Exploring the Co-Design Process of an Early Years Policy Framework Prototype from a Municipal Perspective

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Fanshawe College Pressbooks
London Ontario



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Acknowledgements

This open book has been written by Céline Bourbonnais-MacDonald, Barbara Jackson, and Early Childhood Interns at Fanshawe College in partnership with the OER Design Studio and the Library Learning Commons at Fanshawe College in London, Ontario.

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This project was a collaboration between the author and the team in the OER Design Studio at Fanshawe. The following staff and students were involved in the creation of this project:

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- Wilson Poulter, *Copyright*
- Samantha Diamond & Alexandra Hawkins, *Citation Support*

AI Statement

The authors used AI in Chapter 7 to assist with researching provincial and territorial bilateral agreements and with analyzing information related to the responsiveness pillar, with all outputs verified by the authors.

Grammarly was used to support grammar, spelling, and clarity, and the final content was reviewed by the authors.

Anthropic. (2024). *Claude 4.6 Sonnet* (large language model) [Artificial intelligence]. https://claude.ai

Grammarly, Inc. (n.d.). Grammarly Edu [Writing assistance software]. https://www.grammarly.com

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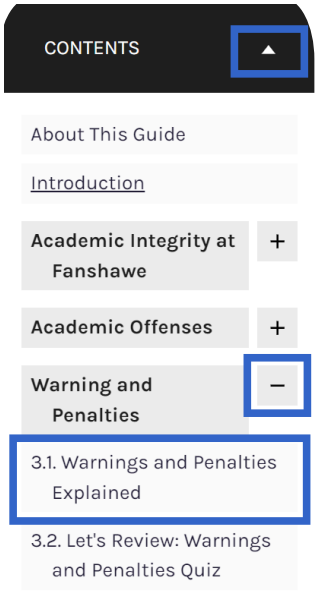

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Land Acknowledgement & Calls to Action



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Through our journey in researching the co-design of an Early Years policy framework prototype, we had the opportunity to engage in meaningful community events and cultural teachings to help expand our worldviews, lenses, and perspectives as humans living on these lands. We would like to acknowledge the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabek, the Lenape, and the Attawandaron peoples as the original inhabitants and caretakers of these lands where we live, learn, play, educate, and grow relationships. We would also like to acknowledge the many Urban Indigenous peoples who come from many Nations and live in and around the regions where Fanshawe College campuses are located. Thank you for your generosity in sharing your teachings to help bring a deeper awareness to the Early Years community about the importance of responsiveness in Early Years education and care.

During the many years we conducted research, collaborated with community partners, and brought the data to life through writing, we were also living through the worldwide pandemic caused by COVID-19. Fortunately, we were honoured to participate in many Indigenous Solidarity Days, held at the Green in Wortley Village, and to engage in the Strawberry Festival and Mini Powwow at Nshwaasnangong Child Care and Family Centre. The faculty and students collaborating on this project shared their settler and Indigenous lenses during weekly meetings and at community tables. Through these cultural teachings and experiences, we came to understand the importance of ongoing relationship-building between Indigenous-led organizations and settler organizations.



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As educators and students working with children, families, and communities, it was our responsibility to reflect on whose voices were present during the research process to ensure multiple lenses were embedded in the perspectives shared. Land Acknowledgements were a common practice at our weekly meetings, alongside sharing upcoming Indigenous-led events, professional learning opportunities, and highlighting Indigenous artists and business owners. It is our hope that non-Indigenous Early Years professionals will take the time to learn about Indigenous led services in the community to help inform their practice, working with children, families, and communities.

As Canada continues to implement the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care plan, we encourage all levels of government to ensure the following Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada are key priorities for a universal Early Years system.

10. We call on the federal government to draft new Aboriginal education legislation with the full participation and informed consent of Aboriginal peoples. The new legislation would include a commitment to sufficient funding and would incorporate the following principles:
    i. Providing sufficient funding to close identified educational achievement gaps within one generation.
    ii. Improving education attainment levels and success rates.
    iii. Developing culturally appropriate curricula.
    iv. Protecting the right to Aboriginal languages, including the teaching of Aboriginal languages as credit courses.
    v. Enabling parental and community responsibility, control, and accountability, similar to what parents enjoy in public school systems.
    vi. Enabling parents to fully participate in the education of their children.
    vii. Respecting and honouring Treaty relationships.
11. We call upon the federal government to provide adequate funding to end the backlog of First Nations students seeking a post-secondary education.
12. We call upon the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

CHAPTER 1: SETTING THE STAGE FOR AN EARLY YEARS POLICY FRAMEWORK PROTOTYPE: RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Chapter Outline

1.0 Learning Objectives
1.1 Overview
1.2 Open Educational Resource – Early Years Policy Framework Prototype for London/Middlesex
1.3 Relevance to Early Years Professionals
1.4 Macro Level Advocacy
1.5 Relevance for Children and Families
1.6 Relevance for Communities and Governing Bodies
1.7 Resources for Further Exploration



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1.0 Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

- Develop an understanding of the influence of policy on social programs and services with a focus on the child, family, and early education and care professionals.
- Describe the range of community resources, from the neighbourhood level to the national level, that support linkages to quality and well-being for families and the early childhood community.
- Create and engage in partnerships with families, communities, colleagues, interdisciplinary professionals, authorities and child service agencies to advocate for quality Early Years and child care programs and services.

1.1 Overview

After many years of community networking and collaboration amongst Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) leaders in the London/Middlesex region of Ontario, there appeared to be a need to streamline this important work to support the various key stakeholders, including families, Early Years professionals, licensed child care operators, and community partners. Through supportive collaboration with the City of London and the County of Middlesex, the terms of reference for various networks were defined, and services were provided to meet the needs of the aforementioned stakeholders.

Licensed Child Care Network (LCCN) is a group of licensed child care operators/owners, Early Years professionals, and community partners promoting the importance of early childhood education and care since the 1990s. Over the years, this network has been instrumental in educating the community of London/Middlesex about the importance of early learning and licensed child care. Many promotional campaigns were established to support families' quest for quality licensed child care. LCCN advocated for ECEC by inviting elected officials to their organizations for tours to support their understanding of the value of licensed child care. During the COVID-19 pandemic, LCCN was instrumental in supporting child care operators by meeting weekly to provide an opportunity for collaboration with public health professionals, municipal child care managers, special needs resourcing, school board representatives, and pre-service training institutions to discuss the implementation of policies and to advocate for necessary provisions to meet the needs of children and families in the region. LCCN's long history of promoting ECEC and advocating for changes to the Early Years system provided a base of strength to guide the ECEC community through the pandemic, followed by the transition to the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreement. In this resource, ECEC will be referred to as Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) to reflect the current Canadian context.

