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Creating Spaces and Places for Young Children and Families



A new picture of childhood and human nature emerges from the research of the past decade. Far from being mere unfinished adults, babies and young children are exquisitely designed by evolution to change and create, to learn and explore. Those capacities, so intrinsic to what it means to be human, appear in their purest forms in the earliest years of our lives. Our most valuable human accomplishments are possible because we were once helpless dependent children, not in spite of it. Childhood, and caregiving, is fundamental to our humanity.¹

**Alison Gopnik,
*The Philosophical Baby***

Celebrating childhood

Newborns know far more than scientists previously imagined. They arrive learning and exploring,² are effective communicators and even understand that people are special and imitate their facial expressions.³ Babies soon develop their own identity, autonomy and social abilities, and follow their own curiosities and learning interests. They look longer at novel or unexpected events than at more predictable ones. They examine and discover their environment and make connections between their experiences. They master physical skills, connect with others and contribute to their world.

Children live in the present and have a wide range of capacities and abilities that adapt to the culture and context of their daily lives. The circumstance under which they learn and grow makes a big difference. Early experiences carry forward into adult life. But as British researcher Helen Penn notes, “Children’s daily experiences are vivid and deeply felt and bad or mediocre experiences, while possibly not harmful in the long run, may lead to considerable unhappiness.”⁴

1060	Number of babies born each day in Canada ⁵
13.8%	Babies who are exclusively breast-fed for six months ⁶
201	Minutes preschoolers in low-income families watch TV each day ⁷
183	Minutes preschoolers in high-income families watch TV each day ⁸
20	Number of minutes experts recommend preschoolers be read to ⁹
860	New words children acquire each year between the ages of 1 and 7 years ¹⁰
9%	Boys who meet Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines ¹¹
4%	Girls who meet Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines ¹²

Young children live in families that are more diverse than ever before, and under circumstances that are significantly more complex, and for many, more stressful. Supporting families to cope with these transitions makes sense from a human capital argument. Healthy, competent children require less expensive interventions today, and become adults who are able to contribute not only to their own families, but to the social and economic well-being of society.

Investing in children begins with the here and now of childhood. The UNICEF (2003) report, *The State of the World's Children*, stresses that children need to be seen and heard in their communities around a wide range of social and environmental issues of concern to them. Responsible citizenship is not something conferred at age 18. Even very young children have the capacity for active participation and the acquisition of civic literacy skills. Children should be recognized as young citizens who are celebrated, and as active, competent people who have a stake in Canadian society and in whom Canadian

society has a stake.¹³ Countries that support early human development recognize the unique contribution that families make. Consequently, they support parents to balance work and child raising. They share the cost of raising children and recognize that children need spaces and places to be, to do, to learn and to interact with others.

What early childhood education offers children and families

When discussing the benefits of early childhood education, policy makers and researchers often focus on its proven role in reducing the number of children who have behaviour, learning or health problems. Those without a defined challenge are assumed “good enough” and somehow not deserving of support.¹⁴ But parents want more than good enough; they want their children to be the best they can be.

Children who have intimate relationships at home, whose physical and emotional needs are met and who have friendships with other children are primed to learn from the world around them. New experiences and challenges provide them with the learning they need for later competencies. Educators trained in early childhood development help parents to stimulate their children’s learning by responding to their cues and initiating interactions. This “doing together” is the foundation of the confident learner. Even the youngest infant learns from these interactions.

Early childhood educator Petra is joined by parents and their young infants who range in age from 2 to 6 months. Many in the group participated in a prenatal group offered by public health and continue to meet each week. Petra greets each new arrival, listening to accounts of first smiles, sleepless nights and the introduction of solid foods. Petra finds ways to boost parent confidence by noting their babies’ communication cues. She remarks to Dria how baby Quinn squirms pleasurably and coos when Dria puts her face close and talks to him.

Children’s physical needs for safety, nutrition, health care and hygiene are basic for ensuring their

security and survival. Healthy children eat healthy foods, get enough rest and play in safe, secure environments. Parents and other caregivers spend a great deal of time changing diapers and cleansing, feeding children or helping them learn to feed themselves, serving food and cleaning up afterward, helping with hand-washing and face-wiping and changing clothes after spills or accidents. Physical care is a core part of development. Through these repeated routines of daily life, children experience gentleness and adults demonstrate skills that children eventually acquire themselves.

Eighteen-month-old Zehra climbs the stairs to the diaper change table assisted by Darlene, an early childhood educator. Darlene and Zehra sing their special song as Zehra mounts the stairs; the same song they have used at each diaper change. Now Zehra gets a clean diaper and initiates the song to let Darlene know she wants to be changed. Her physical competency and sense of self are encouraged as she mounts the table on her own and lies down, rather than being lifted and put in place. The song calms Zehra as she transitions from playing to being cleaned. As part of the routine, Zehra hands the diaper to Darlene; in exchange, Darlene gives Zehra a cloth to wipe her hands. Darlene explains each step and Zehra now delights in indicating to Darlene what comes next.

Babies use sounds and then gestures to communicate. Oral language expands their repertoire for communication as they acquire the abilities to make their needs known, exchange ideas, convey feelings and connect with others. The capacity to express themselves with language offers expanded capabilities to regulate their behaviour and get along with others. When children are deeply involved in pretend play with each other, they determine goals and carry out tasks, provide opportunities to recall a storyline and use increasingly complex language. They become storytellers creating new versions of familiar narratives and composing new ones. Preschoolers' abilities to use complex narratives and more advanced oral language are linked to improved reading comprehension and fluency¹⁵ as

Breastfeeding and early brain development

Health and well-being at every stage of the life course is influenced by nutrition, beginning with the mother's pre-conception nutritional status, continuing through pregnancy to early infancy and beyond. Research shows that a child's tastes and eating habits are formed early in life with consequences for later obesity and also academic achievement.¹⁶

The macronutrients (proteins, carbohydrates and fats) and micronutrients (vitamins and minerals) are particularly important during prenatal and early development, when brain development and body growth is rapid.

