



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) refers to services that provide education and care for children. In Canada, ECEC is offered through two streams:

1. Licensed child care primarily designed to support the workforce participation of mothers, and
2. Kindergarten and Pre-K to prepare children for school.

Child care is a fee-for-service or market program operated by public, non-profit and for-profit agencies and is mostly funded through fees paid by parents (called “parent fees”). Schools offer Kindergarten and Pre-K where no parent fees are charged.

Access to child care varies across Provinces and Territories. On average, only 1 in 2 children age 2-5 years old and 1 in 10 infants participate in an ECEC program. The majority of working parents arrange their work schedules to cover off their children’s care. Kindergarten/Pre-K education is usually fully covered through public entitlement programs based on the age of the child.

Why does child care matter to women?

Women are the main providers of child care.

Women provide the majority of child care within the home and these responsibilities are strongly connected to their socioeconomic status. Mothers who forego paid employment to raise their children lose out in terms of present and future earnings, benefits and advancement. Women who combine paid employment with motherhood are also compromised in the workplace. They too lose out in wages, benefits and advancement. The wage gap for women with children is 15% compared to men, while only 10% for women without children.

Paid child care jobs are also mostly done by women, with part-time, entry and nanny-care work—the least secure jobs— often performed by racialized and immigrant women. The market nature of child care, which relies heavily on parents’ ability to pay for their children’s care, creates a tension between women who need child care and those who provide it. Mothers with children often can’t afford the fees necessary to support adequate wages and good working conditions for the women providing their children’s care.

Commercial child care operators often snap

up available public funding, which can further worsen working conditions as companies focus on profits over wages and working conditions. For example, Quebec’s substantial investments in ECEC have resulted in more women entering the workforce and lower rates of poverty, but the majority of the funding goes to commercial operators, where wages and working conditions are particularly poor.

Women are the main consumers of child care.

Everywhere women struggle to find child care and when they do find it, it is expensive. Women spend on average 15-34% of their income on licensed child care.

Women want high-quality child care for their children. ECEC programs have been shown to improve children’s education outcomes, language skills, social skills, physical health, and ability to express emotions. However, government investments are largely designed to support access to child care, while service quality and its impact on children’s development is a secondary consideration. Kindergarten is focused on children’s development, but by operating on a 9 to 3 school schedule, it is insensitive to the employment demands on mothers.



Policy4Women

Public space, public engagement

Child care policy debates MUST consider:

- Who is primarily served (the child or the parent) and who participates in ECEC programs.
- Who is doing the caring labour (the gender, race, and immigration status of the workforce).
- Under what conditions child care workers are working (waged/unwaged, unionized/non-unionized).
- How the child care is being funded (a public, market, or private service).
- The type of organization overseeing the work (non-profit/for-profit agency, regulated/unregulated).

What can governments do?

Who is responsible?

Provincial/territorial governments regulate (license) child care programs for health and safety, provide limited financial support for low-income families and may offer some operational and capital funding.

The Federal government is responsible for ECEC programming for First Nations communities, military families, and immigrants and refugees. It provides financial supports for child care in the Provinces and Territories through the Canada Social Transfer and the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework and reduces parent fees through tax measures such as the Child Care Expense Deduction.

What has been done?

The Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework provides small amounts of federal funding to support Provincial/Territorial child care services for vulnerable families. When using funding to expand parent subsidies to lower child care fees, Provinces/Territories further support the “fee-for-service” (market) nature of child care. In addition, non-profit organizations often do not have the capacity to successfully compete for child care centre development funding from governments. Commercial programs do, which contributes to the expansion of for-profit child care.

What can be done?

For ECEC to evolve as a quality service accessible to all who want to use it, the public sector must play a leading role in planning, oversight, funding and delivery. Canada has a well-developed public education system with the infrastructure, facilities and public support to enable it to ‘grow down and out’ to support the education and care of children from infancy through elementary school. Schools already provide Kindergarten and Pre-K, many provide before- and after-school programs, and some directly operate programs for infants and preschoolers. Early childhood educators working in kindergarten and Pre-K programs enjoy the benefits of unionization and the other supports a public service job can provide. Increasing the public provision of child care would reduce reliance on commercial operators and provide additional supports to non-profit child care agencies.

The federal government has other levers in place to support women’s equity, which should be enhanced to include:

- Adequately funded maternity/paternity leave, including a ‘use it or lose it’ provision requiring the non-birthing parent to take a portion of the leave.
- Enhanced child benefits, which would have the advantage of freeing up spending on provincial/territorial financial aid for families and redirecting it to expand ECEC services.
- Additional tax measures, which recognize the costs of raising children.

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Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada
www.ccaac.ca

Canadian Child Care Federation
www.cccf-fcsge.ca

Child Care Canada: Childcare Resource and Research Unit
www.childcarecanada.org

Atkinson Center for Society and Child Development
www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson

Resources

Policy4Women.com



Centre for Feminist Research at York University



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