



INTRODUCTION

WHY UNIVERSAL CHILDCARE?

We are faced with a situation that demands immediate action. The time is past when society can refuse to provide community child care services in the hope of dissuading mothers from leaving their children and going to work.
— Royal Commission on the Status of Women, 1970

Today, decades after the Royal Commission on the Status of Women issued its report, the “immediate action” on childcare so urgently called for in 1970 has not yet been taken. In 2008 the Canadian childcare system ranked at the bottom when compared to the programs of other developed countries. In a country of close to five million children of 0–12 years of age, Canada now has fewer than 900,000 regulated childcare spaces. The percentage of children for whom a space is available increased only to 17.5 percent — about a 10 percent increase over the past fifteen years. Services are often unavailable and usually expensive. The quality of the care is frequently troubling: limited public financing forces programs to operate as cheaply as possible, and requirements for programs are low. The early childhood educators who provide the care are underpaid and often undertrained. Overall, Canada’s early childhood education and care situation suffers from chronic neglect.

In the years after the Royal Commission on the Status of Women put childcare on the political map, successive federal governments made several tentative attempts to improve childcare nationally, but none of them proved robust enough to build the system recommended by the report. In 2004 the minority Liberal government of Paul Martin went the furthest, passing a five-year federal budget commitment and signing agreements with all the provinces. Yet the Martin government did not survive long enough to implement the long-anticipated program.

A *Toronto Star* article during that period described the years of childcare advocacy that separated the Royal Commission and Martin's plans. Speaking of the childcare advocates, it said:

For a generation, they have lobbied relentlessly for a national system of childcare that's accessible and affordable for all Canadian children and families. They believe that childcare is the great equalizer, that it can set all kids on a path to a healthy and successful life and build strong communities. They want it to be non-profit, and they want it to be funded and regulated by government. They have pressured and persisted while six successive federal governments have all promised — and failed — to give them what they want.

After years as a marginal issue — seen by many as a “just a women's problem” — childcare had soared to political prominence in the 2004 election. It was one of the hot issues in the campaign, sparking countless debates in kitchens and offices across Canada as the Liberals promised a national program for the first time. In their minority government they began the first steps of putting a system in place. Childcare, it seemed, had finally moved from the margins to the mainstream of political concern. But when the Liberals were defeated in the federal election of 2006 the first act of the new Conservative government — again, a minority — under Prime Minister Stephen Harper was to cancel the embryonic national childcare program.

That step backwards was heartbreaking to the parents and advocates who had worked so hard for a national system. The cancellation caused many people to take a new interest in early childhood education and childcare (ECEC). It generated important questions and forced Canadians to look more carefully at how we treat families and children. Why doesn't Canada have a childcare system? Why do other countries have effective early education and childcare programs while we don't? Without access to reliable childcare, how can Canadian mothers support themselves and their children? What does the absence of an adequate childcare system mean for Canada's labour force, our economy, and population growth? Don't young children have a right to early childhood education and care?

Today Canada is one of only a few industrialized countries not to have taken up the challenge of establishing a coherent and effective early childhood education and childcare system. In many countries policy-makers and politicians have concluded that early childhood education and care systems are both necessary and desirable — good for children, women, families, the economy, and society. Many of those countries have decided to put public resources into building widely accessible and high-quality ECEC programs. As for Canada, international groups such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and UNICEF have noted our country's lack of progress in this regard. A 2006 OECD report showed that Canada ranked lowest on public spending on ECEC — below even the United States, Australia, or United Kingdom. In a 2008 report card UNICEF noted that, in a group of the most wealthy twenty-five countries, 80 percent of three- to six-year-olds and 25 to 50 percent of children under age three were participating in ECEC programs. Among those twenty-five countries Canada achieved the dubious distinction of tying with Ireland for last place, failing to attain nine of UNICEF's ten benchmark indicators of quality and access in ECEC provision. Countries with ECEC systems incorporating most of the system-level characteristics described by the OECD — Sweden, Iceland, Denmark, Finland, France, and Norway — met

eight or more of the indicators. In contrast, Canada, Ireland, and Australia, where ECEC systems are weakly developed, met only one or two indicators.

