

Introducing the *Early Years Study 3* Questions & Answers

What is the *Early Years Study*?

This third edition of the *Early Years Study* documents the social, economic and scientific rationale for investing in early childhood education. It recommends that all children be entitled to an early education from the age of 2 years onward. New to this edition is the **Early Childhood Education Report 2011** (formerly the Index). The ECE Report provides information about the quality, access, financing and policy of early childhood education across Canada.

What does the Report tell us?

The big story behind the ECE Report is the finding that high-quality, publicly funded preschool education for all 2- to 5-year-olds is not a utopian fantasy, particularly if it is built on the assets we already have in public education. Much of the groundwork has been laid, many of the tools have been developed and most importantly, universal early childhood education has many, many advocates.

How are the provinces performing?

Three provinces have passed the halfway mark on the Report's 15-point scale. Quebec tops the rankings with 10 points, closely followed by Prince Edward Island with 9.5 and Manitoba with 7.5. The other provinces range between 1.5 and 6.5 points. If the assessments were conducted as recently as three years ago, only Quebec would have made it past the halfway mark, and most provinces would have scored below 3 points. Many provinces have plans that, if implemented, will improve their standings in future iterations of the Report. Canada may well be achieving its national early learning and care program by stealth.

Why the optimism?

The OECD's 2004 examination of early childhood programming revealed that Canada was a laggard in early childhood provision. Since then, the provinces have been busy. Even the termination of the federal/provincial child care agreements in 2007 did not halt progress. Combined, the provinces and territories now spend over \$7.5-billion annually on early education programs and over 50 percent of preschoolers regularly attend these programs. In 2004, Canada devoted .2 percent of GDP to early childhood programs, while today it is .6 percent, still short of the recommended 1% of GDP but nevertheless a significant increase. Despite budget challenges, provinces have clearly prioritized the education and care of young children.

Is the goal of universal preschool realistic?

Yes, because it builds on existing public education systems. By broadening education's mandate to include younger children, we can bridge the gap between parental leave and formal schooling. Virtually all 5-year-olds in Canada attend kindergarten, and some jurisdictions are expanding access for 4-year-olds. Half of all 3-year-olds are in some type of group programming. With less effort required than starting a whole new social program from scratch, education can meet the needs of preschoolers, as well as school-age children. At the same time, schools can become community centres for families, with supports and programs from pregnancy onward.

Why link early childhood education to public education?

Considerable international evidence supports choosing education as the base upon which to grow early childhood education. Education is unambiguous. It is about children—all children. From this universal and well-established platform, a modern understanding that learning begins at birth and continues throughout life can be developed and promoted. There is no need to reinvent the wheel—education already comes with a strong infrastructure (financing, training, curriculum, data collection, evaluation and research). Parents trust public education. In fact, among our Anglo-American counterparts, Canada has the highest enrolment in publicly-funded education.

Why should early childhood education be a priority for public investment?

Our task today—indeed our very survival as a species depends on it—is to ensure that future generations have the capacity to create democratic, pluralistic and prosperous societies. Science has gone a long way in explaining how experience in the early years of life affects neurobiological pathways that influence the life's course. Investing in expectant mothers and their young children is a powerful equalizer and a key tool for economic and social stability. Countries that invest in women as active members of the labour force show much better performance in education, behaviour and health than countries that do not.

Can we afford it?

Yes, we can. Several Canadian studies document the economic benefits of early childhood education as effective economic development, both as a job creator and as an economic multiplier in local economies. It is a proven prevention against social costs, since diverting children from special education saves thousands of dollars per child. Then there is a wonderful payback that comes from delivering early education in a way that simultaneously supports children's learning and their parents' work. Montreal economist Pierre Fortin calculates how the reduced demand for social benefits, combined with the increased taxes paid by working mothers, more than pays for the entire cost of the Quebec child care program.

Is this what Canadian families want?

We need to move beyond worn-out debates about whether or not child care is a personal or public responsibility, or whether mothers of young children should be at home or in the

workforce. Families that have a parent at home or choose home-based care arrangements also want early childhood education options for their preschoolers. As a society, we cannot have it all. We rely on women's labour and expect families to shoulder the social and financial load for rearing the next generation. Families are telling us they cannot carry this burden alone. Just having children puts them at risk of being poor. Increasingly, couples are deciding not to be parents. Canada must make the hard and important job of raising children a little easier for parents.

How was the Early Childhood Education Report developed?

The ECE Report is rooted in the recommendations of the OECD's review of early education and care systems in Canada and 19 other countries. It is organized around five categories: governance, funding, access, quality in the early learning environment and accountability. Each category is afforded 3 points, for an overall total of 15 points. Categories were chosen based on established research and expert advice from others who have developed similar monitoring tools. Benchmarks in each category were limited by the availability of reliable data. The absence of sufficient data prevented the inclusion of the territories for this round of the ECE Report, something we hope to address in future. The Early Childhood Education Report 2011 provides a baseline. Further modifications may take place following consultations with stakeholders and experts. The ECEI will be housed at the Atkinson Centre, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto.