

Quality, Affordable and Healthy Child Care in Alberta

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The Issue

The early years of life are a critical period that influence health and social outcomes across the life course (1). Early childhood experiences have the potential to affect well-being moving into adulthood, with many chronic diseases and conditions experienced by adults having modifiable risk factors that first present in childhood (1,2). This is significant given that 44% of Canadian adults over 20 years old have at least 1 of 10 common chronic conditions, including hypertension, diabetes, heart disease and cancer (3). Investments in the early years are essential to addressing this growing burden of disease and ensuring all children have opportunities to thrive (1,4).

Parents and primary caregivers play a vital role in meeting a child's needs during the early years. However, communities and governments are also key to creating wider environments that support families in providing nurturing care (1,4,5). With many parents working outside of the home, a large percentage of children are now accessing community settings like child care centres (6). According to Statistics Canada, between October 2018 and January 2019, 54.1% of Alberta children (aged 0-5) participated in some form of child care (7).

In the province of Alberta, full and part-time centre-based child care is regulated through *Alberta's Child Care Licensing Act* and Regulations. The *Act* gives Alberta Human Services the authority to license, inspect and monitor child care programs in Alberta, while the Regulations set out requirements that license holders must follow to protect the safety and well-being of Alberta children (8). The *Act* and Regulations were established in 2007 and are set to expire in January 2021 (9).

Traditionally, child care in Alberta has tended to focus on provision of care (9,10). However, a growing understanding of the early years and the close link between child care and education has highlighted the importance of quality child care settings that incorporate early learning and promote healthy child development (9,10). Increased investment in quality, affordable child care and early learning and implementation of child care policies to promote healthy eating and active living environments are important strategies to ensure more children in Alberta benefit from such settings.

Quality, Affordable Child Care in Alberta

Quality, affordable child care is essential to the well-being of children and families. Access to quality care and early learning provides children with important opportunities for cognitive and social development and supports working parents (10,11). This support is particularly important for women, who remain the primary caregivers of children, as well as low and middle-income households and single-parent families (10,12). However, it is important to emphasize that *access* to child care is not enough; evidence suggests that young children must have access to *quality* care to ensure positive effects (10, 13,14). Examples of quality indicators in child care include staff training in early childhood education, appropriate wages, consistent caregiving,

prioritizing a curriculum for learning, group size and child ratio, and health, safety and physical environment provisions (15,16). While high quality care has social and cognitive benefits for all children, it may be particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those from poorer households (10,12).

Unfortunately, many families in Alberta struggle to access high quality, affordable child care. According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives' 2020 report on child care fees in Canada, in 2019, median monthly infant fees in Calgary, Edmonton and Lethbridge were \$1,300, \$1075, and \$900, respectively (17). For individuals working minimum wage in Alberta, which is currently set at \$15 per hour, this reflects a high proportion of monthly expenses, over and above fixed costs, such as housing and utilities.

Public Interest Alberta's 2018 Child Care Survey also found that 37.5% of child care operators surveyed had staff with minimal training, with for-profit operators having the highest percentage of minimally trained staff (43.6%). In addition, 56% of operators reported challenges recruiting qualified staff (18). Further, according to the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, only 43% of early childhood educators have a two-year diploma, with not all diplomas related to early learning and child care (19).

Lack of access to quality, affordable child care is concerning for a variety of reasons, including women's participation in the labour force and child development. When families are unable to access formal care, it is often the woman that stays home (10). This, in turn, has negative consequences for the female labour supply and economy (13). Indeed, Statistics Canada's 2018 survey on early learning and child care arrangements found that while most parents do not report difficulties finding child care (64%), difficulties can impact ability to work. Among those reporting difficulties, four in ten parents of children (aged 0-5) said they changed their work schedule and 33% worked fewer hours (20). Difficulties accessing affordable child care may also lead families to choose unregulated, low-quality options (21). This is concerning as low-quality care has been associated with negative outcomes related to child development and has the potential for harm (6,9,13).

