



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



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

The availability of high-quality, affordable early learning and child care (ELCC) is widely recognized as a key component in reducing and eliminating poverty, in enabling parents, especially women, to advance their education and seek employment outside the home, and in promoting well-being and positive developmental outcomes in children. High quality is critical if ELCC is to yield important benefits for children, parents, and communities.

A window of opportunity has emerged in recent years to transform ELCC throughout Canada, including Alberta. 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 many Canadian families. Parents are important stakeholders in the evolving ELCC system, and so the success of the CWELCC initiative will depend in part on whether changes to ELCC 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 ELCC, including questions about quality. *Parents' Views About the Quality 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 that report.

Is the quality of early learning and child care important to parents?

Most parents in this survey identified quality as a key factor in selecting a child care arrangement. Quality was cited more often by parents from families with higher incomes than with lower incomes, and more frequently by parents from more densely populated areas than less populated areas. Regardless of income or location, however, a substantial percentage of parents thought quality was important in their decision making.

58% of parents ranked quality as one of the three most important factors they would consider in choosing a child care arrangement.



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When parents have difficulty finding child care, is quality a problem?

About one-quarter of all parents in our sample indicated that they had difficulty finding child care in the past three months. These parents indicated numerous reasons for their difficulty, including trouble “finding the quality of child care I wanted” (41%), “finding a qualified child care provider” (20%), and “finding licensed child care” (17%).

53% of the parents who had difficulty finding child care reported at least one quality-related problem.

What was the impact of these quality-related difficulties?

Of the parents who had difficulties finding child care because of quality-related issues, many reported significant disruptions to their work as a result: 52% changed their work schedules, 47% worked fewer hours, 31% postponed or discontinued work, and many simply quit looking for child care.

31% of parents who had difficulty finding child care quit looking for it altogether.

Are parents concerned with the quality of child care in their communities?

About one-third of parents expressed concerns about the state of local child care. Poor quality was cited as a concern somewhat less often than cost or availability of spaces but more often than inconvenient hours or location.

40% of parents who reported concerns about child care in their community cited poor quality as a problem.

Recommendations

Quality matters to many parents. The importance of high-quality ELCC is emphasized heavily in all the foundational documents of the CWELCC initiative and in bilateral agreements between the federal government and provincial and territorial governments. Little has been done, however, to implement or improve standards for quality in Alberta. If Alberta’s version of the CWELCC initiative is to match parents’ desire for high quality, the following recommendations merit consideration.

1. A commitment to high-quality early learning and child care must begin with a clearly articulated vision for what high quality should and will look like.

Alberta’s provincial government must articulate a vision of high-quality ELCC. Principles and regulations must be defined that provide shared expectations for parents, early childhood educators, policymakers, and legislators. These principles and regulations must be justified in terms of existing evidence, best practices, and community needs, and they must be designed primarily for the benefit of children and families.

2. A plan is needed to implement the changes required to realize the new vision for high-quality early learning and child care.

This plan must identify what is necessary for achieving the vision, including policies for service delivery, funding, regulation, planning, public accountability, and more. As has been demonstrated in other jurisdictions, progress toward building a high-quality system can be derailed or delayed when the vision for ELCC and the policies to implement that vision are inconsistent with each other.



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3. Quality must not be sacrificed in the service of improving affordability and accessibility.

There is overwhelming evidence showing beneficial outcomes of high-quality ELCC for children, families, communities, and economies. Policies that attend entirely to affordability and accessibility, while ignoring quality and the other CWELCC principles, inclusion and flexibility, may appear to be satisfactory in the short term. In the long term, however, they are likely to have unintended, and potentially negative, consequences. A comprehensive approach to improving ELCC is needed.

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.