Canada is indeed a wealthy country. According to the OECD, Canada is the fourth-richest country, wealthier than Sweden, Denmark, or France. There is no doubt that we have the capacity to do much better for children and families. On the childcare and early childhood education front, Canada is a conspicuous laggard.

What Is Early Childhood Education and Care?

When the report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women recommended that Canada develop a national daycare program, the goal was to support women's equality in the workforce. Today that early goal of supporting working mothers has been joined by other objectives that have come to drive the debate. What was called daycare in the 1970s, then childcare in the 1980s and 1990s, is now called early childhood education and care, or early learning and childcare.

The term “early childhood education and care” describes inclusive and integrated services that play multiple roles for children and their families. It signals a holistic concept that has become common internationally, although it has been slower to arrive in North America. The concept of blended early childhood education and care reflects the growing consensus that care and education are, as former UNICEF executive director Carol Bellamy has said, “inseparable.” Good ECEC programs are neither babysitting nor schooling — they are neither solely early childhood education nor solely care. They are not just for children or only for parents. Well-designed early childhood education and care services can meet a wide range of objectives, including care, learning, and social support for children and their parents. ECEC is about an integrated and coherent approach to policy. It is about providing care that includes all children and all parents regardless of employment or socio-economic status.

Instead, what Canada has is a tattered patchwork of disconnected programs. Those programs include both childcare centres and family childcare in private homes, with the primary aim of allowing mothers (and fathers) to participate in the paid labour force. They also include kindergartens and nursery schools or preschools whose main purpose is early education rather than providing childminding in the parents' absence. Sometimes they also include family resource programs, which tend to focus on parents rather than on providing either care or early childhood education. These projects are variously intended to enhance child development and well-being, to support parents in and out of the paid workforce, and to meet other objectives such as reducing poverty and its effects, enhancing social inclusion, and facilitating the entry of newcomers to Canadian society. What is missing is a publicly financed, universal ECEC system that can do all these things.

Some approaches to early childhood education and care take “early” to mean children below school age. While the early years conventionally refer to the years from birth to five, we believe that it is important to include children up to the age of twelve in a consideration of ECEC. School-aged children still require care outside regular elementary school hours if their parents are to be in the paid labour force. We assume that children aged from six to twelve stand to gain social, educational, and developmental benefits from after-school programs, even as they are being educated in their regular schooling. ECEC is also sometimes artificially separated from family issues, particularly maternity and parental leave policy. We believe that these two policy domains need to be brought together more closely when ECEC programs are addressed. What we need is a rounded picture of the ECEC issues and challenges pertinent to parents and young children from birth through elementary school.

Here, in our analysis of Canada's history and politics of early childhood education and care, we tend to focus in particular on regulated childcare, for several reasons. First, it was the issue of childcare for working mothers that motivated the influential early feminist

activism; the childcare advocacy movement has made regulated childcare its primary target for many years. The movement took a broad and holistic approach early on; many advocates and activists always saw quality childcare as the backbone of early learning. Second, much more is known about childcare than about the other ECEC programs. The available data about Canadian kindergartens are quite limited, even more limited than the data about regulated childcare. The absence of data on kindergarten may be in part because kindergarten education is quite minimal in Canada. Although in many other countries kindergarten-like programs form the basis of ECEC systems, in Canada, for the most part, kindergarten classes run for only part of the day and are only for five-year-olds.

Canada as a whole would be best served by a unitary approach to ECEC — an approach that would blend what is now a patchwork of programs into seamless early childhood education and care, ideally as part of public education systems. This is the main model followed by most other countries with successful ECEC programs.

What Is This Book About?

This book describes, explains, and critiques the situation of Canada's early childhood education and childcare in the hope of contributing to public debate on the issues. It draws on research and comparative analysis to present a vision of what ECEC in Canada *could* look like. We start from three main assumptions. First, all Canadians — not just mothers — would benefit if our country had a well-designed publicly funded universal ECEC system. Second, there are specific and systemic reasons why Canada's policies and programs fall so far short. Third, we can do much, much better.

