



Summary: Parents' Views About the Affordability of Early Learning and Child Care in Alberta



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This paper is a summary of the report *Parents' Views About the Affordability of Early Learning and Child Care in Alberta*, which is available at <https://www.ecelec.ca/publications>.

The Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) initiative is being implemented across the country and is expanding the role of child care services in the lives of Canadian families. The success of the CWELCC initiative will depend partly on whether changes to early learning and care meet the needs and expectations of parents.

To learn about parents' views, the Alberta Parent Survey on Early Learning and Child Care was conducted in 2022 with over 1400 parents in Alberta who had children younger than six years of age. Parents responded to a wide range of questions about early learning and care, including questions about affordability. *Parents' Views About the Affordability of Early Learning and Child Care in Alberta* is one in a series of reports based on this survey. In this paper, we summarize findings and recommendations from the report.

Do parents find child care to be affordable?

A third of parents found out-of-pocket fees to be unaffordable, an outcome that was especially pronounced in families with lower incomes. Parents who judged costs to be unaffordable were not limited to groups generally considered to be disadvantaged. For example, the majority of these parents had annual household incomes of \$90,000 or higher.

32% of parents felt that their child care fees were unaffordable.

Is the cost of early learning and care important to parents?

A majority of parents identified cost as one of the three most important factors they would consider if they could access any child care arrangement. Quality and location were also frequently noted. Cost was identified more often among families with lower incomes, but a majority of higher-income families also cited cost. Four of ten parents considered cost to be important in choosing their *current* child care arrangements.

56% of parents identified cost as important in choosing a child care arrangement, and 43% identified cost as important in choosing their current child care arrangements.



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Do parents face affordability barriers in finding child care?

One-quarter of parents reported that they had recently experienced difficulties in finding child care. Of these, a majority reported that affordability was an issue. Families with lower incomes were particularly likely to be affected. Difficulties finding child care often resulted in disruptions to employment, and many parents simply quit trying to find child care.

59% of parents who recently had trouble accessing child care reported that finding affordable care was a barrier.

Is cost a reason for not using child care?

Of the parents who chose *not* to use a child care arrangement for at least one of their children, many cited the high cost of care as an important reason for their decision. This proportion was especially high among families with lower incomes.

37% of parents who chose not to use child care reported that high cost was one of the top three reasons for their decision.

Is the high cost of child care generally regarded as a problem?

Of the parents who expressed concerns about child care in their area, high cost was listed as a problem by a majority and was cited more frequently than quality of care or availability of spaces.

59% of parents who reported concerns about child care in their community cited high cost of child care as a problem.

Does income matter?

As is clear from the table below, families with lower incomes generally had greater concerns about the cost of child care. Affordability concerns were not related to where people lived, whether they received subsidies for child care, or the number of parents in a family.

Parents feel the cost of child care is:	Household income		
	< \$75,000	\$75,000 - \$119,999	\$120,000+
Unaffordable Among parents who paid for child care	42%	34%	27%
Important to consider when choosing a child care arrangement	65%	58%	53%
A barrier to finding child care Among parents who experienced difficulties finding child care in the past three months	77%	63%	45%
A reason for not using child care Among parents who did not use child care for at least one child	48%	35%	34%



Recommendations

Affordability matters to parents. Because making these services affordable for all families is a central goal of the CWELCC plan, the following recommendations merit consideration.

1. Plans to implement affordable child care should include special measures to ensure that new funding for early learning and care helps families with low incomes.

Measures to support families with very low incomes could include ensuring they receive subsidies that eliminate out-of-pocket costs, creating new spaces they can easily access, and removing other barriers.

2. The provincial government should regularly monitor the effect of policy changes on affordability and cost for parents.

Effective monitoring is essential for accountability and for improving policies, and it requires informative and reliable data.

3. Reduced out-of-pocket costs for parents must not come at the expense of quality.

Parents clearly value quality as well as affordability. Measures for improving the quality of early learning and care for children and their families must be put in place to ensure that quality is not sacrificed in the service of reducing costs.

4. To manage costs and to ensure high quality, it may be necessary to consider alternative approaches to funding early learning and care.

Alberta's current plan for implementing changes to early learning and care¹ has features that may make it difficult to ensure that out-of-pocket fees for parents do not exceed the goal of \$10 per day.² Alternative approaches deserve attention. For example, the set-fee approach used in several other provinces is widely regarded as superior in terms of administrative efficiency, predictability for parents, transparency, and monitoring.

5. Issues of affordability must be addressed in concert with, and not separately from, issues of quality, accessibility, inclusion, and flexibility.

Increasing affordability alone does not address the other, equally important issues.

Alberta needs a comprehensive approach that provides stable funding and directly supports early learning and care that is high quality, affordable for families at all income levels, accessible, inclusive, and flexible.

¹ Government of Alberta (2023). *Cost control framework and for-profit expansion plan*.

<https://open.alberta.ca/publications/alberta-cost-control-framework-forprofit-expansion-plan>

² Bisanz, J. (2023). *Questions about Alberta's cost-control framework and for-profit expansion plan*. Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care. <https://www.ecelc.ca/publications-archive/questions-about-albertas-cost-control-frameworkand-for-profit-expansion-plan>