LCCN
Licensed Child Care Network

Review LCCN's website at the following link: Licensed Child Care Network

The Quality Child Care Coordinating Committee (QCCCC) was a network of Early Years professionals meeting regularly to discuss quality indicators for the Early Years communities in the City of London and the surrounding counties. The QCCCC was rebranded from the Quality Child Care Project (QCCP) in 2013. This committee began facilitating Raising the Bar for London and the surrounding counties in 2007. Raising the Bar was a peer-reviewed quality assurance program established by Affiliated Services for Children and Youth (ASCY). This framework for best practices guided child care operators in delivering high-quality services for children and families in the City

of Hamilton. It was adopted throughout Ontario in multiple Early Years settings (Chase, 2017). With funding from the City of London in 2014, the QCCCC embarked on visionary planning with the Early Years community to support Early Years professionals in enhancing their practice with children and families. After a community vote established an implementation committee, strategic planning was set in motion to define what quality in the Early Years might look like for the London/Middlesex region. The 2016 – 2018 strategic plan for QCCCC included the important work of supporting Early Years professionals with ongoing education to enhance early learning and care practice with children and families (QCCCC, n.d.). By 2017, QCCCC had rebranded to Strive. Strive has become a provincial leader in facilitating various learning opportunities to enhance professional practice in ELCC. Strive partners with multiple community networks to ensure consistent progression of pedagogical leadership in ELCC through accountability to an advisory committee, a lead organization (Childreach), and the municipalities. Elgin and Oxford counties joined London/Middlesex in supporting Strive as it engages and supports Early Years professionals in these regions.

Strive | Leading Inspired Learning

Review Strive's website at the following link: Strive

During the period of development of Strive's 2020 strategic plan [PDF] in 2019, several Honours Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Leadership (ECL) students from Fanshawe College joined Dr. Celine Bourbonnais-MacDonald in her research to investigate the co-construction of an Early Years Policy Framework Prototype for the ELCC community in London/Middlesex. The students engaged with community partners, including LCCN and Strive, to gather data from key stakeholders to learn more about the varied perspectives to inform Early Years policy for the region. Data was collected through interviews, focus groups, audio/video recordings, and Town Halls to construct and deconstruct prototypes to inform and support ELCC policy development in London/Middlesex.

The research team had to be creative during the COVID-19 pandemic and find ways to meaningfully engage with the ELCC community in London/Middlesex to continue to build relationships. The LCCN Advocacy Subcommittee met weekly and was joined by Dr. Bourbonnais-MacDonald and research students through their internships and related coursework during the summer and fall of 2022. This partnership collaborated to host three LCCN town halls, two held online during the pandemic and the third town hall held at Fanshawe College, as well as online for those not able to come to the college campus. This approach provided a platform for perspective sharing amongst elected officials, employers, child care providers, Early Years professionals, families, and students. Much of this work has informed the research process to aid in the understanding of various perspectives from key stakeholders in ELCC in the London/Middlesex region. Additionally, the LCCN Advocacy Subcommittee collaborated through multiple meetings with Members of Parliament, Ministers of Provincial Parliament, City Councillors, the Mayor of London, the Ontario Minister of Education, and the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development of Canada.

The research students worked alongside community Mentors from LCCN and Childreach during summer internships to learn more about leadership roles in ELCC and to engage in networking opportunities. These internships also included time for data collection and analysis to inform each prototype, with the intent to share back to the community to support the co-construction of ELCC policy. Discussions were held to determine the most effective way to share the research findings and learnings discovered over the past several years. Chapter 3 will provide more on the methodology that was followed to construct the three Early Years policy framework prototypes.



To learn more about the work conducted by the student interns, access the blog, Our ECEC World, Our ECEC Story.

1.2 Open Educational Resource - Early Years Policy Framework Prototype for London/Middlesex

The development of an Open Educational Resource (OER) to disseminate the information in an accessible and evolving format quickly became the most ethical and interactive option for sharing the experience of working on an Early Years policy prototype and its co-construction. It was seen as an inclusive way to share what was learned and further our understanding of policy-making in an ELCC system. The following excerpt demonstrates the value of an OER for student engagement and for community solutions.

> *Because anyone, including students, can be involved in the creation, revision, and distribution of OER, instructors can also use these resources to engage in "open pedagogy," assignments that leverage OER to create more meaningful learning experiences. Traditionally, students work hard on assignments that will be handed in to their instructor, graded, and then never seen again. Instead, instructors might, for example, ask students to edit OER for redistribution, or have students openly license their own work for use by future students, thereby allowing their work to be shared with a more meaningful audience. This positions students as active participants in scholarly knowledge-sharing (Munro et al., 2016).*

Significant community partnerships were developed during the years of mentoring, research, and data collection between the research team and leaders in the ELCC sector. This resulted in the Early Childhood Leadership students graduating with an enhanced knowledge of community collaboration, vision development, and a deeper understanding of the co-construction of Early Years policy. These future local leaders, along with their faculty, wanted to share back the knowledge gained in a meaningful and resourceful way to support the continued growth of Early Years professionals in London/Middlesex. This experiential learning also provided the students with an opportunity to see Early Years leadership and its many facets in practice.

1.3 Relevance to Early Years Professionals

Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) and Child Care Practitioners in Ontario work with children between the ages of birth to twelve years of age. They support and nurture children's learning in licensed child care, Early ON and family centres, in kindergarten classrooms, or work as educational assistants. These Early Years professionals guide children based on their many years of training, research, reflective practice, and interprofessional collaboration. The province of Ontario's Ministry of Education curricular documents, the College of Early Childhood Educators, and legislation through multiple Acts support Early Years professionals in their practice with young children.

These accountabilities are multifaceted and require an extensive knowledge base to implement ethical and professional practice with young children. Children and families who engage with Early Years programming present various social locations with the human purpose to feel a sense of belonging. Early years professionals must be equipped to provide accountable spaces where all children and families feel welcome and their worldviews are accepted.



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What does this mean for Early Years professionals? They must be open-minded, open-hearted, reflective practitioners, strong advocates, and be engaged in ongoing learning. These professionals need to have multiple competencies and skills, including an ability to lead in various roles and contexts. The College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) in Ontario provides ample resources to support professional practice.

cece college of early childhood educators

Review the following link for the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) to learn more about available resources to support and enhance professional practice.

1.4 Macro Level Advocacy

Ontario RECEs and Child Care Practitioners engage in silent levels of advocacy as described by MacDonald et al. (2015) by embedding curricular documents into their practice and by RECEs being registered with the College of Early Childhood Educators . Both RECEs and Child Care Practitioners engage in meso levels of advocacy in their daily practice through efforts to support families in acquiring additional resources to ensure success for children in Early Years programs (MacDonald et al., 2015). Historically, Early Years professionals have been distanced from advocacy at the macro level by being disconnected from social policy. According to MacDonald et al. (2015), pre-service training programs do not typically include courses related to policy or professionalism as a method for critically assessing the Early Years professionals' role in the larger political system tasked with implementing policy. In today's current context in the province of Ontario, Early Years professionals need to have political acumen to effectively navigate the system in which they practice.