In recent years, a number of steps have been taken to improve the quality and affordability of child care in Alberta. For example, the Government of Alberta funded development of *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework*, published in 2014 (22). *Flight* offers an evidence-based curriculum framework for quality early learning and child care, including indicators for well-being. Implementation of the framework is not mandatory within Alberta child care centres at this time, but is available to educators free of charge (23).

Further, in 2017, the provincial government implemented the Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) initiative, an Alberta-wide pilot program that provided child care at a maximum fee of \$25 per day in 22 centres (24,25). In 2018, the program was expanded, with the addition of 100 centres across the province (26). All child care sites participating in the pilot used *Flight* to guide daily practices (23). According to the 2018-2019 evaluation of the pilot, the initiative had a number of benefits. For example, ELCC Centres were found to have fewer non-compliances with licensing regulations per year, on average, than other day centres in Alberta and stakeholders noted enhancements in child care quality due to implementation of *Flight* (27). Despite these benefits, coverage of the program across the province was low overall (17) and in 2019, the government announced plans to discontinue the pilot.

To improve quality, affordable child care in Alberta, many organizations and stakeholders across the province have called for (9,21,25):

- Increased and sustained investment in high quality, affordable child care and early learning across Alberta

- Adoption of Alberta’s Early Learning and Care Framework (*Flight*) in all Alberta child care centres
- Strengthening of education standards and professional development for child care professionals
- Improved wages for child care professionals

Healthy Eating Environments

Healthy food and a positive relationship with food are essential for child growth and development and the early years are a key period for establishing healthy eating behaviours (28,29). Despite this, many of the community settings that children frequent offer energy dense and nutrient poor foods, increasing risk of poor nutrition and diet-related chronic disease moving into adulthood (28). Current data suggests that a considerable portion of young people are consuming diets low in healthy foods, such as fruits and vegetables, and high in unhealthy foods, like sugar-sweetened beverages (30). This has concerning long-term implications for individual health and the economy. For example, a 2016 study found that inadequate consumption of fruits and vegetables costs the Canadian economy \$3.3 billion a year, including 30.5% in direct health care costs and 69.5% in indirect costs due to loss of productivity (31).

Given that children should be provided with a regular meal or snack every two or three hours (32), child care is recognized as an important setting to address nutrition-related issues and promote healthy eating environments. Establishing healthy eating environments involves making healthy eating easy for everyone. Specific to child care, this includes offering healthy food in line with cultural preferences, as well as fostering healthy relationships with food, creating positive food-related messaging and modelling healthy behaviours (28,29,32,33).

To-date, the Alberta Child Care Licensing Regulations do not require child care centres to provide meals. However, if a meal is offered, it must be provided at appropriate times and in sufficient quantities, as well as in accordance with a food guide recognized by Health Canada. According to the Regulations, menus for meals and snacks must also be posted in a prominent location (34). In addition, it is important to note that, in 2008, the Government of Alberta introduced Alberta’s Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth. These are voluntary guidelines that provide child care centres, schools, recreational facilities and community centres with the tools needed to provide healthy, culturally appropriate food (32).

Gaps in current policy may be creating a missed opportunity to promote healthy food. As noted above, Alberta child care centres are not required to provide meals. However, it is imperative to recognize that many Alberta families struggle to provide their children with a healthy diet for a variety of reasons, including income insufficiency (35). Ensuring all children in child care have access to healthy food by making meals mandatory represents a significant opportunity to ensure more children across Alberta benefit from adequate nutrition during the early years.

In addition, research suggests that many child care centres across Alberta are struggling to provide healthy food. According to Alberta’s 2019 Nutrition Report Card on Food Environments for Children and Youth, child care centres in Alberta received a ‘D’ grade for failing to provide adequate availability of healthy food. This grade was based on data indicating that 77% of 64 government-subsidized child care centres surveyed reported following a written healthy eating policy. Yet, only 27% indicated that they always or usually offered an appropriate balance of food (29). As outlined by the Nutrition Report Card, this highlights an interesting disconnect between policy and practice and a potential need for greater policy adherence (29).