The World Health Organization and others emphasizes the importance of breastfeeding in the first six months for lifelong health.¹⁷ A recent study indicates a strong relationship between breastfeeding and cognitive outcomes.¹⁸ Breastfeeding for as little as four weeks showed a positive and significant effect on academic test scores.

they transition in the primary grades from learning to read, to reading to learn.

A group of preschool children are following the construction of a condominium next door. Children stand at the fence and watch the parade of cement mixers, diggers, front-end loaders and cranes. Three-year-old Pedro sits down on a tricycle and moves back and forth, making a rumbling sound. Other children ride over on tricycles and wagons and join Pedro. Aisha, an early childhood educator, brings out large building blocks, cardboard tubes, large empty boxes and hard hats. The children eagerly begin to construct a building they call "the big condo". Aisha decides to extend the outside play time. Several days later, the area includes structures made out of blocks, tubes and boxes; picture and word signs giving directions for construction vehicles and warnings of danger;

and pails and shovels for hauling sand around in the sand box. The children are asking more and more questions about the construction vehicles and about the many tools the workers are using. Four-year-old Emily wants to know how the water and electricity will be part of the building. Aisha brings in several picture books about construction from the local library. She tells the children that she does not know the answers but she can help them find answers in the book. Hassan suggests they use the internet in the library to look up more information. Several children are drawing pictures about building construction and asking how to spell words like “condominium” and “front-end loader”. Aisha and the children now take pictures every morning and document what progress they observe in a book they are making called “The Big Condo”.

Early childhood education is not solely concerned with academic goals. A child’s world is often too big for them to control. Fearfulness and anxiety are expected and appropriate responses. Children need supportive caring adults to help them discover their surroundings from a safe place. Brain research shows that emotional and cognitive self-regulation

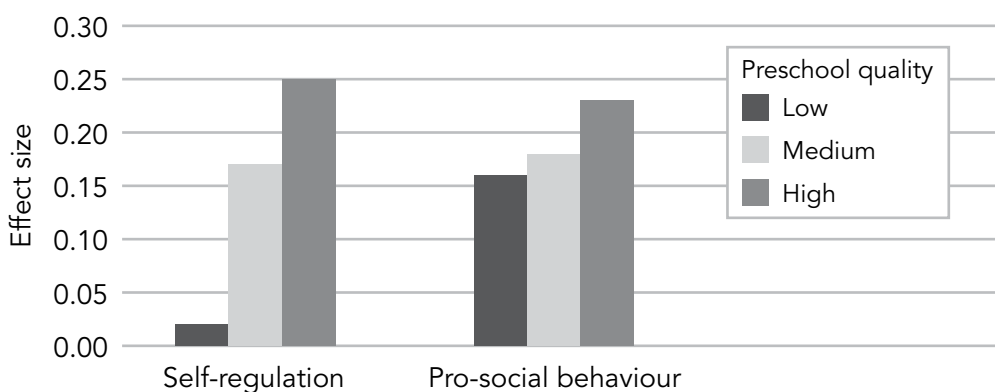
have the same neural roots. Warm physical contact with adults helps build the neural pathways in children that manage emotional responses. When adults are responsive to children’s feelings, children are better able to organize both their thinking and their behaviour as they grow and their brains develop.

Michael arrives at the centre with 2-year-old Cleo. As they enter the playroom Cleo turns to her father, clings to his leg and begins to cry. Michael picks her up, strokes her back and talks softly to soothe her. As Cleo’s crying slows down, Janette, the early childhood educator, approaches and talks quietly to Michael. Their conversation begins to interest Cleo as Janette tells Michael how much Cleo enjoys the playhouse. When Cleo stops crying, Janette suggests she show her dad how she makes cookies in the play oven. After a short demonstration Cleo is ready for her day and kisses Michael goodbye.

The feeling of being included is a prerequisite for early learning. Children and their families are part of broader communities: neighbourhood, faith, ethnocultural, school, professional and workplace. Children bring traditional practices, values, beliefs

FIGURE 3.1

Preschool quality and self-regulation and pro-social behaviour (age 11)

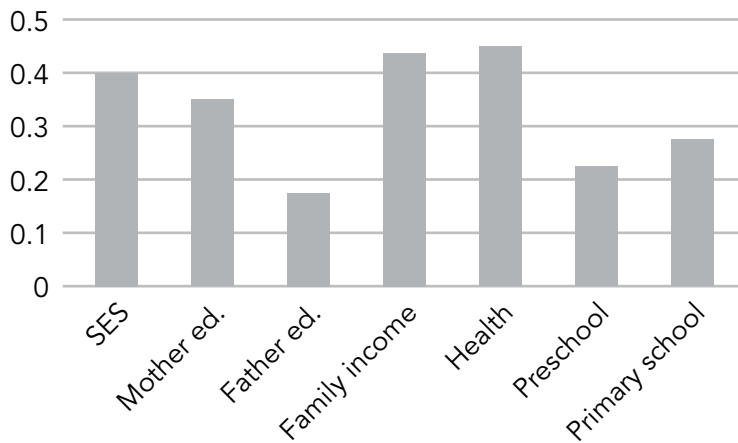


Quality preschool promotes self-regulation in young children with enduring effects into elementary school.

Source: Melhuish, E. in Roseveare, D. (2011).

FIGURE 3.2

Factors affecting academic achievement – age 11



Many factors influence outcomes for children. The health and abilities a child is born with are primary, followed by the home environment including the socioeconomic status of the family, the education attainment of the parents and family income. The quality of preschool and primary school are important outside influencers.

Source: Melhuish, E. in Roseveare, D. (2011).

and the experiences of family and community to early childhood programs. Their sense of inclusion increases in environments that allow their full participation and promotes attitudes, beliefs and values of equity and democracy.¹⁹

Four-year-old Juan speaks Spanish and his mother wants him to learn English. He follows the daily routines at the centre and seems to understand what is being said, but he speaks very little. Juan's mother wants to take home picture books with simple text to read to him at home. Her own English is limited, but she thinks she should only use English at home. Juan's early childhood educator, Nathan, suggests: "Let's try some storybooks without text. You and Juan can tell the story together in Spanish. We use the same books here and tell the story in English. Juan will make the connections. And he is learning—he already understands a lot of English. It is Juan's birthday next week. Can you join us in the morning or at the end of the day to celebrate his birthday and to introduce myself and the other children to a few Spanish words?"

