked contrast to how governments in Canada treat public education. For example, parents are not expected to cobble together arrangements of school-age children. All school-age children are legally entitled to public education and therefore governments are obliged to make schooling accessible and inclusive.

The public education system has shortcomings, but we have seen continuous improvements with respect to equitable access and inclusion over many years. This is because there are mechanisms in place to make the system accountable to communities, parents, and children. Parents do not pay tuition for public education because it is funded through government expenditures. Early childhood educators who work in public education are better paid, receive better benefits and have more favourable working conditions than early childhood educators who work in Canada’s private not-for-profit and for-profit licensed child care sector.

Text box:

A child care market is a “situation in which the state has relatively little influence on or interest in how services for young children are set up, maintained and delivered, rather than a public or publicly-managed system based on the ideas of communal obligations and social citizenship” Lloyd, E., & Penn, H. (2012). *Childcare markets: Can they deliver an equitable service?* Policy Press.

Text box:

“As indicated by the OECD (2016), for children younger than 3 years of age, participation rates in formal ELCC increased with family income and with maternal education in most OECD countries. However, in many OECD countries, particularly countries where the ELCC services are publicly operated or directly subsidized, the gaps in child care use between family income levels largely shrank or disappeared once maternal employment was taken into account.” ([Statistics Canada, Economic and Social Reports, Vol. 1, No.8, August 2021](#))

Text Box:

A [study](#) of inclusiveness of early childhood education and care (ECEC) involving seven case studies across Europe found “when cultural and religious values of ethno-cultural minorities are not accounted for in ECEC services, parents with an immigration background tend to feel excluded.” The study found also that service providers in several countries favour two-parent families (by assuming that two parents can juggle their lives to get around shorter opening hours, for example), and exclude parents based on employment status (for example, by assuming that a parent who is in the paid labour force is more deserving of a space than one who is unemployed).

Canada’s governments are developing new action plans for ELCC

The significant federal funding transfers to the provinces and territories, announced in the 2021 federal budget, are supposed to:

- A. support the implementation of the [early learning and child care Indigenous framework](#)
- B. bring down parent fees for licensed ELCC to \$10 a day by March 31, 2026
- C. make not-for-profit and publicly delivered licensed ELCC more available across the country
- D. improve access to ELCC especially for vulnerable families and communities
- E. raise the quality of ELCC services and make them more inclusive
- F. improve the recruitment and retention rate of qualified early childhood educators

How each province or territory intends to meet these objectives is set out in action plans approved by the federal government. The first action plans cover the first two years of the five-year funding agreements signed by both levels of government. The second action plans covering 2023-24 to 2025-26 are being negotiated now.¹

What actions each provincial and territorial government decides to take (with federal government involvement and approval) over the next three years will shape what ELCC in Canada looks like for a long time to come. We know from the experience in and outside of Canada that some actions are more effective than others for building an equitable system of ELCC. Also, we know which government policies make equitable access and inclusion happen.

What we want

We need transformational system change not more patches

Canada's child care advocates believe the federal government's major financial investment in child care must drive transformational change in ELCC with regard to public responsibility for funding, management and delivery.

We want the current market model of child care provision replaced with a universal public system that will make high quality, affordable, inclusive, flexible, culturally safe, regulated early learning and child care accessible to all who want it. We want those who work in the sector to be properly valued and compensated so that shortages of qualified early childhood educators can start to be addressed.

Child care advocates stress that construction of a Canada-wide system of ELCC must honour and respect the [Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#), which sees Indigenous "children and families supported by a comprehensive and coordinated system of ELCC policies, programs and services that are led by Indigenous peoples, rooted in Indigenous knowledges, cultures and languages, and supported by strong partnerships of holistic, accessible and flexible programming that is inclusive of the needs and aspirations of Indigenous children and families."

Any and all decisions federal, provincial and territorial governments make on ELCC must honour and respect the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), the [Calls to Action](#) of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, the [Calls for Justice](#) issued by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and [Jordan's Principle](#).

c

¹ The Ontario government was the last to agree to a five-year year funding agreement and its second action plan will cover the period 2024-25 to 2025-26.