To improve the healthy eating environment of Alberta child care centres, policy-related recommendations from Alberta's 2019 Nutrition Report Card and Alberta Health Services include (28,29,36):

- Require all child care centres to provide meals and snacks
- Implement the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth in all child care centres and support the complementary development of provincial standards for menu planning, guidance on quantities and requirements for types of foods offered at each meal and snack
- Provide ongoing support to designated licensing officers so that they have the knowledge and tools to review and approve menus and the food environment. Hold child care settings accountable for meeting these standards through the licensing process
- Consult with Environmental Health Inspectors regarding the potential to include nutrition quality as well as food safety in their criteria for granting licensure
- Mandate nutrition-specific training for all child care professionals
- Advocate for federal funding to enhance child care infrastructure for preparing/offering healthier food

Active Living Environments

Regular physical activity and reduced sedentary behaviour in the early years has many benefits for young people, including enhanced motor skills, psychosocial health and cognitive development (37). Providing children with opportunities for outdoor play is also associated with increased physical activity and reduced sedentary behaviour, as well as benefits to overall health and learning (38). Despite this, only 15% of young children meet recommended 24-hour guidelines for both physical activity and sedentary behaviour (39), and many could be spending more time outside (40). Given the large amount of time children spend in child care, creating active living environments that support physical activity, outdoor play and reduced sedentary behaviour, including limits on screen time, is an important aspect of quality care and can assist children in meeting recommended guidelines.

Specific to child care settings, there are currently no Canadian guidelines for physical activity, sedentary behaviour or screen time (37). However, Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for the Early Years (ages 0-4) recommend that toddlers (1-2 years) accumulate at least 180 mins/day of physical activity at any intensity, including energetic play, spread throughout the day, while preschoolers (3-4 years) are encouraged to accumulate at least 180 mins/day of physical activity, including at least 60 minutes of energetic play. The guidelines also recommend minimizing sedentary time and placing limits on screen time, with no screen time for those under 2 years and no more than 1 hour for children aged 3-4 years (41). Overall, replacing sedentary time with additional energetic play, and trading indoor for outdoor time, while preserving sufficient sleep, can provide greater health benefits (41). As outlined by Vanderloo & Tucker (2018), if these guidelines are considered in relation to an 8-hour day at child care, children (aged 3-4 years) should be provided with a minimum of 120 minutes of physical activity daily, including at least 40 minutes of energetic play, while in care (39).

In relation to active living environments, Alberta's Child Care Licensing Regulations currently provide general recommendations around physical activity and outdoor play (39,40). For example, they indicate that license holders must provide a program that is in keeping with the physical, social, intellectual and emotional needs of children (34). Further, they outline some specifications for indoor and outdoor play space and materials (34,39). However, specific time requirements for physical activity, outdoor play and limits on sedentary behaviour, including screen-time, are not provided (40). The Regulations also allow license holders to have smaller play spaces compared to many other provinces across Canada (39,40).

Reviewing Alberta's Child Care Licensing Regulations in light of existing research on active living environments in child care highlights potential for improvement. For example, a 2015 study found that children (19-60 months) from licensed Alberta child care centers spend the majority of their time in child care engaging in sedentary and light physical activity (37). Additional Canadian studies have reported low levels of moderate to vigorous physical activity and high levels of sedentary time among preschoolers in center-based child care (42,43). Research also highlights benefits of large play spaces and specific characteristics of the outdoor play environment (e.g. less fixed playground equipment, use of natural materials) for the promotion of physical activity and children's play (38).