The *Early Childhood Educators Act* 2007 was passed by the Ontario government after years of Early Years professionals advocating for recognition of the important work of ECEs across the province (CECE, 2023a). The College of Early Childhood Educators was fully operational by 2009, requiring any educator working in the Early Years with appropriate qualifications to become registered with the College of Early Childhood Educators.

cece college of early childhood educators

CECE Purpose and Mandate

The College regulates the profession of early childhood education by establishing and enforcing:

- Registration requirements;
- Ethical and professional standards for RECEs;
- Requirements for continuous professional learning; and
- Complaints and discipline process for professional misconduct, incompetence and incapacity.

(CECE, 2023b)

With the introduction of full-day kindergarten in Ontario, RECEs became part of the Early Years team in kindergarten classrooms. This required many RECEs to be trained, recruited and replaced in newly vacant positions in licensed child care as many RECEs moved into positions in the school boards. The introduction of the *Child Care and Early Years Act*, 2014, updated legislation and aided the implementation of curricular documents such as *How Does Learning Happen?: Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) and *The Kindergarten Program*

(2016). The professionalization of the Early Years in Ontario led to an enhanced profile and the implementation of the silent level of advocacy by RECEs (MacDonald et al., 2015).

The fast pace of these changes encouraged RECEs to engage in ongoing professional learning, resulting in increased awareness of advocacy for the sector. The increased accountability to the CECE and the Ministry of Education through the *Child Care and Early Years Act*, 2014, motivated RECEs to advocate for better working conditions. Many local and provincial networks collaborated to voice concerns around the increasing level of expertise required to work as an RECE in Ontario. Discussions and consultations were held to advocate at the macro level in hopes of sharing the educator perspective with policymakers. An awareness around social policy was required to inform advocates in their efforts to bring about change. It is our hope to enhance awareness of the co-construction of social policy, including the voice of the RECE and Early Years professionals, when creating policy that directly impacts the important daily work in ELCC.



Child Care Matters to Everyone: A Snapshot of Child Care in Ontario (2015) [PDF] by the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) to learn more about key stakeholder perspectives during the transition years when the Early Years moved to the Ministry of Education in Ontario.

1.5 Relevance for Children and Families

Early years professionals are at the heart of the daily work with children and families. RECEs and child care practitioners collaborate with families to ensure nurturance, care, and educational opportunities are provided for children in Early Years settings. Children and families enter the Early Years' settings with varied lived experiences, so educators need to be equipped to support and guide through empathy and compassion. Knowledge of inclusive practices are key in ensuring all children and families feel a sense of belonging in Early Years settings. Early years professionals must be aware of resources available in their community to support families as they guide their young children. Time and space needs to be allotted to build relationships and embed the perspectives of children and families in diverse learning spaces.

The perspective of the family is crucial in understanding more about a child to ensure each child feels a sense of belonging and to support their holistic wellness in the Early Years. Early years professionals engage in multiple forms of communication to learn and understand more about each child and family. These perspectives are instrumental in informing Early Years programs about the needs of a child and their family. Some of the relevant key pillars discovered through the research that are necessary for children and families to engage wholly in an Early Years setting include accessibility, affordability, inclusivity, quality, responsiveness and relationship building.



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LEARN MORE

Read and reflect on the questions asked in the following Practice Guideline to understand more about the importance of building responsive relationships with children and families in the Early Years profession. Practice Guideline Supporting Positive Interactions with Children [PDF]

Watch a video to learn more about what families value in Early Years care and education for their children on page 1.5 Relevance for Children and Families of the online version of this OER.

Families provide unique perspectives to inform policy in ELCC that supports the needs of children and their family

unit. The co-construction of social policy includes the voices of key stakeholders to ensure gaps are filled in service provision. Families are the users of Early Years services; therefore, they provide the best resources to inform policy through the lens of determining what is most beneficial to ensure a sense of belonging and well-being for all children and families.

1.6 Relevance for Communities and Governing Bodies

Communities are unique and complex, involving multiple key stakeholders collaborating to envision a future at a local level and at a broader level encompassing governing bodies. Ontario released a discussion paper, *Modernizing Child Care in Ontario* in 2012 to share its vision for the Early Years in the province. Consultations were held across the province with key stakeholders providing feedback to the Ministry of Education to envision what the Early Years might look like in Ontario under the guidance of its new Ministry.

LEARN MORE

Read Ontario's Discussion Paper, *Modernizing Child Care in Ontario (2012)*, to learn more about Ontario's Ministry of Education's vision for the Early Years during the transition period when shifting the Early Years portfolio from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services to the Ministry of Education.

Watch the following interview with the late Dr. Charles Pascal, whose position of Early Years Special Advisor on Early Learning for Ontario during this transition period was instrumental in the professionalization of the Early Years sector in Ontario, on page 1.6 Relevance for Communities and Governing Bodies in the online version of this OER.

Ontario has been professionalizing the Early Years sector for over 15 years by introducing full-day kindergarten, the College of Early Childhood Educators, the *Child Care and Early Years Act (CCEYA)* (Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014), and through the introduction of Early Years curriculum frameworks. After the release of the *Modernizing Child Care in Ontario – Discussion Paper in 2012*, Ontario moved forward with its plan and developed its Early Years policy framework in 2013.

LEARN MORE

Read the Ontario Early Years Policy Framework for an overview of Ontario's progress in seeing its vision through to fruition under the Ministry of Education: Ontario Early Years Policy Framework.

During these years of transition in Ontario, the City of London established its own vision for children, youth and

families in the region. The Child and Youth Network (CYN) was established in the City of London to bring together over 170 agencies servicing children, youth and families to envision a better future for its diverse communities.

CYN Vision

Everything CYN partners do is guided by our shared vision:

"Happy, healthy children and youth today: caring, creative, responsible adults tomorrow."

(CYN, n.d.-b)

The CYN provided guidance for multiple subcommittees and networks to find ways to embed the voices of local communities in their mission to serve children and youth. The results of these collaborations were embedded into the work of the CYN, resulting in the goal of implementing neighbourhood hubs throughout the region to connect families with service providers for a more seamless and inclusive approach. Establishing a family-centred service system was part of this vision, being one of the key priority areas of the CYN (CYN, 2023). This vision of providing schools, child care, and neighbourhood hubs in one location in each neighbourhood matched the vision Dr. Charles Pascal spoke to in the video shared in this chapter.



Review the Child and Youth Network website to learn more about the key priorities and incredible community work taking place in London/Middlesex: Child & Youth Network

Family-Centred Service for London/Middlesex

Middlesex County formed the Middlesex Children's Services Network (MCSN) with the goal of integrating agencies providing services for children and families in the Middlesex region (Middlesex County, 2023).

