

# BUILDING A BETTER FUTURE

A Discussion Paper for Transforming  
Early Years and Child Care in Ontario



**Ministry of Education**

This discussion paper is available at [ontario.ca/morechildcare](https://ontario.ca/morechildcare). To provide feedback to the questions in this discussion paper, please use the Simple Feedback Form posted online at [ontario.ca/morechildcare](https://ontario.ca/morechildcare) or write to us at [CCGE\\_modernization@ontario.ca](mailto:CCGE_modernization@ontario.ca) or by regular mail to:

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We value diverse cultural, linguistic, geographic and ability perspectives, and look forward to advice from all individuals and groups, including those from First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Francophone, and northern, rural and remote communities.

# Message from the Associate Minister of Education (Early Years and Child Care)

Dear Parents, Families, Early Years and Child Care Partners,

As any parent will tell you, raising a child is one of the best jobs in the world. There is no greater joy than watching them grow, develop and reach important milestones along the way.

However, being a parent often means you rely on support from friends, family and professionals to help you on this journey. In addition, for many families, this could also mean child care. We have heard from parents, caregivers, and our early years and child care partners that there simply are not enough affordable and accessible licensed child care spaces for children. Many families are also seeking more flexible programs that meet the needs of their dynamic lives.

We also know that the early years of a child's life are incredibly important to their development and future success. And when the youngest members of our communities succeed, we all benefit.

That is why our government is moving forward on a historic commitment to create 100,000 new licensed child care spaces for children under the age of 4 starting next year. This major transformation will double capacity for this age group increasing access to 40% of children aged 0-4 over the next five years.

We are making a substantial investment in our children's future – and the future of Ontario – to make this possible. In 2015, the new *Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014* came into effect, replacing 70 year old legislation. In addition, we are modernizing Ontario Early Years Child and Family Centres, supporting access to before- and after-school care and have implemented full-day kindergarten provincewide.

We have achieved a great deal, but there is still more to be done. Going forward we are building a renewed early years and child care policy framework to guide the next phase of our work. Strengthening the early years and child care system and advancing this significant growth in our sector will be challenging. We are transforming the way we deliver early years learning and child care in Ontario. We need your input, your advice and your experience to inform our renewed framework and bring our strategy to life.

Our system today is strong because of our positive partnership with the sector, and due to our collaboration and coordination with all of you. Thank you for your support, dedication, and all that you do to shape, educate and care for our early learners. It is with great excitement that I embark on this journey with you and I look forward to working together to build a better future for our children.

Sincerely,



Indira Naidoo-Harris

Associate Minister of Education

# Investing in Our Future

There is no greater resource than our children, which is why their well-being and success is our top priority. Ontario has long recognized the importance of quality learning experiences for our youngest learners. That is why we have made great progress to create a more seamless and connected system to support Ontario's children and families from birth, all the way through to postsecondary education.

*"The child's best interest is always first and foremost."*

– Naaniigaan Abinoojii

Since the early 1960's, research has proven what parents already know – children are born intelligent and curious, with a strong desire to learn about the world around them. We know a child's mind develops the fastest in the early years of life; in fact, a baby's brain builds 700 new neural connections a *second*.<sup>1</sup> These early experiences have a significant and measurable impact on a child's brain for life.

It is important for children to experience the highest-quality early learning experiences. Research shows that these programs strengthen a child's social, emotional, language, literacy, cognitive and self-regulatory skills.<sup>2</sup>

That is why we need to take advantage of this critical window of opportunity and ensure children have positive early childhood education and learning experiences. Studies have shown that early years programs can support children's development in three areas:

**1) Academic Achievement:** children in quality early childhood education programs have stronger cognitive development over the course of their lives, have better grades at school and increased chances of attaining postsecondary education.<sup>3</sup>

*"The positive relation between child care quality and virtually every facet of children's development that has been studied is one of the most consistent findings in developmental science."*

– National Academy of Sciences

- 2) **Health and Well-Being:** children experiencing caring and responsive relationships in early years programs grow up happier, healthier and more resilient.<sup>4</sup>
- 3) **Lifelong Success:** children with positive early childhood educations are more likely to have a highly-skilled job and better lifelong outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

There is a clear economic benefit, too. Economists estimate that for every dollar spent on early childhood education, there is a seven dollar return on investment.<sup>6</sup> We also know that accessible and affordable child care options support economic empowerment for women. Child care allows more parents to participate in the labour market, as well as pursue postsecondary education and training. This helps close the wage gap between genders. These are just some of the many reasons why it is so important to provide young children with the best possible experiences, because money spent on early childhood education is not just money well spent, but is an investment for a better future. Our future.

To get there, we need your help. Making our early years and child care system the best it can be is only possible if we listen closely to your advice and feedback. This discussion paper is a starting point for a conversation with parents, families, educators, caregivers, early years and child care partners and anyone who is interested in the next phase of renewal for early years and child care in Ontario. We want to hear from Ontarians all across our province.

