



**MARTHA FRIENDLY AND  
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## **Coming in 2020** A national child care program for Canada

**A**bout three years ago, four national child care organizations — three struggling to stay afloat after federal cuts; the other anxious about its future — came together to see how they could work together to keep advancing the ideas they all stood for. The Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (now defunct as a result of de-funding) and the Canadian Child Care Federation believed in the urgent need for a robust national policy and sufficient federal funding to create a sustainable, universal, high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) system across Canada. Decades of research, policy developments and international experience had already shown that high quality ECEC addressed multiple social and political objectives: women's equality and employment, poverty reduction, family-work balance, social integration and equal opportunity, healthy child development and well-being, and economic prosperity.

The Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada was particularly intent on looking for a way to bring the various parts of the child care movement together to work for a vision that had been more than 30 years in the making. The CCAAC wanted to reinvigorate the movement, which had so successfully put child care on the public agenda. They thought it critical to ensure that future generations of parents would

no longer have to struggle with child care. Just as crucial was the need to pass the torch to newer generations of child care advocates. It was also important to articulate an updated vision of ECEC in Canada based on new knowledge about what works.

After much brainstorming, the organizations decided they would collaborate on planning and sponsoring a conference in November 2014 — Canada’s fourth national child care policy conference, ChildCare2020: From Vision to Action. They hammered out a conference conception based on three priorities: to develop an inclusive vision of early childhood education and child care reflecting the needs of today’s families and young children; ensure that this vision of ECEC was on the public agenda; and engage future generations to expand citizen and government support for ECEC.

### **One step forward...**

The last time all sectors of the Canadian child care movement had the opportunity to come together at a national policy conference was a decade ago, in 2004. The OECD had recently issued an influential report showing that Canada, one of the world’s wealthiest countries, lagged behind the others (way behind some of the “best” ECEC countries) on quality, access, funding and policy development. The OECD’s review said that Canada was “still in its infancy” when it came to putting an ECEC system in place. This is still the case today. The OECD report made many practical suggestions, but few were implemented by Canada.

At the time of this policy conference, a national ECEC system seemed within our grasp. The federal government had begun the process of making formal agreements with provinces and territories to provide dedicated funding based on the “QUAD” principles: quality, universal, accessible and developmental ECEC services.

The mood at the conference was excited and forward-looking. The specifics of the expected national child care policy were discussed and debated among the speakers and attendees, who included then-Minister of Social Development Ken Dryden, former Manitoba Premier Gary Doer, former NDP leader Jack Layton, Pauline Marois, who had spearheaded the introduction of Quebec’s then \$5-a-day child care program in the late 1990s, and other luminaries and participants from across Canada and abroad.

Like so many glimmers of hope, however, this one was short-lived. In 2006 the newly elected Conservatives, in their first governmental action, cancelled the just-executed federal-provincial agreements.

### ...Two steps back

In their place, the government instituted a cash transfer — the Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB), a \$100 cheque mailed monthly to individual families with children under age six to use as they please (not necessarily for child care). The UCCB joined the Child Care Expense Deduction (CCED), a tax measure allowing the lower family income earner to deduct receipted child care expenses from gross income. Most recently, the government has advanced the related notion of income-splitting for families with children under 18. All three measures are demand-side, market-based expenditures that benefit wealthier families most and do nothing to build the high quality early childhood education and care services all families need and want for their children, regardless of their income or labour force status.

But one thing these measures do is cost Canadians a lot: \$2.5 billion a year for the UCCB; \$938 million a year for the CCED; and a potential \$3 billion a year for proposed income splitting. These are public funds and amount to considerably more than the \$1 billion per year the federal Liberals' Foundations program was to have cost in each of the first five years.

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care that is also observed in several other countries such as Australia, the U.S. and the UK. Our fee-based, market-developed, and mostly privatized child care services remain overwhelmingly fragmented, scarce and unaffordable, and too many are of mediocre or poor quality. This means options are few, especially for families with infants, children with disabilities, or those who work non-standard hours, are students, or live in rural communities. Unregulated or “informal” care with no public oversight at all is often the only choice for parents.

Indigenous Canadians are perhaps the most disadvantaged by this non-system. They have even less access than non-Indigenous Canadians to the coherent ECEC services they need in their communities. The funding earmarked for developing a strategy for Indigenous ECEC services was among the elements of the Foundations program that were cut along with the federal/provincial/territorial agreements. Since then, federal funding for the fragmented array of ECEC services for Indigenous communities has dwindled.