View the core functions of the Family Centred Service System.

The vision of MCSN is shared below.

> Middlesex County, where children and families reach their full potential within their own unique, rural community.
>
> (Middlesex County, 2026)

Many agencies supporting MCSN were also involved with the CYN in London. The City of London and the County of Middlesex ensured municipal representatives were collaborating within both networks to build a seamless Early Years system for families in urban and rural settings. Early years networks and committees in London/Middlesex are supported by both municipalities to raise awareness of key issues impacting children, youth, and families across the region. This meaningful work provides an excellent example of Early Years community collaboration in action.

Chapter two will discuss in detail the evolution of the Early Years vision from the global and Canadian perspectives. This introductory chapter provides a glimpse into the provincial and municipal visions for the Early Years as they relate to the context of Ontario and London/Middlesex. An understanding of the local context is important when reviewing the research data that informed the construction of the six key pillars discussed in the following chapters.

1.7 Resources for Further Exploration

Additional Resources

- Childreach
- Familyinfo.ca
- Government of Ontario. Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014
- Ontario. Early Childhood Educators Act, 2007

CHAPTER 2: SETTING THE CONTEXT OF A SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO CANADA EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE SYSTEM

Chapter Outline

2.0 Learning Objectives
2.1 Early Learning and Child Care Around the Globe
2.2 Canada's Focus on a Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care System (ELCC)
2.3 Ontario's Bi-lateral Agreement(s) with the Federal Government
2.4 London-Middlesex's Delivery of its Early Learning and Child Care System
2.5 What Does This All Mean to Policy?
2.6 Reflective Activity



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2.0 Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the key factors within the current social context that impact Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) systems.
- Identify the similarities and differences of ELCC systems at the global level.
- Outline the similarities and differences between the ELCC systems across Canada.
- Analyze how the current Early Learning and Child Care system in the province of Ontario reflects the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC).
- Evaluate through reflection the current status of the ELLC system within a specific municipality/region through specific lenses (parent, student, EY professional, child care provider, government).

Note: Canada uses the term Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) when referring to its Early Years system; in Europe and other countries, the term used is Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). As the research for the Early Years policy framework prototype is bound within the province of Ontario, the authors will use ELCC.

2.1 Early Learning and Child Care Around the Globe

While there has been an evolution in the implementation of ELCC systems since the early 2000s, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has made governments around the globe more aware of the urgent need for accessible, sustainable, and quality child care for all of their children. How countries reacted to the pandemic has varied and brought closer attention to changing demographics, global and individual countries' economics, and social trends (OECD, 2001, 2017, and 2021b).

The following **demographics** have impacted and continue to influence ELCC systems:

- aging populations in economically rich countries, while also seeing lower birth rates;
- increased number of single-parent households;
- migration of world populations due to political, climate, and sustainable living crises.



"ELCC Influences" by Freddy Vale, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

ELCC systems are also influenced by the **economics** within a country and across the globe. This includes:

- more families with dual-earning parents striving to be financially sound and able to provide for their children;
- mothers wishing to continue to be part of the workforce after the birth of their children;
- countries seeking added workforces to support their economies;
- countries continue to underspend on ELCC systems, making access, affordability and quality more difficult to attain.

Finally, **social trends**, which are at times the most difficult to measure, anticipate, and be able to respond to, influence not only the ECEC system itself but also how it is perceived. One must consider:

- how children and their rights are perceived within the makeup of their family, their community, and their country;
- how families see their roles and the role of governments in supporting their children;
- how research has further informed the development, growth, and well-being of children, recognizing the

uniqueness of each child and their right to have a safe and nurturing environment in which to live.

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the gaps within ELCC systems globally and in Canada. Canada's ELCC system has become an area of focus, looking at creating a system available across the country, in all provinces and territories, for all children and families who wish to have access.

LEARN MORE

The Starting Strong OECD iLibrary is a collection of reports on international information on early childhood education and care.

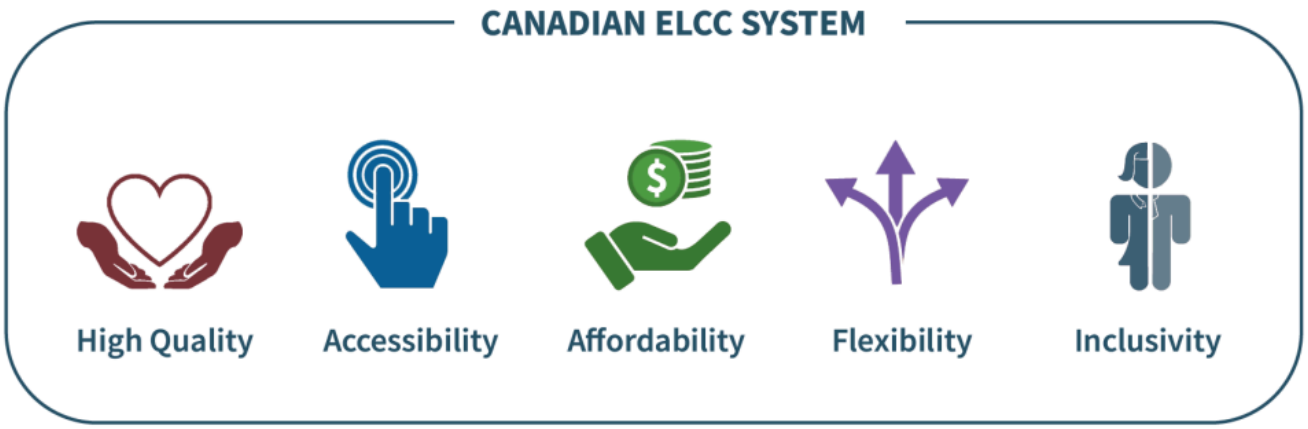
2.2 Canada's Focus on a Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care System (ELCC)

Canada, similar to other countries around the globe, has been working on establishing an ELCC system from coast to coast that will meet the needs of all children and families who wish to access early learning and child care. Due to Canada's governmental structure, it is important to note that provinces and territories have jurisdiction over the ELLC system within their borders as part of their responsibilities, often seen as part of a ministry or department of education. The national government of Canada has used a consensus approach over many years to establish an ELLC system, which has resulted in a variety of approaches in the provinces and territories. However, the COVID-19 pandemic helped emphasize the gaps and difficult paths that parents and families must navigate to access affordable, dependable, quality child care. This attempt has often been described as a "patchwork" approach, with end results far from meeting the needs of children and families.



"Canadian Provinces and Territories" by Anchjo, CC BY-SA 3.0.

