

# Building a Pan-Canadian Child Care System

YMCA Canada's national positioning  
on early learning and child care

March 2021



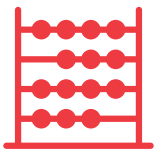
*Building healthy  
communities*



# The YMCA knows healthy families are supported families.

As Canada's leading non-profit provider of child care, the YMCA has more than 88,300 licensed infant, toddler, preschool, and school-age spaces. At 1,250 licensed child care centres from coast-to-coast, the YMCA nurtures the development of over 61,500 children of all backgrounds and abilities each year. Supported by substantial evidence, we recognize the influence of the first six years of a child's life on their learning, behaviours, and health into adulthood. Our acclaimed national curriculum, YMCA Playing to Learn™ and YMCA A Place to Connect™, is grounded in research on the best way for children to learn and is regularly and rigorously evaluated and practically informed by the feedback of families and educators. Our 9,900 child care staff and educators are highly trained and accountable for implementing our curriculum and adhering to the YMCA's national child safety and protection standards, as well as provincial regulations.

## The YMCA's Impact



**88,300 +** licensed infant, toddler, preschool, and school-age spaces



**1,250** YMCA licensed child care centres are available from coast-to-coast



**61,500 +** children of all backgrounds and abilities are nurtured in their development through the YMCA



**9,900** child care staff and educators are highly trained and accountable for implementing our curriculum

Accessible, affordable, inclusive, high-quality child care is essential to child development, positive family outcomes, gender equity, poverty reduction, and the Canadian economy. With more than 50-years of experience providing high-quality licensed child care across nine provinces, the YMCA has the expertise, foundation in communities, and ability to expand to create a pan-Canadian child care system, in partnership with all levels of government.

### YMCA Playing to Learn™

Using play as the primary learning medium, YMCA Playing to Learn™ introduces children, up to six years old, to literacy, numeracy, arts, science, and more. Developed in 2001 by the YMCA of Greater Toronto, YMCA Playing to Learn™ is based on research and evidence on the most effective way children learn and gain new skills. In alignment with provincial early learning frameworks adopted to date, the curriculum offers **28,700** children each year the opportunities to develop confidence, self-direction, and self-regulation, promoting a smooth transition into primary schools.



The following brief provides policy recommendations advanced by the YMCA to establish a pan-Canadian child care system. In the pages below we have identified four areas of focus for the Government of Canada’s consideration based on our expertise and experience providing licensed child care in Canada. Our recommendations are centred on creating high-quality learning and care environments for children, and simultaneously addressing barriers to access, affordability, and inclusivity for families. Advancement of the recommendations outlined will involve close collaboration between the Government of Canada and their provincial and territorial counterparts, as well as stakeholders, such as the YMCA. We would be pleased to further discuss our recommendations and can be contacted directly.

**The building blocks to a pan-Canadian licensed child care system**

- 1 A well-recognized Early Childhood Educator profession
- 2 Expansion of high-quality non-profit child care and lower cost for families
- 3 All children have the support they need to achieve their best start
- 4 Evaluation for continuous improvement and accountability

**YMCA A Place to Connect™**

Based on research, as well as input from children and families, YMCA A Place to Connect™ guides programs for school-age children, ages five to 12. With a focus on choice, and the development of skills and relationships, children engage in physical activities, games, and outdoor play that allows them to explore arts and crafts, reading, science, math and more.

Developed in 2006 by the YMCA of Greater Toronto, the curriculum brings a high-quality approach to how we deliver over **850** before- and after-school care programs to approximately **32,800** children a year.