Many children negotiate a second language. They benefit when early childhood educators show they

value other languages. Children need opportunities to learn in the language they understand at the same time as they acquire a new language. As they continue to learn vocabulary and conceptual skills in their home language they are better equipped to acquire skills in a second language.²⁰

Early childhood programs live alongside other institutions, including public media and political dialogue. Racial, religious and ethnic tensions and incidents are often part of the context. Confronting prejudices and taking action to avoid discrimination and biases increase a sense of belonging of children and families.²¹

Families attending the centre include professional, two-income earning parents working in nearby offices and parents who are employed in the garment industry. Many of the families are newcomers to Canada and live on low incomes. Elisa works with the preschool children and wants to create a learning environment that respects diversity and identity. She takes pictures of the children and their families to paste in their cubbies.

Children need regular opportunities for vigorous and sustained play. Rough-and-tumble activities,

crawling through tubes, ball throwing, jumping over sticks or riding a tricycle are vigorous play. Beyond the obvious health benefits that come with physical activity, preschool children experience other well-documented benefits, including improved sensory-motor coordination, social negotiation skills and vocabulary, and increased sentence complexity and sensory integration.²² Active Healthy Kids Canada recommends that early childhood programs offer a minimum of 90 minutes of daily active play.²³

Back outside, Sam and Micaela are chasing each other across the playground. Amid squeals of delight, they race each other up a small hill and roll down to the bottom over and over again.

Components of quality early childhood education

As documented throughout this report, early childhood programs offer multiple social and economic benefits. For children and families, they are very personal places. Parents long for environments where their children are nurtured with real affection, receive individualized attention and are appreciated for their uniqueness. They want their children to make friends, to have new experiences and to learn new skills. They want a relationship with their children's educators that is welcoming, respectful and reciprocal.

When you walk inside a high-quality early childhood centre, it looks and smells good. It is bright, airy, organized and clean. Knowing that it is never too early to make children aware of their relationship to the world, centres are environmentally responsible models of reduce, reuse and recycle. Flora and fauna are major players. There is a variety of play materials for children to put together and take apart. There are quiet corners with storybooks and soft seating to cuddle up on. Knowledgeable and responsive educators encourage language use, both spoken and visual, to show literacy in daily living and to enrich exploration and expand problem solving. Immersion in these environments boosts early learning.²⁴

Quality early childhood programs have common principles, approaches and tools that guide

practice. There is recognition that children's earliest experiences matter deeply, laying the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health. Families and communities are viewed as partners who strengthen the program's ability to meet the needs of young children. Respect for diversity, equity and inclusion are acknowledged as essential for optimal development. Research also shows that a planned curriculum, anchored by play, best capitalizes on children's natural curiosity and exuberance to learn.

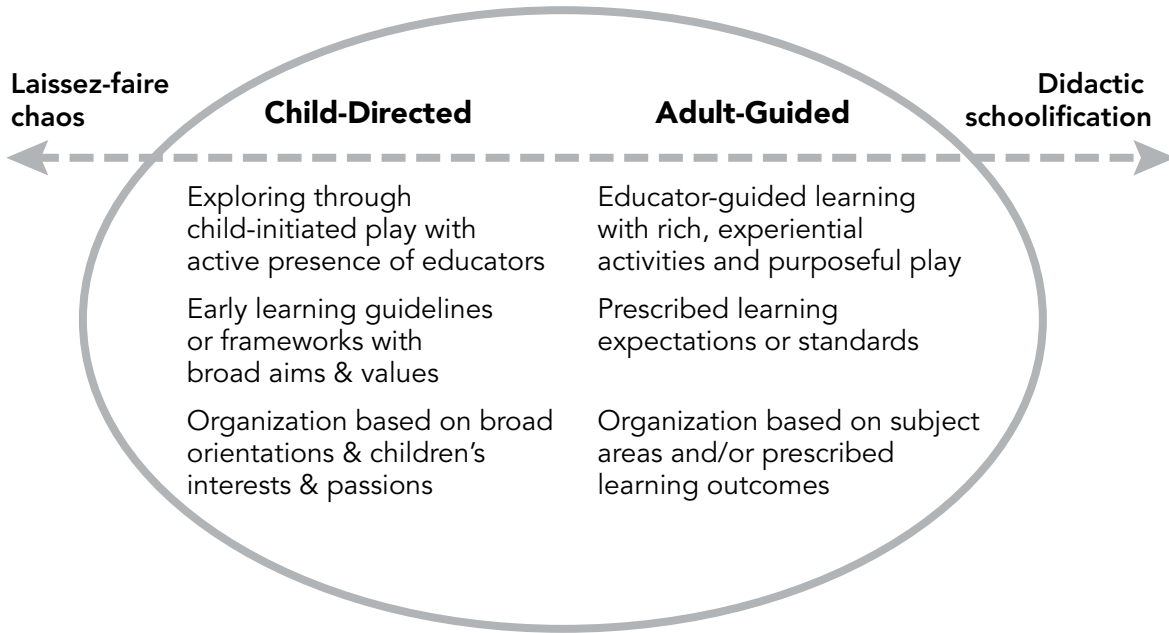
A sound curriculum guides early learning environments for children from infancy through to the early primary grades, when children transition to more analytical thinking. It influences not only the content but the design of the early learning environment, including appropriate lighting, furniture, equipment, materials, storage, food preparation and hygiene facilities, ensuring the space is inviting to children, families and staff. It directs educators in the scheduling of routines and activities, the organization of indoor and outdoor space and the adaptation of space and activities to include children with special needs. Early childhood educators (ECEs) use the curriculum to guide their expectations of the children and to help document their own and the children's progress. The curriculum is not only for front-line ECEs; it also informs directors, school principals, senior administrators and other decision makers how to allocate resources and set policies in tune with the developmental needs of young children.