The 2017 federal government's document, *Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework*, helped establish bilateral agreements that helped begin a more focused process on constructing a national or pan-Canadian ELCC system. They identified key indicators that would support the long-term vision of the Canadian ELCC system, a system "where all children can experience the enriching environment of quality learning and child care that supports children's development to reach their full potential" (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2017, p. 1). The key indicators identified were: 1) high quality, 2) accessibility, 3) affordability, 4) flexibility, and 5) inclusivity. Provinces and territories identified areas of focus within these key indicators and, with added federal funding to supplement their own provincial funding, worked on meeting their goals and outcomes that reflected the unique needs of their own ELCC systems over 4 years.



"Key Indicators" by Freddy Vale & Andrew Stracuzzi, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

This first set of bilateral agreements between the federal and provincial/territorial governments has led to a second set negotiated and affirmed in 2021-22. These agreements are at the heart of the current ELCC systems in each province and territory and are supported by the 2023 *Canada Early Learning and Child Care Act* (2024).

The current bilateral agreements continue to work on establishing a quality early learning and child care environment for all Canadian children, using the key indicators identified in the federal government's 2017 *Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework*. These agreements represent each province/territory focused on specific areas of their ELCC system, combining their vision, goals and outcomes while coordinating key aspects of the ELCC system across the country. Similar to 2017, each jurisdiction must report on its progress to ensure ongoing financial support through 2026.

This second set of bilateral agreements continues to seek increased access through more child care spaces at an affordable cost of $10 per day for all children. Access to affordable child care spaces is at the heart of these agreements. While the other key indicators continue to be part of these agreements, it is important to note that the focus is very much on increasing the number of child care spaces and keeping the cost affordable for families across the country. This has created several issues, which will be discussed in the next chapter. It explains the creation of an Early Years policy framework prototype based on the needs of two municipalities in southwestern Ontario.

LEARN MORE

Review the 2017 federal government's document, *Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework*

It is important to note that Canada shared its first *Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework* (IELCC) in 2018. This document was co-constructed with Indigenous peoples and the Government of Canada over many years. It acknowledges the right of Indigenous Peoples, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis to govern their ELCC, which reflects their varied cultures, languages and aspirations for their children.

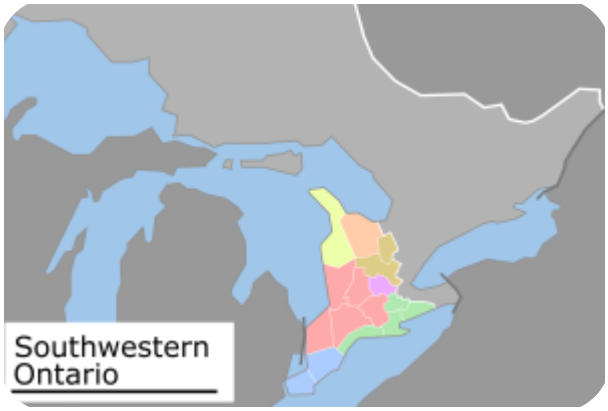


Review the *Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework (IELCC)*

Also, the Government of Canada (2025b) signed what is described as an "Asymmetrical agreement on the Canada-wide early learning and child care component" for 2012 to 2026 with the province of Québec. This recognizes that this province has had its own ELCC system since 1997 and respects its understanding of the current needs of Québécois families. The focus is on adding to the existing number of affordable spaces while increasing the number of ECEs and improving working conditions and wages.

2.3 Ontario's Bi-lateral Agreement(s) with the Federal Government

The province of Ontario has had a bilateral agreement with the federal government since 2017 to support its Early Years system. While the province is responsible for the delivery of an ELCC system, it is the only province in the country that delegates the operationalizing of the system to its 444 municipalities. Many of these municipalities coordinate their efforts and share the management of the day-to-day work of the ELCC system within their areas.



Map by SelfieCity, CC 1.0.

Before the first bilateral agreement, Ontario had embarked on a vision of an ELCC system that would bring together various resources and supports for children and their families while growing the number of child care spaces. In 2014, it passed the Child Care and Early Years Act (CCEYA) legislation, which continues to be part of the regulation and licensing process within the province. At the same time, the Ministry of Education for the province released a curriculum and pedagogy document, *How Does Learning Happen* (Government of Ontario, 2014b), to support a quality, caring and learning environment for children. Full-day kindergarten for all children in the province was rolled out over 4 years, being fully implemented during the 2014-15 school year. That meant that children were now able to attend all-day and everyday programs for their junior and senior kindergarten years, and at no cost. Ontario also engaged in a consultation process across the province, resulting in the *Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework* released in the spring of 2017. Despite these efforts, parents continued to have difficulty finding quality, affordable child care for their younger children, be it in a city or in rural areas.

LEARN MORE

Read *How Does Learning Happen: Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years (2014) [PDF]* &*Ontario's Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework (2017)*

The 2017 Canada-Ontario bilateral agreement involved increasing the number of affordable licensed child care spaces, looking at being more inclusive, especially in supporting vulnerable children and their families through added subsidies. Before and after-school programs were provided, and funds were added to help provide more

care for young children. This agreement also set aside funds for the training and professional development for Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) through regional centres of excellence so that they would be able to build their professionalism to meet the needs of all children in their care. It also provided added funds to support upgrading in ECE qualifications and leadership development in the sector. Municipalities received funds for the ongoing creation of Early Years Children and Family Centres, which would help children and families through free access to various programs and community support in their neighbourhood. The construction of a network of family centres across the province was seen to ensure direct help to young families as they navigated through their new role as parents.



Read *Canada-Ontario Early Learning and Child Care Agreement 2017-2020*

From March 2020 through 2021, like other parts of the country and the globe, the province was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Child care was crucial in supporting health care providers and other occupations deemed essential to the support of communities, which were in various levels of quarantine. This resulted in increased pressure on the Ontario ELCC system, which was already frayed. Parents, child care providers, Early Years professionals, advocacy organizations, and employers across the province were adding pressure on the government to see child care as a necessary component to the economic recovery of communities. As other provinces and territories signed onto the Canada-wide early learning and care agreements (CWELCC) in 2021, Ontario finally joined in 2022. They were the last province to do so, receiving much pressure to agree to the 5-year commitment that would see parents paying $10 per day for child care across the country by 2026.

2.4 London-Middlesex Delivery of its Early Learning and Child Care System

The City of London and the County of Middlesex in southwestern Ontario combine their efforts in planning, funding and operating the ELCC system for their children and families as per the Ontario government's expectations of the role of Consolidated Municipal Service Manager (CMSM). As mentioned in Section 2.3, Ontario is the only Canadian province that delegates the operation of the ELCC system to its municipalities.