Our focus is not just on what Canada has and does, but also on what it *should* do for early childhood education and care. We think about this dual focus as the *is* and the *ought*. The current conditions, the contemporary patchwork of services and programs, make up today's reality — the *is*. Most working families in Canada struggle

to find and pay for childcare, and many children lose out on the benefits of good early childhood education. Women, as mothers and caregivers, carry the lion's share of this burden and of the care gap. As we look around the world, particularly at the Nordic countries and at other parts of Europe, we find inspiring examples of the kinds of early childhood programs we might build here in Canada. The approaches of countries that do an outstanding job of providing ECEC programs can motivate us to advocate for the system that all Canadians could enjoy — the *ought*.

In this sense, the book moves back and forth between the too-often glum assessment of the current ECEC situation — which is the legacy of Canadian history and Canadian political choices — and a consideration of the robust early childhood education and childcare system that could do so much more. ECEC is important for all Canadians, and it deserves to be taken seriously as a key political issue. As we shall see, ECEC and lifelong learning are not just important for children but important for the economy and the knowledge society; they are important for family support, equity, and social solidarity and democratic practice (chapter 1). And to understand why this is so we need to take stock of Canada's current ECEC situation and identify the key features of the programs and variations in them across the country (chapter 2).

Canada's ten provinces and three territories show many real and significant differences. Up close those differences appear large — Manitoba, for example, can serve about 14.5 percent of its children aged 0–12 years in regulated childcare, while neighbouring Saskatchewan has spaces for fewer than 6 percent of its children. In Newfoundland a majority of childcare centres are operated for-profit; in Nunavut, none are. In Ontario, almost all four-year-olds go to junior kindergarten, which is available only for a small minority of four-year-olds in other provinces. But while there are differences among the provinces, the broad outlines of the ECEC policy architecture are strikingly uniform across the country — more similar than different. Childcare and early childhood education are divided.

Table I-1. Commonalities and Differences of ECEC Programs across Provinces/Territories

Commonalities	...and Differences
<p>Every province/territory...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provides regulated childcare under a childcare Act • provides free public kindergarten for all who choose • treats childcare and kindergarten as separate programs • treats childcare as a market commodity and kindergarten as a public service • requires parents to pay user fees for childcare • provides regulated childcare for only a minority of children with working mothers; most use unregulated childcare arrangements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • some license family childcare homes individually, some under agencies; some do not regulate nursery schools • kindergarten may be part school day or full school day • while kindergarten is usually only for five-year-olds, in Ontario all four-year-olds are included too • childcare fees vary enormously — from almost \$2,000 per month to \$7 a day (infants) • range of coverage in regulated childcare varies widely — from less than 6% to more than 35% (0–12 years) • proportion of childcare centres that are operated for-profit ranges from 0% to 70%

Childcare is a user-fee service, almost entirely privatized and regulated under social welfare departments. Childcare and kindergarten serve a limited number of children and families.

The Lens of Quality and Access

To make sense of what Canada's early childhood education and childcare situation looks like today and where it ought to go, we rely on two complementary themes: quality and access. We use quality and access to consider current conditions in the diagnostic sense: how much access exists, and what kind of quality currently

prevails? We also use the concepts in a prescriptive sense: what kinds of programs and policies do Canadians need in order to have a high-quality and universally accessible system of early childhood education and care?

Access is the more straightforward concept. It is relatively easy to figure out how many children and parents have access. Access can readily be interrogated by data and evidence. The answer lies in whether services are available when and how they are needed, and whether they are affordable. Access is somewhat more subtle when further issues are considered: whether services are appropriate culturally and age-wise, and whether they are sensitive to parents' work schedules. Childcare is space and time-specific, and needs to be conveniently at hand. It does families no good if they need full-time care but only part-day services are available, or if a nearby centre is open for the hours that a parent wants, but does not include a program for their child with special needs. We consider how well Canadian ECEC programs fare on access when we look at how much and what kinds of programs exist, at coverage, and at how well programs and policy meet the needs of parents — for example, as students or participants in the labour force. Good access may also require meeting the needs of local labour markets and employers — for example, for evening, weekend, or shift work, or to accommodate seasonal needs (as in agricultural or other rural communities).