Curricula is not static. It is intended to respond to new knowledge and the changing circumstances of children, their families and communities. Good curricula address the whole child and is often organized into broad categories with learning expectations for each: physical, social, emotional, communication/language and cognitive. This supports educators in observing the children and adapting activities accordingly. The curricula serve additional purposes, including promoting an even level of quality across programs and facilitating communication between parents and staff.

Researchers have found that the quality of the curriculum and pedagogy offered to children is more important than a specific curriculum and

FIGURE 3.3

Curriculum continuum



Both child-directed and adult-guided curricula can be effective if done well. Practitioners and researchers agree, laissez-faire and didactic approaches are not effective. Most important is having a curriculum that is coherent with a vision and goals and with a consistent quality of pedagogy to carry it out. In practice, effective early childhood programs operate along a continuum that recognize some learning is best supported by explicit instruction, while other is best achieved by facilitation and modeling.

Adapted from: Bertrand, J. (2010); Miller, E. & Almon, J. (2009); OECD. (2006).

pedagogical approach, with two general exceptions. Young children do not show long-term gains from a scripted curriculum dominated by direct instruction and a focus on specific academic achievements related to literacy and numeracy.²⁵ This approach is sometimes referred to as the “schoolification” of early childhood education.²⁶ On the other hand, loosely-structured programs that promote child-directed play without the involvement or active support of educators typically result in chaos.²⁷

Early learning frameworks in place in several provinces tend towards a child-directed approach, while curricula for school kindergarten programs tend towards adult-guided approaches.

In one study of curriculum approaches used in the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, a teacher-directed approach to acquiring basic skills did

promote early literacy skills and made the transition to kindergarten easier.²⁸ However, longer-term child outcomes, especially high school completion, were attributed to environments with child-initiated activity—engagement based on social learning and learning how to learn.

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project in England and Wales offers strong evidence that a well-planned curriculum and pedagogy with specific learning goals, delivered by responsive educators, improves children’s intellectual and social/behavioural development. Children made more progress in centres where cognitive and social goals were complementary and viewed as equally important. In centres rated as excellent, educators and children engaged in more sustained shared thinking. Educators intentionally extended

children's thinking by working together to solve a problem, clarify a concept, expand a narrative or explore a question. The beneficial effects of pre-school remained evident through the initial years of primary school.²⁹

Educators matter

Encounters between people are fluid and never the same twice. For this reason, it is important for all educators to be reflective practitioners, sensitive to children and knowledgeable about how they develop. Skilled ECEs match their interactions and responses to what is required to best assist a child's learning. They provide children with scaffolding, the kind of assistance that helps children to reach further than would be possible unassisted.³⁰

A typical exchange between children and ECE might look like this:

Five-year-old Anita and 4-year-old Sam are using small blocks to make roads for their miniature cars. Amanda, an early childhood educator, brings out several empty boxes. Nearby are markers, tape, scissors, string, small slips of paper. She asks the children, "Could you use these boxes on your roads?"

ECEs ask questions to promote problem solving and challenge children's thinking and reasoning. Children acquire numeracy skills from birth, first recognizing the patterns in people faces, then in repetitive games like 'patty-cake' and 'peek-a-boo.' Even very small children know two cookies are better than one. Young children acquire the language of numbers when they understand how to put things in order and the relationships between big and little, more and less, tall and short. With experience, their understanding of qualitative and quantitative relationships deepens and children develop abilities to measure time, temperature, length and mass.

The children have noticed that although they are the same age, they are different heights. Their ECE, Stella, asks if they would like to know how big they are. She rolls out a long roll of paper and invites them to form pairs. As one child lies down on the paper, the other traces the outline of their body.

Curricula reflect social values and goals

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The curricula developed for preschool children reflect and promote society's values and morals.³¹ Swedish preschool curricula aim to help children to understand and participate in democratic government. Early years education includes support for social cohesion and national cultural identity, respect for diversity or the promotion of bi- or multi-culturalism. In New Zealand *Te Whariki* is the national early childhood curriculum. It adopts a specific sociocultural perspective on learning that recognizes the different social contexts in which children live and seeks to promote bi-culturalism between Maori and European cultures.

Stella provides pens and tape measures and asks if hands are longer than feet. The children then ask if arms are longer than legs. Is fingertip to fingertip as long as head to toe? The tape measures come off the paper to calculate the circumference of heads, arms and legs. The children record their measurements.

Bringing children to learning opportunities is part of the supportive relationship between educators and parents and between educators, parents and children; the child learns through active involvement, not through passively receiving information. Adults open up learning opportunities for young children when they respect children as confident and competent learners. These expectations encourage young children's hopefulness in their own capabilities.

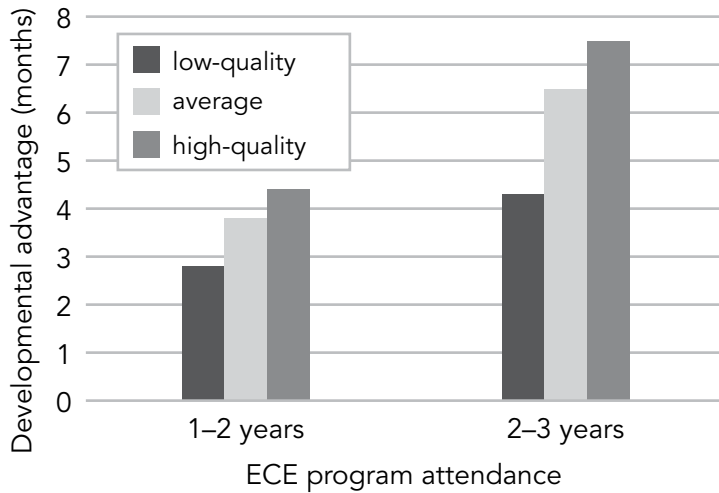
Early childhood options for all

All children should have the opportunity to attend places like the ones described in this chapter, staffed by sensitive, qualified ECEs like Darlene, Aisha, Nathan and the others. Few do. Most children must settle for mediocrity and live with the consequences. Experience tells us it is not enough to merely add

FIGURE 3.4

Quality and duration matter

(months of developmental advantage on literacy)



Both the quality of preschool programs and the amount of time children attend preschool influence later educational achievement. Melhuish found literacy benefits even for children attending lower quality (not abusive or neglectful) programs, but the children who profited most attended good programs for two or more years.