### **What we now know**

While Canada overall has stood still on developing a high quality ECEC system as the lynchpin of family policy, other nations continue to move ahead. A number have created public systems through well-directed, planned public investments, with very good results, although many continue to “split” care and education systems for younger and older preschoolers. By and large, national governments in just about every country have taken an interest in continuing to develop ECEC policy, mostly based on experience, research and best practices.

Significantly, the European Union has been evolving its 2002 “Barcelona targets” for child care availability to include the critical role high quality services play. These targets originally focussed solely on labour market considerations. EU Member States had agreed to provide child care by 2010 for at least 90% of children between three years and mandatory school entry and to at least 33% of children less than three years of age. While the numerical targets still remain, the idea that “access without quality is of little merit” underpins development of Europe-wide quality targets designed to support “children’s and their families’ wellbeing both in the present and the future”.

Sadly, just about all wealthy or OECD countries do better on ECEC policy, funding and provision than Canada. According to UNICEF, even the U.S. spends more on ECEC than Canada while Slovenia, a country that became independent only in 1991, is among the countries that has built a well-regarded universal, and mostly public care and education system.

Nonetheless, there have been some encouraging initiatives in Canada in the last two decades or so. Provinces/territories, local governments and early childhood organizations have developed many ECEC initiatives aimed at expanding access, improving quality, restructuring public funding, and strengthening training and policy. Perhaps the best known is Quebec's approach that substantially base-funds services rather than subsidizing individual families, while Manitoba and Prince Edward Island have developed funding systems that combine base funding with the older, fee subsidy approach.

We now have a better idea about what it takes to blend child care and education. A number of provinces (Newfoundland and Labrador is the most recent) have brought these together in one Ministry, and full-school-day kindergarten (at least for five-year-olds) is now the norm in Canada. However, well-integrated services and the "strong and equal partnership" recommended by the OECD have not yet materialized.

Early childhood educators (ECEs), once referred to as "babysitters", are now understood to be fundamental to quality. Along with this comes the recognition that those working with young children should be educated in their field (not just in any field) to qualify for the job, and be well compensated and valued as professionals. Canadian training requirements are still quite low compared to international benchmarks but wages have increased slightly in some jurisdictions. We still have much further to go.

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### **We can afford it**

ECEC has many complexities and nuances, especially in a federation that is also a liberal-democratic welfare regime, and getting it right isn't easy. At the same time, we know it can be done, and we must continue to try. Today we know that families' child care needs will

remain unmet without a well-designed national child care program based on shared principles, best evidence and solid accountability. Such a system can definitely be structured to fit the brand of federalism that created other national social programs valued by Canadians from coast-to-coast-to-coast.

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The key to building a high quality ECEC system is the same today as it was before the emerging national child care program was cancelled in 2006: The federal government, while respecting issues of provincial/territorial jurisdiction, must step up to the plate. There must be significant, sustained funding, and a national policy framework that includes overarching principles of universal entitlement, high quality and comprehensiveness. There must also be targets and timetables, as well as accountability measures. Federal funding and a robust national policy framework must go hand in hand. Otherwise, provincial/territorial programs on their own will continue to evolve in painful,

slow steps, leaving many parents unable to find or afford quality programs for their children.

The response to Childcare2020 is more than encouraging and shows there is a huge appetite for the broader child care movement — the workforce, parents, researchers, policymakers and other groups — to come together to plan for the future. Despite the many challenges and financial obstacles, people, including students and ECEs, are finding ways to get to the conference. A combination of creative local fund raising and the financial and in-kind contributions of a diverse group of ECEC supporters has taken the conference from a gleam in the eye of the organizers to a program shaped by key policy issues, with many opportunities for debating them, networking and sharing ideas.

Child care could well become a defining issue in the 2015 election. Imagine what it would mean for Canada to set about developing and implementing its first new social program in almost 50 years. It would mark a turning point, setting us on the road to new social and economic policies based on democracy and fairness, an enhanced role for governments, and doing what's right — and in the public interest.

Canada's child care organizations believe that it is eminently doable to put a high quality ECEC system in place. We know what this system of services could look like; a vision is set out below.