This paper features a set of questions, and your responses will help Ontario create a renewed early years and child care policy framework. This framework will present Ontario's new vision for the early years, based on the feedback it collects through this discussion paper. The framework will describe Ontario's commitment to ensure children have reasonable access to quality early years experiences. It will also list priorities for moving forward, including a strategic plan for Ontario's child care expansion as we build a more accessible, affordable and responsive high-quality early years system.

But before moving on, we want to provide you with some background information about how we arrived at where we are today.

# Building a Better Early Years and Child Care System

Research has guided Ontario's plan to modernize and transform its early years and child care system. Knowing how important the early years are, the government has taken significant steps to improve children's experiences in early years and licensed child care programs over the last decade.

Every child deserves the best possible start in life. Ontario recognizes that families in communities across the province rely on a range of programs that best meet the diverse needs of the child and family including child and family programs, child care, full-day kindergarten, before- and after-school care, recreation programs, cultural programs, camps, child minding and other care arrangements.

## Investing in Ontario's Early Years and Child Care System

Since 2003-04, the Government of Ontario has made significant investments in child care, doubling the number of licensed child care spaces to a total of nearly 390,000 spaces. These spaces are for all children, as Ontario offers special needs resourcing funding and resources to help support the inclusion of children with special needs.

The province has also invested in its infrastructure to increase child care spaces across Ontario. Recently, the province invested \$120 million to create 4,000 new child care spaces in schools for Ontario families. This opens more spaces for children under 4 years old while supporting the use of schools as community hubs.

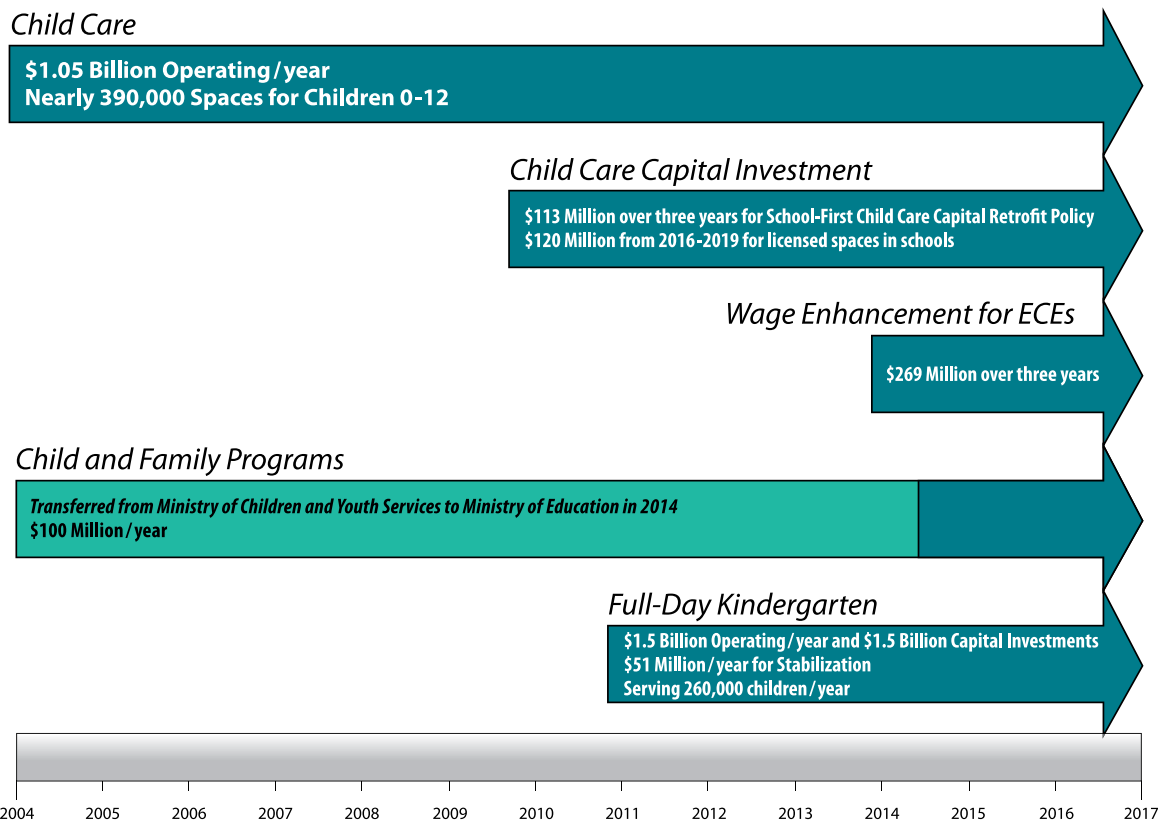
Today's early years and child care programs enrich children's development with quality programming. This is why the province has recognized the importance of Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) in child care settings. We have done this by supporting the establishment of the ECE sector as a body of professionals, and by providing wage enhancements to all staff working in licensed child care settings.