The lens of quality is more complex. When North Americans write about quality in early childhood education and care, they are usually thinking about what happens “on the floor” at the individual program level — the quality of children’s experiences with each other, with staff, and in their physical environment, or whether regulations reflect best practices. Much of the North American research on quality tends to be focused on structural matters such as staff-child ratios, group sizes, and staff training qualifications, which are clearly important. Fundamental to program quality are early childhood staff. A breathtaking myth relevant to quality is that women *naturally* know how to care for children. This myth is damaging to

quality because it promotes the notion that good-quality programs are possible without early childhood education training or ongoing professional development, and without professional-level salaries, recognition, and respect.

Another way of thinking about quality is to consider it as an attribute of the whole system, from philosophy through program, funding, governance, infrastructure, and policy development and evaluation. Considering quality in this wider sense means linking values, philosophy, and goals. One dimension of quality is how well ECEC programs are complemented by family policy, which can also play a key role in bridging the work-family balance.

The lens of quality and access can be used to review what's missing in Canada's ECEC situation, and what doesn't work (chapter 3). Some of the underdevelopment is micro-level, occurring in childcare centres, classrooms, and playgrounds, while other aspects of underdevelopment are more system-level. One fundamental problem emerges when we follow the money. Canada has a national and provincial fixation on funding parent-users (what economists call the demand side) through subsidies, tax breaks, and parent allowances rather than by providing the necessary resources to a system, its programs, and its infrastructure (the supply side). By looking at these and other structural challenges, we can see what's missing in Canada's ECEC landscape.

The current ECEC architecture is the product of choices and changes going back more than a century. Historically, in Canada, as in most other countries, raising young children was seen as a private family responsibility, mainly the job of mothers in the home (chapter 4). In the nineteenth century, governments began to recognize the importance of public schooling, and free education for children age six years and up became the norm in most provinces by about 1900. The first public kindergartens developed in this context, spreading across Ontario by the early twentieth century. Meanwhile, welfare-oriented programs — the first few day nurseries — began around the same time for different reasons, and the legacy of two split streams began. Education developed as an entitlement for all citizens, free at

the point of delivery, with a rightful claim on the public. In contrast, childcare programs, at one time poised delicately between education and welfare, fell decisively into the welfare silo, experiencing a long association with charity, stigma, and eligibility testing, a tumble that still troubles childcare today.

Canada's political institutions and traditions have also shaped ECEC (chapter 5). Canada, as a federated country, has a division of powers between national and provincial governments. Canada is also one of the liberal welfare states with a mixed economy of welfare. The twists and turns of recent federal policies, linked to shifts in political culture, have played an important part in the story of our childcare and early childhood education programs.

ECEC has long been dogged by controversies (chapter 6). The biggest stakes lie with questions about the effects of childcare on children's development, or what in shorthand is signalled by the anxious question, "Is childcare good for children?" Research reassures us that high-quality childcare is generally good for most children and underscores the importance of building a high-quality ECEC system rather than simply establishing custodial services. Other important debates also play a part, including whether ECEC should be targeted or universal, and delivered as a public good or a business.

In the end our discussion and diagnosis lead to a number of inevitable recommendations (chapter 7). To build a high-quality and universally accessible early childhood education and childcare system, Canada must make some fundamental and transformative policy shifts. We look around the world for examples of countries that have successfully built childcare systems, and consider the lessons that Canada can learn from them. We first imagine what a mature ECEC system could look like in Canada, and then call for policy redesign with the goal of moving towards such a system — putting forward ten practical steps for building a high-quality, accessible system of early childhood education and care for all Canadian children and their families.