LEARN MORE

Read the Service System Managers for Child Care and Early Years Programs, Government of Ontario

The CMSMs for London and Middlesex are required to stay informed on the licensed child care in their municipalities, as well as the before and after school programs and the Early Years support programs such as EarlyON. They oversee the finances of the ELCC, ensuring that the system has operation funding as well as subsidies to support families who may not be able to pay the full fee for their child care. The municipalities are also tasked with the support of children with disabilities who are attending child care programs.

family !nfo.ca

Family Centres and EarlyON Program Locations

One of the key responsibilities of the CMSMs is creating a service plan for their ELCC system and sharing this report with the provincial government. This document is the equivalent of a strategic plan that will inform the ELCC system, usually for 4 to 5 years. The current service plan includes the following key sections:

1. An overview of the province of Ontario's areas of focus for the provincial ELCC system;
2. London's context, vision, and outcomes for its ELCC system;
3. Middlesex's context and opportunities for children and families in its ELCC system;
4. action plans for each of the municipalities.

London's action plan was created to mesh with the needs of its families and child care providers while also responding to Ontario's areas of priority for 2019 through 2023 (City of London, 2019, p. 32):

1. making child care more affordable to parents (affordability);
2. increasing the choice and availability of child care for families (availability, responsiveness);
3. reducing the red tape and administrative burden for child care providers (red tape);
4. improving quality and delivering high standards of care (quality).

These priorities helped anchor the "levers" for the City of London (City of London, 2019, p.31), which were based on their long-term implementation of a service system that would meet the needs of children and families across the city.



Read the London-Middlesex Child Care & Early Years Service System Plan 2019-2023 [PDF]

The County of Middlesex, a municipality within Southwestern Ontario comprised of towns and rural communities, created its own action plan based on data collected to reflect its own needs for 2019 through 2023 (City of London, 2024, p. 56):

1. increase connections in the child care and Early Years system;
2. increase awareness of the child care and Early Years service system;
3. support professional learning and capacity building for educators and administrators to elevate the quality of the child care and Early Years system;
4. champion community priorities to improve the child care and Early Years service system;
5. respond to evidence-informed community needs in an innovative way.

It is important to draw attention to the *Child Care and Early Years Service System Plan* (2019) as it was constructed using a community development approach, which the City of London has used since the early 2000s. Various information sources included surveys (online, paper, and postcard formats), focus groups, and community meetings. Children, parents, child care providers, school boards, community organizations supporting children and families, post-secondary institutions, and professionals from the regional health unit were given the opportunity to share their voices. The consultation also included the Francophone and Indigenous communities within the city. This is important as we move towards the concept of co-construction of policy by end users of a social service in the next section and in Chapter 3: Policy Making in Early Learning and Child Care.

2.5 What Does This All Mean to Policy?

The Childcare Resource and Research Unit (2001) published an executive summary 22 years ago, *Executive Summary: Starting Strong: Early Education and Care Report on an OECD Thematic Review[PDF]*, on what was seen as at the heart of effective ECEC / ELCC systems. The authors provided an overview of eight key policy elements that still stand today. These elements mesh with Canada's *Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework* (2017) and its key indicators, as indicated in the previous section, 2.2 Canada's Focus on a Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care System (ELCC): high quality; accessibility, affordability, flexibility, and inclusivity. The following chart demonstrates the intersectionality between what was presented then and how it still resonates today in 2023 (Child Care Canada, 2001).

Policy Focus *Child Care Canada (2001)*	**Key Indicators** *Canada's Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework (2017)*
1. A systemic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation (Consider: one lead ministry; cooperation amongst various ministries, services, professionals, and parents to support ECEC / ELCC policy)	• High quality • Flexibility
2. A strong and equal partnership with the education system (Consider: lifelong learning mindset; positive transition experiences for children; collaboration and partnerships between ECEC / ELCC and education systems)	• High quality • Flexibility • Inclusivity
3. A universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support (Consider: universal access; role of parental leaves; equitable access to quality ECEC / ELCC)	• High quality • Accessibility • Flexibility • Inclusivity
4. Substantial public investment in services and the infrastructure. (Consider: long-term, sustainable funding through multiple sources to ensure quality ECEC / ELCC)	• High quality • Accessibility • Affordability
5. A participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance (Consider: accountability through participatory process that involves staff, parents, and children; establishment of regulatory standards that are coordinated with funding to ensure quality ECEC / ELCC)	• High quality • Accessibility • Inclusivity
6. Appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision (Consider: focus on training, recruitment, retention of qualified, diverse RECEs; working conditions and professional learning reflects growing societal expectations for a quality ECEC / ELCC system)	• High quality • Accessibility • Affordability • Flexibility • Inclusivity
7. Systematic attention to monitoring and data collection (Consider: regular collection and analysis of information/data to monitor and respond to the needs of children, parents, and RECEs as part of a high-quality ECEC / ELCC system)	• High quality • Accessibility • Flexibility • Inclusivity
8. A stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation (Consider: ongoing funding for research on key policy goals/outcomes; use of various research approaches, i.e., the coordination of quantitative and qualitative methods; emphasis on knowledge dissemination of findings and implications to sustain a high-quality ECEC / ELCC system)	• High quality • Flexibility • Inclusivity

Based on the above chart, it is important to consider that the viability of a high-quality ELCC system depends on a sound policy framework. The construction of such a policy framework must consider the many elements mentioned above and how they intersect in the creation of that system. It must take into account who it serves and why it approaches its work in a certain manner. The complex nature of a social policy that is set to impact children and the future of a community, a province, and a country is not to be taken lightly. The next chapter will look at how a participatory approach to policymaking has helped influence two municipalities' service plans for the next four years.

2.6 Reflective Activity

Reflection

During the course of this chapter, you have explored ELCC systems from a global, Canadian, national, provincial, and municipal perspective.

When reviewing ELCC / ECEC, Finland is often used as the standard early learning system for children. The following activity will provide you with a chance to discover Finland's approach to ELCC.

Once you have completed the graphic organizer below with key information on Finland, you will look at what is currently happening in Ontario.

Step 1: Using the link to Eurydice, complete the chart below as you explore Finland's information on its early childhood learning and care system.

Step 2: Now, move to the Canada-Ontario bilateral agreement and its action plan to complete the next column in the chart.

Step 3: Answer the reflection questions and export your document.
Reflection Questions

1. Finland's Approach to ELCC
    - Similarities and Differences
        - Social Context
        - Governance
        - Accessibility
        - Affordability
        - Flexibility
        - Quality
        - Inclusivity
2. Ontario's Approach to ECEC

- Similarities and Differences
  - Social Context
  - Governance
  - Accessibility
  - Affordability
  - Flexibility
  - Quality
  - Inclusivity

3. Reflection Questions: Now it's time for your own thoughts.
   - How does the province compare? What is similar and what is different?
   - Are there lessons to be learned and reflected upon when looking at Finland's approach, on Ontario's approach?
   - How can this inform our Early Years policies at the provincial and regional levels?

CHAPTER 3: POLICY MAKING IN EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE

Chapter Outline

3.0 Learning Objectives
3.1 Southwest Ontario Context
3.2 Co-Construction of Policy Making
3.3 Literature Review
3.4 Research Process and Methodology
3.5 Findings
3.6 Results and Implications



Image by Yan Krukau, Pexels License.