To further support families, the province has invested \$100 million per year in child and family programs across Ontario. To make access to child and family

programs easier, these will soon be transformed and combined into one brand of integrated services so that parents have easier access to programs designed for their needs, located in their communities.

Additional new investments will support the creation of 100,000 new licensed child care spaces over the next five years, beginning in 2017. This funding will build on the investments Ontario has made to-date to double child care funding to more than \$1 billion per year since 2003-2004.

### Total Investments in the Early Years



### Full-Day Kindergarten

In 2010, following broad consultation, the government launched full-day kindergarten. This ground-breaking program combines a full day of instruction led by a teacher and an early childhood educator, with an optional before- and after-school program available to all four- and five-year-olds. Research shows a link between full-day kindergarten and improved literacy and numeracy scores, increased readiness for Grade 1, and better developmental health and well-being for children. The program also quadrupled the number of licensed

child care spaces located in schools, helping communities integrate child care and education in a single location under one roof.

## Child Care Modernization

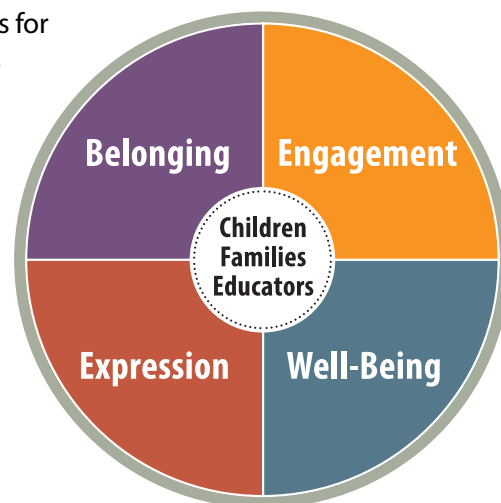
In 2011, the government engaged with its partners to modernize child care, resulting in advice and recommendations that helped to change Ontario's early years and child care system for the better.

The *Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014*, came into effect on August 31, 2015. It was the first new child care legislation in the province in almost 70 years. This Act strengthens compliance, health and safety in early years settings, while helping parents make informed choices about their child care options. To ensure children are receiving the highest-quality care possible, the government also released a dedicated resource guide for early years settings called *How Does Learning Happen?* To emphasize the importance of play- and inquiry-based learning, all licensed child care settings are now required to have a program statement that focuses on creating high-quality environments and experiences for children.

The government also listened to families about fees for child care wait lists. We made a regulatory change to ban this practice, making it easier for parents to access child care. Ontario is the first province in Canada to ban such fees. We also used new regulations to support greater flexibility for age groupings in child care centres. And to provide families with even more options for care, we are expanding before- and after-school care for 6-12 year olds in publicly funded schools where there is sufficient demand starting in September 2017. Because families with children should have a choice of care options available to them.

*“Children are competent, capable of complex thinking, curious, and rich in potential. They grow up in families with diverse social, cultural, and linguistic perspectives. Every child should feel that he or she belongs, is a valuable contributor to his or her surroundings, and deserves the opportunity to succeed. When we recognize children as capable and curious, we are more likely to deliver programs and services that value and build on their strengths and abilities.”*

*– How Does Learning Happen?*



*These four foundations ensure optimal learning and development. Source: How Does Learning Happen? 2014*



## Truth and Reconciliation

Ontario recognizes the value of culturally-appropriate early years and child care programs in First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. As such, the government is committed to working closely with Indigenous partners to support a strong early years and child care system for children living on and off reserve. We have taken steps to improve early years services for Indigenous people as part of Ontario's commitment to reconciliation and have plans to expand child and family programs on-reserve, making supports available in more communities across the province. The number of child care spaces and culturally-relevant programming will also increase for off-reserve communities.



# Building a Better Future

We have made great progress and know there is still more to do. The demand for child care exceeds supply, especially for children aged 0-4. Today, only 20% of Ontario's children have access to licensed child care programs, and access and affordability are significant challenges for families seeking child care and early years programs. Parents who work shifts or have non-traditional schedules struggle to find flexible care. Families in urban areas who are lucky to find a space often pay too much in fees. Families in northern and rural locations often need to travel considerable distances for licensed care. And we know both rural and urban families often find it difficult to find infant and toddler spaces.

## *Building Up: Increase of Child Care Spaces Over Time for Children Aged 0-4*



*(All figures are approximate)*

We need to work harder so that more children have access to quality early years and child care experiences. This is important because positive outcomes for children happen when:

- Educators foster caring relationships with children with positive and responsive interactions;
- Programs provide stimulating materials and experiences that hold children's curiosity and thinking through play-based approaches and;
- Educators have higher levels of education and opportunities to participate in ongoing professional development.