Source: Melhuish, E. in Roseveare, D. (2011).

preschool spaces; we need to be concerned with how good they are. Enrolling children in overcrowded classrooms with inept educators can make their lives worse. But quantity often wins out over quality for policy makers because it is easier to boast about increasing spaces than improving classroom quality.

Researcher Carl Corter notes: “In Canada, the story of government roles in early childhood programs has been told mainly in words like “fragmented” and “underfunded”, certainly not “foundational” for providing coherent supports to children’s development and to their families.”³²

In the absence of public action to support children’s early learning, community innovators, often responding to the call of the Early Years studies, mobilize grassroots activities designed to meet the needs of young children and their families. Charismatic leaders bring stakeholders together to forge a common vision. Networks are established to collaborate around joint objectives and activities. Playgrounds, after-school clubs, morning playgroups, take-home book bags and Saturday gym programs emerge and are welcomed by families.

But community-driven initiatives operate on the margins of mainstream programs. They rarely challenge service mandates, funding or organization and

most fail when the leadership changes. Occasionally large organizations or governments pick up innovations and morph them into yet another stand-alone program on the ever-changing list of activities available in communities. Seldom are they integrated into schools or health services to become part of the core services delivered to families.

Governments also initiate their own collaborative efforts, bringing service providers and stakeholders together to make services work better for people. These rarely have the authority to command the participation of key players or to direct the reorganization of mandates or funding. They usually last as long as there is money to allocate.

Evaluations of integration efforts agree—the goodwill of community advocates and committed stakeholders alone does not sustain institutional change.³³ The personal experience of community leaders concurs: “Twenty years ago I thought I could work together with a school board leader and we could sprinkle the magic dust of collaboration around and all good things for kids and families would follow,” observes Graham Clyne, a community activist.

Community-level coordination efforts can inform new policy frameworks, but successful transformations require high-level political will and direction

that goes beyond single ministries to embrace the whole government. Without top-level direction, departments remain accountable to their governance structures. As a result, most aim to improve coordination while retaining their respective funding and legislative mandates.

Challenges to early childhood service integration

When everyone agrees that integrating services is positive for children and families and more efficient for taxpayers, why is it so difficult to accomplish? A number of barriers make system transformation difficult:

- **Structure:** An absence of high-level, consistent direction damages most initiatives. Education is a critical department with the infrastructure to provide stability for service integration, but it is also a big boat to turn. Children's and social service ministries are the outliers in most governments and feel compelled to defend their departmental integrities and cultures. Regional infrastructure of education and social services often have different geographical boundaries and organizational structures that are hard to join up. Too many initiatives started and abandoned leave bureaucrats feeling cynical. Opponents drag their feet, banking on policy makers getting distracted with other tasks.
- **Turf:** From the classroom floor to ministry offices, deeply ingrained professional and agency ideologies clash over who will lead and who will adapt. Commercial and community agencies claim loss of clients and funding; unions fight job redundancies; professional organizations worry about retaining status and members; and school officials balk at taking on tasks that are outside a narrowly defined educational scope.
- **Combining universal and targeted programs:** Kindergarten is provided at no direct cost to parents. Where available, parent and family support programs have no or modest fees. Few families can find or pay for regulated child care. This fractured funding structure locks participants into their silos.

- **Communication and resources:** Poor communication with parents, the public and stakeholders leads to a lack of clarity about goals, timelines, roles and responsibilities. Inadequate transition planning for agencies affected by systems change disrupts related services and creates opposition, while inadequate resources undermines quality.
- **Staffing:** Insufficient supports frustrate educators and administrators who must meet new demands. Disparity in remuneration and working conditions among professionals with similar skills and responsibilities, labour contracts and professional regulation all limit the flexibility needed for systems change.
- **Balancing the books:** The recent global recession and slow recovery have pressured governments to deliver programs for significantly lower costs, rolling back integration efforts as each department and agency seeks to protect its own budget and employees.

Benefits of early childhood program integration

While research into integrating children's programming has focused largely on the process, positive gains have also been documented for children, families and staff. Evaluations of Sure Start in the UK, Communities for Children in Australia and Toronto First Duty report that children in neighbourhoods with integrated children's services are more socially competent compared with children living in similar areas without integrated services. More families were informed about services and found them more accessible.³⁴ They attended programs more often and participated in a broader range of activities. There was a reduction in the number of agencies families had to approach and fewer families fell through the cracks. In addition, parents reported greater satisfaction with services, less family stress, reduced social isolation, more confidence in their parenting and improved communication with staff.

Integrated models challenge staff to abandon professional rigidity and develop a shared understanding and language with respect to early childhood practice. When supported by effective leadership,

there is more collaboration and staff members enjoy expanded professional development and more opportunities for peer learning.

Program quality is another benefit of integration. Integrated models seem to push back against developmentally inappropriate curriculum and approaches, and promote a more progressive vision of what early childhood programming should be: building engaged, active learning; less modularization; whole child development, including supports to build self-regulation; enhanced parent capacity to partner with educators to support their children's development; and expanded community and school links. The Toronto First Duty initiative found that quality ratings reflected the degree of integration, with programs receiving a higher quality rating when integration ratings were also high.

For schools and community service providers, integration can be difficult, involving real change to culture and methodologies and requiring new skills and ways of working. Change requires leadership at all levels. Provincial and local administrators must ensure that the time and needed resources are made available to develop local expertise.