# Spotlight on the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the critical role of child care in Canada. During the first and second waves, as provinces went into lockdown and public spaces and schools were mandated to close, child care agencies, such as YMCAs, were called upon to remain open. Emergency child care was essential for parents on the front lines in health care and essential services, playing a significant role in ensuring our health care system could respond to increasing demand and keep children safe while their parents were at work. As the economy and communities look to rebuild and recover following the pandemic, access to services that help Canadians return to work, look for a new job, or obtain additional education and training will be critical. For parents, knowing their children are safe and in high-quality learning and care environments is vital. This is particularly true for mothers who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had an unprecedented impact on the lives of children and youth. Since the onset of the pandemic, children have been affected by school closures, loss of recreational opportunities, disruptions in their routines, isolation, negative health effects on their loved ones, loss of family income, and public fear caused by the virus. The impact has been immediate and will be long-lasting on the development, physical and mental health, and social abilities of children and youth across Canada, but more so for the most vulnerable children. Accessible, high-quality child care plays an influential role in addressing the adverse effects caused by the pandemic and promoting positive health, development, and wellbeing outcomes for children and youth.

While COVID-19 reinforced the importance of child care, the pandemic has also exacerbated long-standing challenges faced by licensed non-profit child care agencies. Staffing shortages, inconsistent approaches to funding across the country, and insufficient resources to support children with special needs are among these challenges.

The YMCA applauds the Government of Canada for recognizing the essential role of child care on the economy, the she-covey, and positive outcomes for children. We welcome early investments in the Fall Economic Statement and commitments to addressing barriers and building a pan-Canadian system that meet the needs of children, their families, and high-quality early learning and child care agencies.

## **The negative impact of COVID-19 on women's participation in the labour force**

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed women's participation in the labour force down to its lowest levels in three decades. An RBC study found employment among women with toddlers or school-age children fell 7% in February to May 2020 against a 4% decline for fathers. The employment of single mothers was significantly impacted among this cohort, down 12% from February to June 2020 versus 7% for single fathers.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, one in three Canadian women has considered quitting their job due to the pressures of managing child care and other responsibilities during the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

## **Sedentary behaviour, screen time, and mental health challenges have increased among children and youth due to COVID-19**

According to ParticipACTION's 2020 Report Card on Physical Activity, less than 1 in 5 children and youth met the national guidelines for physical activity, sedentary, and sleep behaviours prior to the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Today, it is reported that less than 3% of children and youth are getting the recommended 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day.<sup>4</sup> Families are reporting increased screen time because of physical distancing and remote learning, and young people are sharing their personal struggles with stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges as a result of COVID-19.<sup>5</sup>

# The building blocks to a pan-Canadian licensed child care system

1



## A well-recognized Early Childhood Educator profession

Attracting, training, and retaining well-qualified Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) to work in licensed child care is challenging. Canada has long faced a labour shortage of professional ECEs who are qualified and willing to work in the field. This shortage has become more severe due to COVID-19, negatively impacting all communities but felt most acutely in rural Canada. Research shows that high turnover can have adverse effects on quality and child development. When ECEs change regularly within a child care program, educators and children are unable to foster stable relationships, thus reducing stimulating and nurturing interactions that support development.<sup>6</sup> Accessible education, professional development opportunities, and good working conditions – such as remuneration and appropriate staff-child ratios – are critical factors to building a robust workforce and enhancing the status of the profession. For example, higher wages positively affect job satisfaction, optimal staff-child ratios lead to more supportive interactions, and opportunities for further learning promotes motivation within the workplace.<sup>7</sup> These are also important factors in creating safe, healthy, positive high-quality learning and care environments for children.

To create a pan-Canadian child care system, the Government of Canada must invest in the ECE profession in partnership with the provinces and territories. This will allow Canada to effectively expand licensed child care by ensuring there is a robust workforce of qualified ECE professionals with core competencies essential to healthy child development.

***“Quality of care ultimately boils down to the quality of the relationship between the child care provider or teacher and the child.*”**

***A beautiful space and an elaborate curriculum – like a beautiful home – can be impressive, but without skilled and stable child care providers, they will not promote positive development.”***



Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000, pp. 314–315, ‘From neurons to neighbourhoods’ study