One of the best ways to support children’s learning and development is through positive and rich adult-child and child-child interactions. Research shows that the physical environment, indoors and outdoors, as well as the atmosphere, relationships, materials, and the level of flexibility in rules and schedules, all have a beneficial impact on children’s learning.<sup>7</sup>

Our progress in the early years was made possible only through deep and meaningful engagement with Ontario families and our partners. Once again, we need your help and want you to be a part of the next phase of growth and transformation of our early years and child care system.

## The Commitment to 100,000 Licensed Child Care Spaces

On September 12, 2016, our government made the historic commitment to create **100,000 new licensed child care spaces for infants, toddlers and preschoolers** in Ontario over the next five years starting in 2017. Through this commitment, we are determined to move forward and build on our progress to date. We believe Ontario’s commitment to create an additional 100,000 licensed child care spaces will help more working families find high-quality, affordable care to give our children the best start in life.

Estimates indicate that about 45 to 50% of children in the 0-4 age range are in need of licensed care. Creating 100,000 licensed spaces will double the current capacity of the 0-4 age group, creating spaces for about 40% of children in that age range.



# Renewed Framework for Early Years and Child Care

We believe Ontarians should be able to choose from a range of high-quality early learning and child care programs that work best for their family at a reasonable cost. This is why the Ontario government is committed to working with parents, families and communities to develop a renewed framework for early years and child care, supported by an unprecedented investment in our child care system.

## The Key Pillars

A focus on the following four key pillars will inform our renewed vision for Ontario's early years:

- **Access** to licensed child care and early years programs
- **Responsiveness** to needs of families and children through early years programs and child care in schools, communities, workplaces and at home
- **Affordability** for families that need support
- **Quality** programs that contribute to healthy child development measured through established province-wide outcomes

Together these four key pillars will guide Ontario's renewed early years and child care policy framework and help us to achieve an accessible, responsive, affordable and high-quality child care and early years system which will meet the needs of children and families across the province in every community.

# Key Discussion Questions

Our efforts so far to improve the early years and child care system were possible through our continued partnership with our stakeholders and most importantly, the parents, families and children across Ontario who we serve. Again we're calling on you to help guide the government's renewed child care and early years policy framework and its child care expansion strategy. The feedback we receive from you will also help inform the government's renewed vision for Ontario's children.

We are looking for your feedback on the following questions grouped by our strategic pillars in order to get the best advice from you on how to move forward. In responding to these questions, we ask that you take into account the diverse and unique needs of children and families across the province and consider the needs of Indigenous partners, families with children with disabilities, francophone communities, urban, rural, remote and northern perspectives. Our goal is to create a renewed early years and child care policy framework and a child care expansion strategy that takes a child and family-centred approach that respects equity, inclusiveness and diversity.

## ACCESS

- 1) What does access to early years and child care programs mean to you?
- 2) In your experience, what are the strengths of the current system and what are the biggest barriers to parents accessing licensed early years and child care programs in your community?
- 3) In your experience, what can be done by governments, communities, employers and providers to increase access to early years programs and licensed child care?

## RESPONSIVENESS

- 1) Do parents have the early years and child care options they need?
- 2) What are the strengths of the current system and options available?  
What can be done to provide your family with more choice and flexibility?

## **AFFORDABILITY**

- 1)** What does an affordable child care system look like to you?
- 2)** What are the strengths and weaknesses of the subsidy model in Ontario?\*
- 3)** What are the most important things governments, communities, providers and employers should do to make early years programs in Ontario more affordable?

## **QUALITY**

- 1)** What does a high quality early years or child care program look like?
- 2)** What role should the province play in ensuring high quality early learning and child care programs?
- 3)** How should we measure quality in our early years and child care programs?

Your feedback will help us to develop a vision for a renewed early years and child care policy framework, along with an implementation plan for the creation of 100,000 new licensed child care spaces across the province. We hope that you will answer all or some of these questions to help inform, guide and be a part of this important effort. If you feel there is something important we haven't addressed, we want to hear about that too!

\* Ontario's child care subsidy helps eligible families pay for licensed child care.

# Moving Forward

We owe it to the children of Ontario to give them the best possible care. So we hope to hear from people across the province to ensure a rich and diverse range of advice from as many voices as possible.

The questions in this paper will begin our conversation with parents, families, caregivers and child care and early year's partners. It will be shared online and discussed in regional meetings across the provinces. For more information on engagement sessions in your region please visit [ontario.ca/morechildcare](http://ontario.ca/morechildcare).

On behalf of the government of Ontario, we would like to thank you for taking the time to reflect on these questions and providing your feedback.

## Endnotes

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