New thinking for new challenges

Canadians agree that we need a new discourse about the role of government in helping families address the highly complex challenges they face in providing their children with opportunity and security. Yet efforts on behalf of children are taking place against a backdrop of intensifying demand, increasing complexity and taxpayer fatigue. Doing more of the same will not deliver the scale and nature of the changes needed. Moreover, attempts at reform along single departmental or professional lines often give rise to unintended consequences. Narrow thinking about policy solutions can alleviate one need, while exacerbating others.

Real integration demands new ways of thinking—a system-wide approach with new measures of success and new resources that include the energy and ideas of citizens, communities and experts. Early childhood program integration needs to move beyond pilot projects and be brought to centre stage.

Influencing policy change

It is only through public policy that permanent and sustainable change for a better future can take place. *Good* policy requires 'political space', a convergence of the right leaders, at the right time, doing the right thing. *Smart* policy making requires the ability to identify what is not working and foster a consensus around what can work. Many inputs go into creating the dynamics that turn scientific evidence into community action, and ultimately policy change. Here are two examples of foundations partnering with communities to cultivate a convergence of stakeholder and public opinion in support of new approaches to early childhood and family service delivery.

Avenir d'enfants, mobilizing to improve outcomes for young children in Quebec

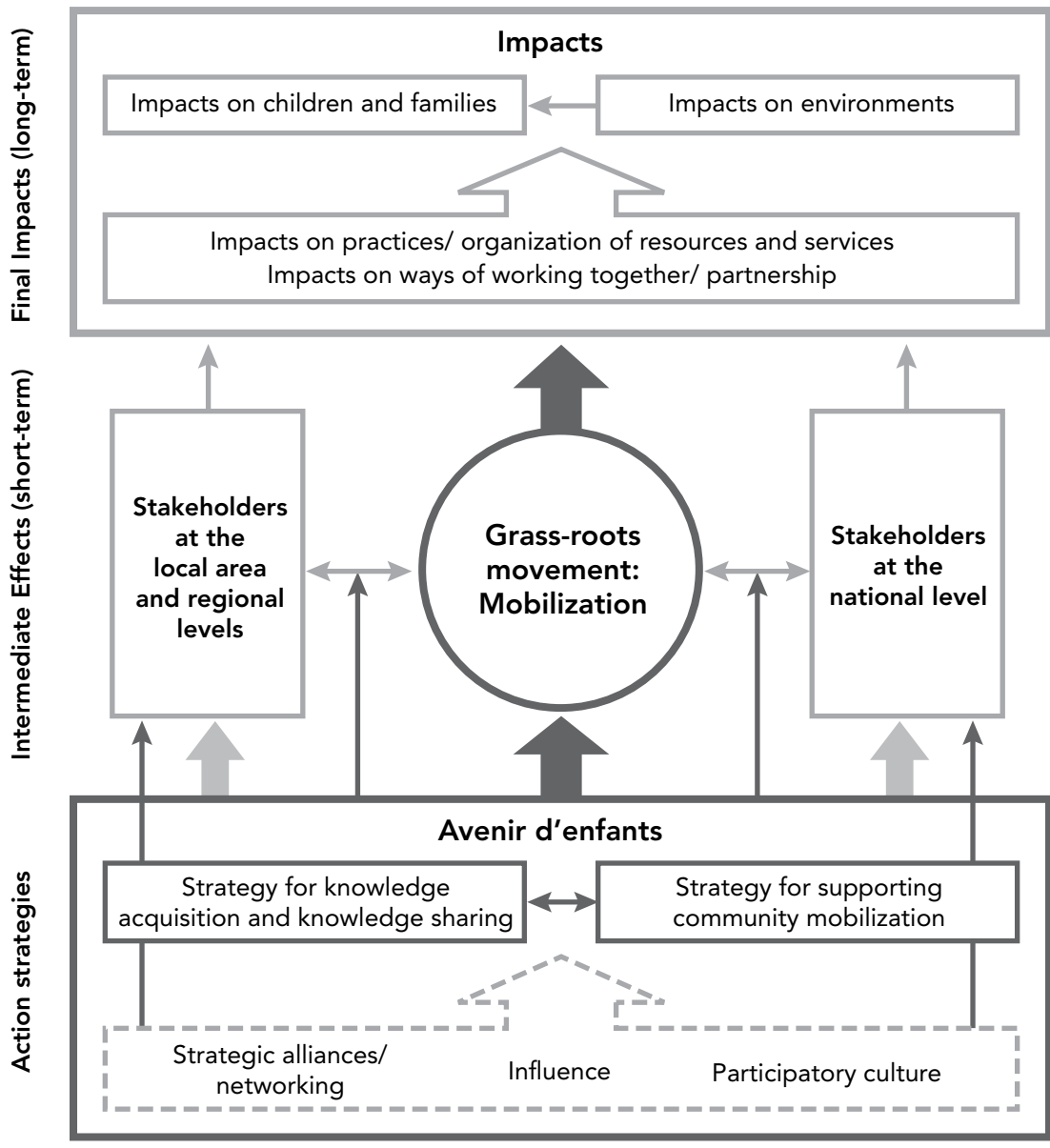
Avenir d'enfants is an ambitious civic/government partnership that guides and financially supports Quebec communities to promote the development and well-being of children from the prenatal period to age 5. Public health, early childhood programs, schools, municipalities, community agencies and parent representatives come together to harmonize strategies, align services and mandates, explore and experiment with the integration of funding and human resources and ensure continuity of services for young children and families.

Avenir d'enfants distinguishes itself from other community-mobilizing initiatives in a singular manner. The Quebec legislature created a 10-year fund for community projects designed to create equitable opportunities for children. The Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation added \$250 million to the province's \$150 million commitment. Avenir d'enfants manages the fund under the direction of a 10-member board composed of equal numbers of women and men. The funding partners appoint four members each, while an additional two are jointly determined.

Avenir d'enfants shares the perspective of many community collaborations. The goal is to mobilize stakeholders and residents to leverage assets and build social capital for early childhood at the local

FIGURE 3.5

Avenir d'enfants' comprehensive model of change



level. But Avenir d'enfants operates in a jurisdiction with well-defined service systems in place:

- Education provides learning and care for children aged 5 to 12 years.
- Public health and social services operate through community clinics to promote healthy pre- and postnatal care.