## Policy Recommendations

- 1.1. Enhance funding to support the cost of an Early Childhood Educator degree/diploma, as well as ongoing professional development opportunities and training. Explore innovative solutions such as online training, paid placements, and mentorship programs in partnership with licensed non-profit child care agencies as part of a comprehensive workforce recruitment strategy.
- 1.2. Establish national principles for the education of professionals working with children ages 0 to 12 to ensure core competencies to support positive child outcomes.
- 1.3. Increase funding dedicated to compensation (wages and benefits) for Early Childhood Educators to close the salary gap and ensure consistency across all child education and care settings. Encourage the introduction of provincial, publicly funded ECE wage grids that recognize qualification levels, set competitive wages, and are regularly evaluated and indexed.
- 1.4. Increase access to certification programs and paid placements for internationally trained Early Childhood Educators looking to work in the field in Canada.
- 1.5. Review existing evidence and research optimal Early Childhood Educator-child ratios that support child development across all age groups. Evidence should be shared with provinces and territories and could be leveraged to support national guidelines for ratios in licensed child care.







## 2

### Expansion of high-quality non-profit child care and lower cost for families

Licensed non-profit child care has a longstanding reputation for being high-quality. A 2004 study found that non-profit child care rated approximately 10% higher in quality than for-profit centres, and a subsequent study in 2007 found “strong patterns of non-profit superiority in producing quality child care services across all the data studied.”<sup>8</sup> In Canada, non-profit agencies have deep roots in communities and account for approximately 70% of child care, with the YMCA as the largest non-profit provider. Expansion of the Canadian child care system should build upon the foundation laid by non-profit agencies. This includes safeguarding against further loss in capacity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The demand for child care remains high, licensed spaces are hard to find, and child care costs are increasingly out of reach for families. In addition to current capacity and the ability to grow, positive family outcomes and ensuring cost is not a barrier to access is a priority for many non-profit child care agencies. Many agencies, including the YMCA, also have experience delivering provincial maximum fee pilots such as the \$10/day child care pilot in British Columbia and the \$25/day pilot in Alberta.

Licensed non-profit child care agencies can be a partner of the Government of Canada, as well as provincial and local governments, in increasing the availability of child care. This will allow Canada to improve access to high-quality child care spaces that are close to home and are offered at an affordable cost for families.



Non-profit agencies have deep roots in communities, accounting for approximately **70% of child care in Canada.**



## Policy Recommendations

- 2.1.** Expand the role of non-profit agencies as Canada's licensed child care provider, in partnership with the provinces and territories. Identify non-profit agencies with a well-established, evidence-based curriculum, and required policies and procedures that support child protection, safety, and development that can quickly create new high-quality child care spaces in communities.
- 2.2.** Ensure non-profit licensed child care agencies withstand the financial challenges caused by COVID-19 through federal programs that maintain operations despite lost revenue and higher costs.
- 2.3.** Direct federal social infrastructure funding to build new, repurpose, and renovate licensed child care spaces operated by non-profit providers. Infrastructure investment should be matched with operating funding to support new spaces for all ages. Encourage the integration of new child care spaces into local planning and that are close to accessible transit, schools, employment nodes, and affordable housing, with a focus on underserved communities.
- 2.4.** Work with the provinces and territories to support initiatives that cap licensed fees for families with children ages 0-12 and supply adequate operating funding to agencies that maintain set fees. Further financial assistance in the form of immediate federal subsidies should be provided to low-income families in licensed child care.







### 3

## All children have the support they need to achieve their best start

As cited in a 2019 literature review conducted by Employment and Social Development Canada, curricula are “paramount in ensuring children experience high-quality care that facilitates cognitive development and school readiness.” Development-centred, age appropriate curriculum combined with educator training and pedagogical processes leads to positive outcomes and ensures children get the best start in life.<sup>9</sup> To assist children of all backgrounds and abilities, curriculum activities, as well as program structure and conditions, must be adaptable, equitable, and inclusive. For example, incorporating culturally-specific content and providing opportunities for children and families to participate in their first language, respects and affirms diversity, cultivates a sense of belonging, and supports the development of positive self-identity.

The YMCA knows this to be true. With over 20 years of experience developing, implementing, coaching, and evaluating our early years and school-age curriculums, YMCA Playing to Learn™ and YMCA A Place to Connect™, we play an important role in promoting the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of all children. To ensure children in Canada have the best start, there must be greater investments in supports that lead to positive outcomes for children, as part of a pan-Canadian child care system.