3.0 Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the interplay between national, provincial/territorial, and municipal governments when operationalizing an Early Learning and Child Care policy (ELCC) framework.
- Outline the elements of policy co-construction and how this approach helps bring various stakeholder voices/perspectives to policy-making.
- Analyze various ELCC policy frameworks to help recognize key elements that support an accessible, sustainable, quality ELCC system that meets the needs of all children and families within a jurisdiction.
- Discuss how applied research can inform a particular field or sector.
- Explain how policy impacts leadership roles and responsibilities in the Early Years.

3.1 Southwest Ontario Context

Ontario municipalities are responsible for providing a long-term Early Years service plan to the provincial government every four years. This plan helps guide the sector's operationalization of long- and short-term outcomes that will meet the municipalities' goals in providing increased access to quality child care to its families and children. The Corporation of the City of London and Middlesex County collaborated to meet provincial Early Years expectations, as outlined in the 2019-2023 plan. The current iteration of the service plan for 2024-2028 continued to present a collaborative approach to constructing a strategic plan that outlines the two municipalities' goals and actions to support a quality ELCC system. This iteration of the service plan also needed to meet the expectations as per the *Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC)*, which saw provinces and territories signing bilateral agreements in 2021 and into 2022.

Explore the ELCC service plan (2024-2028) document to familiarize yourself with its structure, content, and key stakeholders. The previous plan is provided as a comparison of the evolution of the ELCC System over time.

London-Middlesex Child Care & Early Years Service System Plan 2024-2028 [PDF]
London-Middlesex Child Care & Early Years Service System Plan 2019-2023 [PDF]

Additionally, explore the Ontario CWELCC agreement, which provides you with specific goals and expectations of the provincial government in light of their bilateral agreement with the federal government.

From 2019 through 2023, existing partnerships supported the ongoing collection of quantitative and qualitative data in both London and Middlesex County to ensure that the current ELCC service plan was based on the reality faced by those most impacted by the ELCC system. The collaboration included ELCC community leaders, municipal leaders, Fanshawe College faculty, and Early Childhood Leadership (ECL) students, and it occurred over five years. Strong relationships existed before this focus on gathering the voices of parents, Early Years professionals, directors and program supervisors in child care learning environments and employers within the two municipalities' ELCC systems. It is important to note that the City of London worked collaboratively with the

Municipality of Middlesex. Still, both have elements that are unique to their communities, elements reflecting the needs of their urban, small-town, and rural communities.

Explore this information on the Child and Youth Network (CYN), City of London, which will provide you with a historical perspective on how the municipality built relationships to support their work.

Explore the Middlesex Family Connection's website which helps communicate Middlesex County's ELCC information to families within their municipality.

Within this context, ECL students and faculty at Fanshawe College used applied research that included a mixed methods approach to answer the following question: How can co-construction of an Early Years policy framework prototype help support two Ontario municipalities in building and maintaining a quality child care system accessible to all families and their children? Fanshawe College's Centre for Research and Innovation was able to provide internal funding and ongoing support during the research study, and its School of Community Studies helped with access to faculty for intern student support and its on-site facilities for community meetings. Community partners (City of London, County of Middlesex, LCCN, and Strive) shared in-kind support such as access to regular community meetings, previously collected data and reports, and time to review the ongoing data collection processes and analysis.

It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the social context and the choice of research methodology. Like other parts of the globe, Canada and the London-Middlesex region grappled with health and safety concerns while trying to keep key services available. The concept of "essential work" came to the forefront. Parents working from home, dealing with reduced access to child care, meant that women were often the last ones to return to work due to their multiple roles. Navigating the pandemic and the economic recovery laid bare the varied roles of ELCC leaders. This saw their roles expand to include a more complex understanding of policy and the policy-making process, all part of the required political acumen in this new reality. This added knowledge and transfer to practice have now become key leadership competencies.

3.2 Co-Construction of Policy Making

Based on the City of London's approach to seeking the voices of its community members to inform municipal policy in the areas of social supports for families, children, and youth over many years, the process of co-construction of policy was seen as a realistic next step to help inform an Early Years policy framework prototype. Years of work have established strong relationships with over 170 organizations that worked collaboratively to maximize their collective impact within the municipality.

Explore this document that gives the background to the City of London's Approach to Change [PDF]; written in 2015, it provides the context on how the municipality sees its role in building social policy.

Also, explore the Community Plan 2024 Progress Report [PDF] to discover the approaches that the City of London have put in place to operationalize serving their communities.

Definition of Co-construction of Policy

Co-construction of a policy involves a collaborative approach , bringing together the voices of key stakeholders impacted by the policy being created. This process includes policymakers, experts in the field, and citizens affected by the policy at the beginning of the policy-making process.

This approach to policy-making has been part of research across various societal sectors and countries, including Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Portugal, and the United Kingdom (Mayer et al., 2004; Vigar, 2017; Blomkamp, 2018; Goulart & Falanga, 2022). Co-construction of policy goes beyond consultation, which is often done after a policy is written. It involves feedback to refine what experts, policymakers, and politicians have put forward based on their interpretation of what should be considered. The concept of co-construction is familiar to the Early Years sector; this approach is a critical component of their pedagogy. Educators mesh their professional knowledge with the interests and the overall well-being of the children in their care. This ensures that the voice of the children is part of the curriculum within the learning environment. Effective policy co-construction meshes various knowledge areas, as Vigar (2017) explained. This author notes the intersection of different knowledges as part of effective policy making and transparency in participatory democracy. These various knowledges include: 1) local knowledge and the citizen as an expert in his/her/their reality; 2) technical knowledge as the experts within

the specific sector; 3) practice-centred knowledge that is anchored in the applied practice of those within a sector; and 4) political knowledge that includes the political reality in which a policy is being constructed.

Canadian academic, Vaillancourt (2009), provided an interpretation of how democracy within a region and its public policy-making can work together to create services its citizens need. He expands on two specific parts of policy-making – co-construction and co-production. Vaillancourt sees co-construction as including citizens' perspectives at the beginning of the process, and co-production as the application or operationalization of policy. This research focused on the co-construction of the Early Years Policy framework prototype. Some aspects within the framework prototype allude to co-production, especially when looking at the roles of the ELCC leaders at the provincial and municipal levels and the directors of ELCC organizations in the City of London and County of Middlesex.

3.3 Literature Review

To help anchor the research and lessons learned through the co-construction of the Early Years policy framework prototype, there was a review of existing ELCC frameworks from a global and Canadian perspective. This helped identify key elements of the frameworks and similarities and differences while informing the first iteration of the policy framework prototype.