- A network of early childhood providers (Centres de la petite enfance – CPE) serves 60 percent of young children.

Avenir d'enfants is not a substitute for system infrastructure and public investment. While recognizing there is a need for more CPE spaces or other programming, it does not fund direct services.

Rather, it wants service providers to better know the families in their community and how they are being served, and to find out how they could be better served.

“The first step for everyone was to look beyond the boundaries of their own roles and responsibilities and see what else was happening in their communities,” says Lyse Brunet, the CEO of Avenir d’enfants. “We act as a network weaver, connecting people who work with children, including school board directors, CPE supervisors, municipal staff and public health professionals so they can develop a shared understanding of how children live.”

Avenir d’enfants does not have the authority to redirect the human or financial resources of agencies. “What we can do is support a process where service providers can create a strategy. Everyone has some room at the margins to do something differently and they can identify what additional resources are needed to collaborate for improved outcomes for children and families,” explains Brunet.

The challenge for Avenir d’enfants is to facilitate community-based remedies to service challenges that deny a strong start to all of Quebec’s children. In year one (2010–11), 66 communities developed action plans identifying and addressing service challenges. Avenir d’enfants documented the actions, identified and produced support tools and shared the most effective approaches between participants. The experience promotes better practices at the local level and positions communities to formulate recommendations for policy change at the provincial level.

By 2012, Avenir d’enfants will be working with 125 communities. Inspired by the results from local projects using the Early Development Instrument (EDI) to inform their plans, Avenir d’enfants is joining with the Ministère de la santé et des services sociaux (MSSS) to use the EDI in all Quebec kindergarten classes. The EDI assesses the readiness of kindergarten-aged children for school.

Avenir d’enfants also undertakes projects with a province-wide reach. Thirteen projects with post-secondary and training institutions are designed to increase capacity in the sector. For example, St. Jerome CEGEP is adapting the provincial

curriculum for family homecare providers. This initiative has the potential to reach 11,000 family caregivers who are part of the provincial child care system, improving quality in family care homes and outcomes for children.

One of the big questions Avenir d’enfants hopes to answer is how education, health and community agencies can better intervene on behalf of children from disadvantaged homes. Communities are encouraged to identify and overcome barriers to the participation of families who have been traditionally underserved by publicly funded programs.

Behind Avenir d’enfants is a vision and long-standing community action. *A Quebec Crazy for its Children*, released in 1992 by the government’s Working Group on Youth, galvanized a consensus behind prioritizing public resources for children. The report is credited with creating the political space for Quebec’s successful anti-poverty and family support policies. It inspired 1, 2, 3 GO!, community-based projects supported by the Centraide of Greater Montreal^a to improve outcomes for children. In 2002, 1, 2, 3 GO! expanded its scope to become a resource and support agency devoted entirely to early childhood work throughout Quebec.

In 2000, the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation was established, mandated to address the underlying causes of poverty. It developed Quebec enfants, a division within the foundation designed to promote school-readiness. In early 2009, following several months of discussions, and with support from their respective funders, 1, 2, 3 GO! and Quebec enfants merged. Their networks and complementary know-how formed the basis for Avenir d’enfants.

The Chagnon Foundation sees its partnership with government as a tool to implement solutions identified by those who make a daily contribution to the lives of children. The partnership encourages government to become more porous: promoting innovation by allowing new voices to enter the policy making system. Often the people with the most insight are the families who use the services themselves. Those least likely to be asked, but often

^a Quebec’s equivalent to the United Way.

with the most to offer, are those families who do not use them. Avenir d'enfants offers them all a voice.

Building early learning opportunities in Atlantic Canada

Another initiative that partners with governments to maximize leverage is the Early Childhood Development Centres project in Atlantic Canada. The Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation (MWMFF) has agreements with the Governments of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island to create demonstration sites that combine the existing resources of child care, kindergarten, special needs and family supports into early childhood centres aligned with schools. In Newfoundland and Labrador, MWMFF is partnering with the Jimmy Pratt Foundation and the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland to support early childhood research and evaluation in collaboration with governments and communities.

These full service centres showcase best practices in early childhood programming and identify the policy changes needed to remove impediments to access and quality. By demonstrating to policy makers and the public the value of comprehensive service delivery, the projects can help inform the development of effective early childhood systems.

Each of the 14 centres MWMFF supports is unique because each community is different. Families are actively involved in shaping the programming their children receive, but across the region they agree on the same thing: the need for an accessible location that provides educational care for their children that facilitates their work and family life and that provides supports if their child has special needs.

The Health and Education Research Group (HERG), at the University of New Brunswick, and researchers from l'Université de Moncton are evaluating the experiences at the New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island sites for children, families, staff, program managers and service administrators. The findings will inform recommendations for policy action.

Regional differences are considered in site selection. La Boussole, Centre de la petite enfance et de

la famille de Richibucto Inc. opened in Soleil Levant School in the fall of 2010. La Boussole (The Compass) is one of nine early childhood demonstration sites in New Brunswick. Its team of staff delivers programming to parents and children including full- and part-time educational child care, parent and child playgroups, immunization clinics and healthy lifestyle programs, integrated with school-based services.

La Boussole serves Acadian and Francophone families in Kent County, as well as English-speaking families who want their children to attend a French school. Michèle Doiron Campbell, Vice-President of La Boussole and the mother of two preschoolers, welcomes the strong linguistic and cultural identity the program offers. "Minority Francophone children often do not have the opportunity to acquire pre-literacy skills in French before they start school. This centre will help children build a strong linguistic foundation for their ongoing learning and development."

In New Brunswick's Saint John River valley, MWMFF is supporting the Carleton York Victoria network of demonstration sites in small rural communities. Anchored by Step Ahead in Bath, also a government-supported site, lessons learned are quickly transferred to new communities. The school district, Valley Family Resource Program and public health are active partners.

The demonstration sites have continued through a change of government in New Brunswick. One of the first actions of the new government was to consolidate all early childhood programming under a new Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Development. The education ministry continues to confer with stakeholders on the best ways to meet the government's election commitment for 10,000 new early learning and care spaces.