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### **It's a May morning in 2020...**

High quality early childhood education and child care has become a reality for most children and families across Canada's six time zones. In Joe Batt's Arm on Fogo Island, Newfoundland, a nutritious meal is being served to the toddlers at the new early childhood centre in the school. In small-town Lac-Etchemin, Quebec, and suburban Markham, Ontario, home child care providers arrive at early childhood hubs to meet with their networks while the children enjoy outdoor activities. In Winnipeg, a stay-at-home mom with a new baby arrives at nursery school with her three-year-old daughter while at Haida Gwaii's Skidegate Children's Centre, an educator greets the First Nations parents and children as they arrive.

ECEC programs in each of these communities have unique features but share many common characteristics. Although there are still waiting lists, parents across Canada know that a space will be available before too long. Substantial service expansion means that all parents — whether or not in the paid workforce — can now find a space. Sustained public operational/base funding to services means fees are much lower than before and affordable.

Under the new Canada-wide policy framework, provinces, territories and Indigenous communities receive federal funds. Each has a well-worked-out long-term plan with expansion targets. To meet them, provincial/territorial officials work closely with local governments, school authorities, other service providers, early childhood educators and parent/community groups, as well as with the federal government.

### **More public management**

With provincially set parent fees and salary scales, and collaboration between provincial and local municipalities and school boards, today's ECEC is now more publicly managed. Planning, developing and supporting high quality programs for the families who choose to use them is a local responsibility within overall provincial/territorial plans. Parent committees have input on key issues but the days when parents and volunteers were responsible for raising funds to cover basic operating costs are long gone.

Although there are still quite a few non-profit programs, many more ECEC services across the 0–5 age range are now delivered by school boards and municipalities. These work in partnership with early childhood educator and teacher organizations to ensure that curriculum and service delivery are based on inclusive, appropriate best practices.

The for-profit sector has stayed small, diminishing as the public non-profit sectors expand. And as the supply and affordability of regulated ECEC has grown, parents' reliance on unregulated care has diminished substantially. Many previously unregulated home child care providers have now become part of the funded, regulated system.

The mix of ECEC services is determined at the local level based on a planning process taking into account community needs and priorities. Services that seamlessly provide “care” and “learning” for children are



offered across Canada, with parenting support resources integrated into service provision. The specific arrangements vary by province/territory, but all are designed to meet parents' schedules while providing terrific care and learning environments for young children.

### **Enhanced quality**

Quality has improved across Canada based on broad curriculum frameworks designed to be adapted at the local program level to support local choices. Children with disabilities and from diverse cultural backgrounds are fully included in all programs with extra support when needed. The ratio of educators to children is favourable to ensure that children's needs are well met at all ages.

All ECEC settings are staffed by early childhood educators, share common pedagogical approaches and provide enriching, caring, seamless and comfortable environments for children and parents. Outside-school-hours programs are mostly school-based and provide a range of enriching age-appropriate activities for older children up to age 12.

Early childhood training for home child care providers has become the norm as has provision of equipment, resources, support and networking. And as public funding for regulated services has grown, wages and benefits for home care providers better reflect the value of their work.

Federal, provincial and territorial governments have improved their legislated parental leave provisions to fit the varying needs and financial realities of families. Leaves, available to all new parents, are more flexible, and better paid. There is also an additional paid leave for new fathers only that must be taken shortly after the birth. Many improvements have been made to services and policies for parents who work non-standard hours, and a national task force set up to find more comprehensive solutions is well underway.

### **A common vision, different approaches**

Despite important commonalities, 2020's ECEC is not "one size fits all". Provinces, territories and Indigenous communities have designed their own ECEC programs within the framework of broad overarching

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Canada-wide principles and policies, legislation, funding and public reporting arrangements.

While Canada's national ECEC program is, and always will be, a work in progress, in 2020 it is enormously popular. Parents across the income spectrum see that their children are happy and benefitting. Communities and politicians like the societal benefits and the positive economic activity brought about through increased mothers' employment and spending in local communities. Everyone takes pride in this long overdue social program that is good for all children and families. When the President of the United States toured Quebec, she visited one of Lac-Étchemin's community hub centres and took the community's ideas back to Washington DC to inform the new approach to ECEC she has been promoting.

All in all, the national ECEC program is deemed a great success. It looks like it's here to stay.

And for those who are now the "elders" of the child care movement in Canada that began more than 40 years ago, 2020 is a satisfying year. Finally, they can say, "We did it."

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# ChildCare2020

*from vision to action*



## **Come one, come all!**

Early childhood educators, academics and researchers, policy-makers, advocates, and parents — from urban, suburban, rural and Indigenous communities across Canada.

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