In the literature, examples of policy-related opportunities to improve active living environments in the child care setting include (37-39,44-46):

- Setting specific standards and time requirements for physical activity, outdoor play and sedentary behaviour, including screen-time, based on age
- Ensuring appropriate physical activity settings for indoor and outdoor play. In particular, making improvements to outdoor play spaces (e.g. increasing amount of space required per child, use of natural materials)
- Incorporating structured and unstructured physical activity into daily routines and curriculum
- Improving staff training, education, and resources to support policies and practices aimed at increasing physical activity, outdoor play and reduced sedentary behaviour

Benefits to Taking Action

Quality, affordable child care and early learning that promotes healthy eating and active living environments has significant benefits for public health.

- High quality child care is related to positive outcomes for child cognitive and social development and can improve school related achievement and behaviour, particularly for vulnerable populations (6,10,12,13).
- Access to quality, affordable child care and early learning has potential to benefit female labour force participation, poverty reduction and the economy (10,12,13). According to a 2017 report from the Conference Board of Canada, expansion of early childhood education and care across Canada could lift thousands of families – many single-parent households – out of poverty, with benefits of the program exceeding the costs (12).
- The World Health Organization has identified the child care setting as an important location for the promotion of healthy weights and the prevention of childhood obesity (47).
- Interventions to promote healthy eating and physical activity in the child care setting have shown promise in improving outcomes related to physical activity, movement proficiency, healthy eating and diet quality, though more research is needed at the policy level (45-49). Interventions appear most successful when they are comprehensive and multi-component, targeting a combination of nutrition, physical activity and sedentary behaviour (45,47,49).
- Encouraging outdoor play has significant benefits for children. Children who engage in outdoor play tend to be more active and less sedentary (38,50). Nature-based learning is also associated with positive benefits, such as higher test scores and greater enjoyment of the learning process (38,51).

Considerations

The early learning and child care system in Alberta and related policies must reflect cultural diversity and the role of Indigenous families as partners in early learning and child care (9,11). Call to Action 12 in the Truth and Reconciliation Act calls on all levels of government to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families (52). Further, in 2018, the Government of Canada developed the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework, which represents the Government of Canada and Indigenous people's work to co-develop a transformative Indigenous framework that reflects the unique cultures, aspirations and needs of First Nations, Inuit and Metis children across Canada (53). The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta supports the vision of the Framework and has presented a number of recommendations to acknowledge Indigenous peoples in the *Child Care Licensing Act* and Regulations (9). These recommendations include acknowledging the role of Indigenous peoples as partners in developing early learning and child care in the preamble to the *Act*, providing early learning and education through recognized Indigenous colleges and universities, and providing early child educators with education and professional learning in Indigenous studies (9).

Further, it is important to note that accreditation has been available to licensed child care centers in Alberta since 2004, with revised standards released in December 2013 (54). The aim of the accreditation process has been to promote excellence in child care, with standards focusing on outcomes related to child, staff, families and communities. In terms of nutrition, the revised standards briefly highlight the need to respect children's dietary requirements for individual and cultural needs. However, physical activity is referenced in more detail. Specifically, Standard 2.2 highlights the need for programs to promote physical wellness in all children and incorporate physical literacy in everyday programming, and includes several indicators related to physical activity and sedentary behaviour (54,55). In winter 2020, the Government of Alberta announced plans to cancel the accreditation program (56).

Finally, while interventions to promote nutrition and physical activity in the child care setting have shown some promise, it is important to note that more research is needed in this area. This is particularly the case in terms of understanding impacts at the policy-level and in real world settings (39,45,48,49). Moreover, despite the presence of guidelines and frameworks to promote quality in child care, many centres struggle to implement recommended policies and practices (29,48). With this in mind, additional research and support is needed to understand effective strategies for improving implementation of related policies and practices in this setting (48,49).

Priorities for Action

- Call for increased and sustained investment in quality, affordable child care and early learning across Alberta
- Endorse the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta's Recommendations for Improving Alberta's Child Care Licensing Legislation
- Support updates to *Alberta's Child Care Act* and Regulations to improve healthy eating and active living environments in child care settings
- Call for increased investment to assist child care professionals in promoting nutrition and physical activity in their centres

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