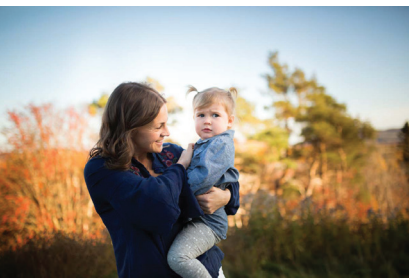
**Incorporating culturally-specific content and providing opportunities for children and families to participate in their first language respects and affirms diversity and inclusion.**





## Policy Recommendations

- 3.1.** Work with the provinces and territories, as well as child care and education stakeholders to establish principles for child care curriculum in Canada. Ensure principles focus on a curriculum that aligns with provincial frameworks, is evidence-based, evaluated annually, with a pedagogy that supports how children learn, like in YMCA Playing to Learn™ and YMCA A Place to Connect™.
- 3.2.** Increase operating supports for licensed non-profit child care agencies to assist children with identified special needs. This includes adequate funding for special needs specialists, enhanced ratios, and support for one-on-one assistance for the entire time the child is in care. Access to ongoing training for Early Childhood Educators, as well as developmentally appropriate materials and supplies to best support children's unique needs is essential.
- 3.3.** Support licensed child care agencies in improving their competencies to create safer, more inclusive programs for diverse communities, for example, incorporating diverse worldviews, providing culturally and linguistically appropriate care, and incorporating curriculum to respect and affirm gender identity and expression.
- 3.4.** Enable early learning and child care agencies to innovate through targeted investments. Innovation should focus on nurturing the development of children, supporting the emerging needs of families, and addressing inequities in society.
- 3.5.** Create federally funded pilots and program opportunities focused on positive child and family outcomes, equity, and inclusion. This could include incorporating positive mental health, expanded outdoor play, Reconciliation, and diversity and inclusion learnings into licensed child care curriculum.



All children have the support they need to achieve their best start





# 4

## Evaluation for continuous improvement and accountability

Effectively achieving a pan-Canadian system that is accessible, affordable, inclusive, and high-quality is dependent on regular evaluation and accountability. Establishing key performance indicators to measure the current system against desired outcomes will allow for early intervention in areas where improvement is needed.

To ensure the system is led by the best and latest evidence to support quality, there must be meaningful efforts to address the lack of Canadian research in critical areas, including examining early learning and child care for subpopulations, such as immigrant children, children from official minority language communities, and Indigenous children.

The Government of Canada can take a leadership role in national data collection, research, and evaluation to support continuous improvement and accountability in a pan-Canadian child care system.

***“A Canadian measure with data collection would help us to unpack the complexity of early learning and child care quality in ways that could increase the precision of our knowledge and, more importantly, track whether policies are meeting their intended purpose.”***



Employment and Social Development Canada, 2019, 'Defining and measuring the quality of early learning and child care: A literature review'





## Policy Recommendations

- 4.1. Promote collaboration between the national secretariat, provincial and territorial counterparts, and child care stakeholders, including the YMCA, to advise and accelerate policymaking, and promote evaluation and accountability.
- 4.2. Coordinate regular collection and reporting of comprehensive statistical data using a variety of data collection vehicles to measure quality, accessibility, affordability, and inclusivity of early learning and child care.
- 4.3. Support early learning and child care research across a range of disciplines, methodologies, approaches, and types of questions, including greater research on non-profit child care in Canada.



# Conclusion

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) 'quality toolbox' for early childhood education and care identifies five levers: designing and implementing curriculum and standards; improving qualifications, training, and working conditions; engaging families and communities; setting quality goals and regulations; and advancing data collection, research, and monitoring.<sup>10</sup> YMCA Canada's policy recommendations outlined above align with and expand upon these standards to create a high-quality pan-Canadian child care system that is accessible, affordable, and inclusive to all. With our evidence-based curriculum and deep roots in communities, the YMCA is well-positioned to continue to grow and lead in early learning and child care, harnessing opportunities created by increasing need, in partnership with the Government of Canada, and provinces and territories, as part of a pan-Canadian child care system.