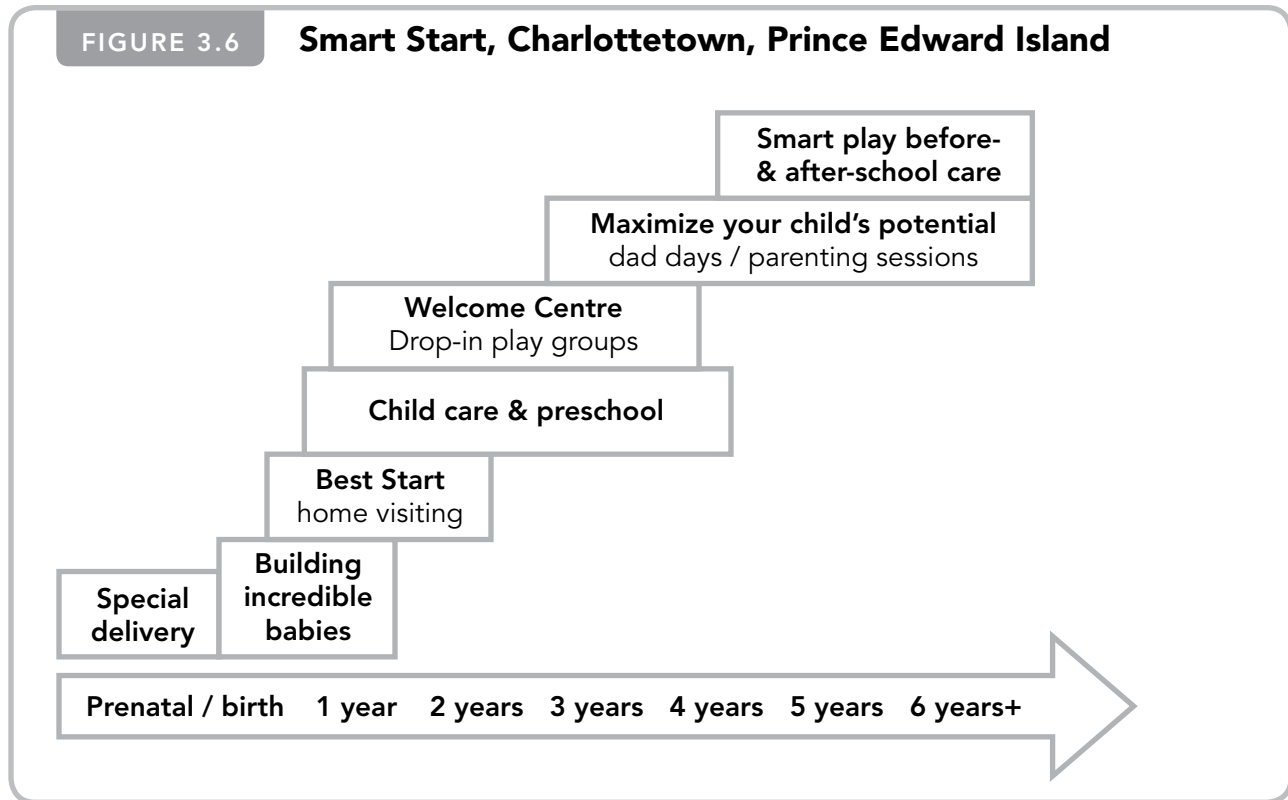
Smart Start Prince Edward Island

*"The Preschool Excellence Initiative is based on the belief that our youngest Islanders deserve the strongest start possible and that government has a societal responsibility to provide for all Island children."*³⁵

Smart Start in Prince Edward Island is another MWMFF-supported project; it is a partnership

FIGURE 3.6

Smart Start, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island



between the Eastern School District, Public Health Nursing, Holland College, the University of PEI and CHANCES, a non-profit community agency. Operating out of four locations, the program reaches out to local families, offering a full-day/full-year child and family program that includes pre- and postnatal resources, nutrition counselling, an early development program for infants and toddlers, school-based preschool for 2- to 4-year-olds and child/parent activities, resources and information.

“This is a tremendous opportunity to model best practice in Prince Edward Island that meets the needs of young children and their families and is solidly based in the most current research,” says Ann Robertson, Executive Director of the CHANCES Family Centre, and manager of the Smart Start centres.

In September 2011, the Smart Start sites joined the Prince Edward Island government’s new Pre-school Excellence Initiative as Early Years Centres. Early Years Centres are the core of the new initiative. They follow a common curriculum, have mandated parent committees and employ a province-wide salary and fee scale.

The MWMFF and the provincial government are working with researchers at Holland College and the University of PEI to monitor the first year transition to Early Years Centres. The evaluation will establish baseline data for the province and inform further development. The next phase of the evaluation will assess the impact of the Preschool Initiative on children, families, early childhood educators, communities and the province.

MWMFF is expanding support for Smart Start to reach families who traditionally do not use early childhood services. Its experiences will inform future policy discussions.

Evaluations from Smart Start already show positive results.³⁶ The site reconfirms the important role of the principal in an integrated setting. This position leads in creating a professional learning community of teachers, early childhood educators and parents. Utilization data indicates more families are being served in ways that they want to be, with a broader range of more flexible and affordable services. Parent satisfaction has also improved. Staff members are more responsive to parent concerns,

listen and act on their suggestions and involve them in programming. Preliminary results show improvements in school readiness for children who regularly participate in Smart Start programming.

In addition to the funding and guidance provided to demonstration sites during start up and operations, the MWMFF uses a combination of methods to support progress on early childhood policy. Joint protocols and agreements clarify roles, responsibilities and expected outcomes between levels of government, the foundation and community partners. Staff and outside expertise are made available to inform policy, programming and research. Joint professional development opportunities are provided for educators and administrators from education, health and the community. Foundation staff members maintain regular contact with community and government officials, and they employ a communications strategy that combines praise and nudge to move the agenda forward.

ENDNOTES

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