

How early learning and child care is organized in Canada

It's complicated

Each of Canada's jurisdictions—10 provinces, three territories—has several programs for child care and early childhood education with multiple objectives such as “giving children the best start in life,” school readiness, early intervention, women's equality, supporting families, and poverty reduction. There is no overall national program. However, since 2017, the federal government and provinces/territories have agreed to a [Multilateral Agreement on Early Learning and Child Care \(ELCC\)](#).

Governments in Canada do not recognize child care as a right

Child care is not an entitlement or a right in Canada. Each province/territory enables provision of regulated child care services including centre-based full day child care, regulated home (family) child care, school-aged child care, and usually part day nursery school or preschool, each with legislated requirements for service delivery. Child care services are not funded per se (except to some extent in Quebec) but some public funding is available to provide some support for services and to help low income families pay fees. Historically, social service ministries were responsible for child care but today a majority of provinces/territories have made child care as a responsibility of their education ministries.

Kindergarten is a right

All provinces/territories also provide kindergarten for all five-year-olds, delivered at no fee to parents by public education authorities. Ontario is the sole province with kindergarten covering all four-year-olds, with Nova Scotia and Quebec phasing it in; some kindergarten is available for some four-year-olds in other jurisdiction. Full school-day programs now predominate in Canadian kindergarten provision; kindergarten attendance is optional in most provinces/territories.

Thus, kindergarten is a public responsibility, while finding and paying for child care for children younger than age five (or four in several jurisdictions) outside school hours child care for school-aged children is primarily a private family responsibility.

Federal government's role

In addition, the federal government directly funds several ECEC-type programs for special populations—Head Start for Indigenous Canadians and child minding for newcomers to Canada taking language training. The Child Care Expense Deduction under *The Income Tax Act*, allows eligible parents to claim some employment-related child care expenses as a deduction from taxable income. The federal government also contributes to maternity/parental leave by providing benefits to eligible families under the Employment Insurance (EI) program; the provisions for job-protected leave from work are

determined by each province/territory. This system applies to Canada outside Quebec, which has its own program covering both leave provisions and benefits, the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP).

Following the 2015 federal election, the federal government re-engaged in discussion about ELCC with provinces/territories. This culminated in a June 2017 announcement of a Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework, which emphasizes collaboration between the federal government and provinces/territories. There are five principles stated in this framework—high quality, accessibility, affordability, flexibility, and inclusivity. Funding commitments were outlined in the 2017 federal budget beginning with \$540 million in 2018-19 and expected to increase to \$870 million annually by 2026-27.

Roles and responsibilities

In the Canadian federation, child care and early childhood education—like other social, educational, and health programs—are under provincial/territorial jurisdiction. However, the federal government may, and does, play a variety of funding and policy roles in social programs.

Local governments generally have no role in regulated child care outside Ontario where they play several important mandated roles. As well, the City of Vancouver has adopted a significant key planning and policy-setting role, and a small number of municipalities in Alberta and Saskatchewan support or deliver services. Local school boards (or school divisions) are responsible for elementary schools including kindergarten. In jurisdictions, many schools host child care programs as landlords.

Canadian child care is treated as a market commodity

Canadian child care is treated as a market commodity and is considered to be primarily a private family responsibility. Thus, parent-consumers, non-governmental organizations, and other community-based actors are a key part of Canadian ELCC.

Almost all regulated Canadian child care is private-initiated and maintained by voluntary organizations, parents or entrepreneurs. The not-for-profit child care sector represents about 70% of the total supply, with for-profits (ranging from one centre operations to corporate-type chains with multiple locations) making up the rest. There are few publicly-delivered services.

Who pays for child care and how?

All types of child care in Canada (except in Quebec) are mostly supported by parent fees, with provinces/territories paying some (usually fairly limited), operating costs for regulated child care. A number of provinces – Manitoba, Prince Edward Island, Alberta, British Columbia—now have introduced some more operationally funded child care services. These operating funds help to reduce parent fees. Child care fees depend on the child's age, duration of care, and the amount of operational funding

provided by the province/territory. All provinces/territories save Quebec subsidize individual eligible, low-income families in regulated child care by covering some or all of the fees on the parent's behalf (in Quebec, most of the cost of much of the regulated child care is covered by operational funds paid to child care programs by the Quebec government).

Affordability and quality

Canada, for the most part, takes a consumerist approach to child care—substantially relying on a market model. Consequently, the supply of regulated services covers only a minority of children. As parent fees are the main source of revenue for child care services in most provinces/territories, affording child care is difficult for many families across Canada. Linked to this reliance on fees are the low wages of the educators providing the services; the low wages, in turn, are linked to what the available research suggests about child care quality—that services too often may not be the high-quality “early childhood education” shown to benefit young children.