# Who We Are

The YMCA is a powerful association of people joined together by a shared passion to foster a sense of belonging for all. In an age of complex social challenges, the YMCA is steadfastly dedicated to building healthy communities by inviting and encouraging Canadians to join in, give back, and gain the connections, skills, and confidence they need to thrive. As one of Canada's largest and longest-standing charities, the YMCA is at the heart of communities serving over 2.39 million people through 40 Member Associations across the country, supported by over 50,500 staff and volunteers. Together, we are unwavering in our dedication to achieving meaningful outcomes that matter to the communities we serve.

For more information, visit [ymca.ca](http://ymca.ca).



The YMCA fosters a sense of belonging for all



**2.39 million** people served a year



**50,500** staff and volunteers supported



Countless meaningful outcomes and achievements in communities served

## Acknowledgements

This paper was authored by YMCA Canada. YMCA Canada would like to thank the following individuals for their contributions: Fiona Cascagnette, Sibel Cicek, Trina Clarke, Steve Compton, Linda Cottes, Peter Dinsdale, Susan Emerson, Maria English, Nicki Glowacki, Lorrie Huggins, Brenda Kent, Kathi Lomas McGee, Lynette Mikalishen, April Morton, Cathy Poole, Jessica Stepic, Olga Sullivan, Amelia Swanson, Ida Thomas, Annalise Yuzda. YMCA Canada also thanks members of the National Board for their feedback on this paper.

**Jessica Stepic**, *Manager, Government Relations, YMCA Canada*  
Jessica.Stepic@ymca.ca

## Sources

1. RBC Economics. (2020). "Pandemic Threatens Decades of Women's Labour Force Gains." <https://thoughtleadership.rbc.com/pandemic-threatens-decades-of-womens-labour-force-gains/>
2. Pollara Strategic Insights. (2020). "Canadian women almost twice as likely as men to have lost job due to COVID-19." <https://www.pollara.com/canadian-women-almost-twice-as-likely-as-men-to-have-lost-job-due-to-covid-19/>
3. ParticipACTION. The Role of the Family in the Physical Activity, Sedentary and Sleep Behaviours of Children and Youth. The 2020 ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth. Toronto: ParticipACTION; 2020. [https://participaction.cdn.prismic.io/participaction/f6854240-ef7c-448c-ae5c-5634c41a0170\\_2020\\_Report\\_Card\\_Children\\_and\\_Youth\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](https://participaction.cdn.prismic.io/participaction/f6854240-ef7c-448c-ae5c-5634c41a0170_2020_Report_Card_Children_and_Youth_Full_Report.pdf)
4. Moore, S.A., Faulkner, G., Rhodes, R.E. et al. (2020). "Impact of the COVID-19 virus outbreak on movement and play behaviours of Canadian children and youth: a national survey." *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act* 17, 85. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-020-00987-8>
5. UNICEF Canada. (2020). U-Report Canada. "Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Young People in Canada." [https://oneyouth.unicef.ca/sites/default/files/2020-05/U-Report\\_COVID-19\\_Poll\\_2\\_Results\\_external.pdf](https://oneyouth.unicef.ca/sites/default/files/2020-05/U-Report_COVID-19_Poll_2_Results_external.pdf)
6. Canadian Council on Learning (CCL). (2006). "Why is High-Quality Child Care Essential? The link between Quality Child Care and Early Learning", *Lessons in Learning*, CCL, Ottawa
7. OECD. (n.d). Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). "Research Brief: Working Conditions Matter." <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/49322250.pdf>
8. Childcare Resource and Research Unit. (2011). Child Care BRIEFing Notes. What research says about quality in for-profit, non-profit and public child care. <https://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/What%20research%20says%20about%20quality%20in%20fp%20np%20and%20p%20child%20care.pdf>
9. Canada. Employment and Social Development Canada. (2019). "Defining and measuring the quality of early learning and child care: a literature review." <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/early-learning-child-care/reports/2019-defining-measuring-quality.html>
10. OECD. (2012). "Starting Strong II – A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care." <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/startingstrongiiqualitytoolboxforecec.html>

Building healthy  
communities