Convincing governments

Acting with others is best

Decision-makers are more likely to act on an issue if they think the issue matters to a lot of people. The first step to effective advocacy is to connect with others who are likely to share your concern. E-mail info@childcarenow.ca or direct message @child_care_now to find other child care advocates in your community. Child Care Now can also help you build a network of child care advocates if one does not already exist.

Meet decision-makers face-to-face

Decision-makers will pay attention if you get their attention. Figuring out which decision-makers to speak to is the first step. Start by contacting your elected local, provincial, and federal representatives. Their contact information is available to the public whereas public service officials are more difficult to seek out.

It is always best to meet with elected decision-makers, and always good to have several advocates to attend the meeting. Prepare for the meeting together with other advocates. Decide ahead of time what you would like the elected official to do. Gather evidence and arguments in support of your request. Take notes during the meeting. If the elected official asks questions you cannot answer, or asks for information you do not have, say you will seek out the answers or information and forward them after the meeting. Encourage the elected official to commit to taking action on your request. Within a day or two of the meeting, send a thank you letter, card or email and include a summary of whatever commitments the elected official made. It is important to let as many people know about your meeting and what the elected official said. You can let other advocates know by getting word out through emails, e-letters (or electronic news bulletins) or through social media using appropriate “tags.” You can let the public know by getting in touch with journalists who you think would be interested in writing a story about the issue. You can write a commentary on the issue and seek to get it published by print or on-line newspapers.

Organize public meetings

A meeting with an elected official usually involves only a few advocates and the decision-maker. A public meeting can bring many more people together. You can use public meetings to

- build awareness of your issue and your proposed solutions;

- broaden support for your proposed solutions;
- apply pressure on decision-makers to consider your proposed solutions.

Your meeting should be designed and organized to achieve whatever objective(s) you decide are necessary. For example, if you are using a public meeting to put pressure on elected officials make sure they are in the room, and make sure that everyone (or close to everyone) supports your policy solutions. If you are using it to broaden awareness of your issue, and support for your policy solutions, make sure the room is not filled with people who already know the issue and are on your side.

Advocacy rarely works if you don't organize and mobilize

Making change involves (a) constantly working to increase the number of supporters (and keeping lists so that we know who they are and how to reach them) and (b) getting supporters to engage in activities that demonstrate growing strength. There are lots of activities that make numeric strength visible including letter-writing campaigns, petitions, rallies, and boycotts. Increasing the number of supporters through outreach, education, and other tactics to convince those not already convinced is called "organizing." Getting our supporters to act is called "mobilizing."

Don't depend on digital

Social media and other forms of digital communications like web sites and e-mail blasts are very useful tools to get information out to large audiences but unfortunately good digital communications require more resources than child care advocates are likely to have. The best way to reach large audiences from digital platforms is to ask supportive organizations, with large digital audiences, to amplify your messages.

Don't buy into the myth that digital communications are the most efficient way to convince decision-makers to act on your issues. Elected officials are less and less responsive to digital pressure campaigns. They will almost always pay more attention to letters, emails, or phone calls sent by constituents than they will hundreds of electronic form letters or messages. The most effective personal communications are those that tell a compelling story and call on the elected politician to respond. If you organize this kind of letter-writing or message-writing initiative, encourage those who take part to copy you so that you can track how many letters or messages were sent and you can personally thank those who participated.

Advocacy campaigns demonstrate collective strength, organization and persistence

The kind of system change that child care advocates want requires many changes in government policy that are most likely to be introduced incrementally over a period of time. Advocacy campaigns are a means to put concerted, coordinated, and constant pressure on policy makers to make a series of changes that bring us immediate positive results, but also bring us closer to our vision of a fully equitably accessible and inclusive ELCC system.

Advocacy campaigns typically involve more than one activity, and each activity is carefully chosen to broaden our base of support, increase our skills and capacity to advocate, while also having a significant impact on decision-makers.

The child care movement almost always has one campaign or another in motion. We encourage every child care advocate to [join Child Care Now](#), or sign up to our mailing list, to stay informed of national campaign activities and activities organized by our provincial chapter. If you live in Ontario, join our affiliate, the [Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care](#). If you live in British Columbia we encourage you to join our affiliate, the [Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC](#).

Box text:

There are many tool kits available on the Internet that give detailed pointers on how to carry out advocacy activities including the Ontario Nonprofit Network's [Guide for Nonprofits to Meaningfully Engage your Community](#).