3.3.1 Overview of European ELLC frameworks

The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) provides a broader review of ELCC frameworks and systems over several years, in its Starting Strong reports from 2001 to 2025. It also considers countries farther afield, adding to the European perspective. *Starting Strong III* (2012) set the foundations for policy in the ELCC field with its identification of policy levers:

1. Setting out quality goals and regulations;
2. Designing and implementing curriculum and standards;
3. Improving qualifications, training and working conditions;
4. Engaging families and communities;
5. Advancing data collection, research, and monitoring.

The OECD provides views on long-term benefits linked to economic and socioeconomic outcomes through labour market indicators, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP). By 2025, there is now an increased focus on the impact of inequalities in education for children and reference to a three-pillar policy approach that includes: 1) quality; 2) inclusivity; and 3) access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The focus is evolving, moving towards reducing inequality and recognizing children's rights, recognizing that equitable access must be part of ELCC systems.



Explore this document to familiarize yourself with the policy levers that became part of many Early Years frameworks within the European/Western world: Starting Strong III: A quality toolbox for early childhood education and care.

Also, explore this document to familiarize yourself with the evolution of OECD focus (2025): Reducing inequalities by investing in early childhood education and care.

Examining specific ELCC frameworks reveals similarities in key areas, while also highlighting the unique operationalization of ELCC systems across over 30 European Union (EU) countries. They seek to provide high-quality early ELCC via: 1) access; 2) workforce; 3) curriculum; 4) evaluation and monitoring; and 5) governance and funding. These intersect with the OECD policy levers mentioned above.

LEARN MORE

Explore this website to find ELCC frameworks within the EU. Once on this site, you can review the countries' education systems. For example, when you select a specific county, you will see a table of contents on the right. If you choose the Early Education and Child Care tab, you will see the particulars of that country's ELCC framework and other details.

These frameworks have several similarities that help us understand what is at the heart of the frameworks that support the ELCC within these countries, as indicated in the chart below.

Foundational Aspects Within the EU Frameworks
1. Universal rights of children to have access to ELCC (also linked to women's right to access work).
2. Common and shared definition and scope to ELCC.
3. Common understanding and sharing of the concept of quality.
4. Transparent monitoring and evaluation of ELCC systems.
5. Inclusion that reflects the ever-changing needs of children for long-term learning, digital safety, and foreign language learning.
6. High participation of children in the ELCC systems of at least 95%.

Bianchi et al. (2022) and The European Commission (Eurydice, n.d.) give data that emphasize children's rights in the Early Years. As explained above, this is an added perspective to the OECD data and analysis, linking key elements to the overall quality of the ELCC systems that ultimately benefit children, families, and society in the long term.

3.3.2 Overview of Canadian ELCC Context and Frameworks

Since the 1970s, Canada has tried to create a national ELCC system to support children and families nationwide. This historical overview helps us understand the complex nature of policy-making in Canada within today's reality (Colley, 2020).

- **1970:** Royal Commission on the Status of Women recommends the construction of a national ELCC system.
- **1987:** Disagreement at the national level between parties leads to a lack of consensus on a national ELCC system, where each party presents its own report and steps forward, resulting in an ultimately stalemate.
- **1993:** Proposed a shared cost national ELCC program where the federal government provides 40% of funding, provinces and territories provide 20%, and parents contribute the final 20%; this legislation was not acted upon.
- **2015:** Another effort at creating a national ELCC framework; the specifics were left to the provinces and territories, with no overall national expectations on how the $7.5 billion would be spent over 11 years.

- **2024:** Legislation is passed at the national level that results in a national act, the Canada Early Learning and Child Care Act (Government of Canada, 2025b).

Other factors come into play when creating and implementing a Canada-wide ELCC policy framework. First, one must also consider the federal system structure, where the federal, provincial and territorial governments have specific roles and responsibilities within their jurisdictions. Each province and territory is responsible for ELCC and the education system. Arriving at a consensus between ten provinces and three territories is no easy feat, as each wishes to ensure that the services they provide reflect their families' and children's needs and aspirations. This tug-of-war between the two levels of government adds another layer when trying to operationalize a practical ELCC framework. While some may suggest that Canada can look at the EU model, it is important to be aware of a more hierarchical relationship between the federal and provincial/territorial governments. Due to the funding structure, the federal government can control aspects of social policy and systems nationwide. This is evident in the health care systems and some aspects of the education systems (i.e., funding of second language learning in some school systems).

We must also consider the impacts of Canada's social and political contexts during the past few years. Since the country began attempting to create a national ELCC policy framework in 2015, the population has grown from 36.9 million in 2018 to approximately 42 million in 2025 (Statistics Canada, 2026). Increased immigration from both outside and inside the country has brought more demands on the social services that support families and children. This was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where many families struggled to balance work and child care. Societal pressures, in this case, Canadian women trying to stay working or return to work, were thwarted due to limited, if any, access to consistent, quality child care (Vickerson et al., 2022). Based on low fees – $10 per day- access became the key focus and anchor in the bilateral agreements. The intersection of social realities and expectations, with political realities, became even more pronounced at this time in policymaking. Also, adding the fiscal realities of Canadian and global economies brought the need for a Canada-wide ELCC framework.

As of 2025, most of Canada's provinces and territories have ratified their agreements. However, Alberta and Saskatchewan have chosen not to continue. At the same time, Ontario has agreed 'in principle' but has yet to sign off on its bilateral agreement (Government of Canada, 2025b), due to a perceived shortfall in funding. It is also important to mention that Quebec's agreement is described as 'asymmetrical'; this different approach to their agreement reflects the unique nature of that province. Their agreement recognizes their pre-existing provincial child care system and its rights to the French language and culture.



Explore the CWELCC bilateral agreements for each province and territory at this Government of Canada website.

What is the foundation for the current *Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care* (CWELCC) agreements? It can be found in the 2017 document, *Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework, published by Employment and Social Development Canada*. This framework provides the expectations set at the federal level, while the bilateral agreements are the unique operationalization of these expectations based on each province and territory's needs.

The key elements, at times identified as “guiding principles” or pillars, outlined in the document, which drive the provincial and territorial agreements, are as follows:

1. Quality,
2. Accessibility,
3. Affordability,
4. Flexibility,
5. and Inclusivity.

When comparing Canada’s current CEWLCC framework to the OECD and EU frameworks, the following chart helps show the similarities:

OCED (2025) (Three pillar policy)	*EU (2022, 2025) (Foundational Aspects*	*Canada (2017) (Principles)*
Quality	Shared understanding and scope of quality	Quality
Inclusivity	Inclusion	Inclusivity
Access	Universal rights to access	Accessibility
	Shared definition and scope of ELCC	
	Monitoring and evaluation	
		Affordability
		Flexibility

In the current bilateral agreements, part of each province and territory’s policies, Canada shares similarities with OECD (2012) policy levers: 1 (quality and standards), 3 (improving qualifications, training, and working conditions), and 5 (data collection, research, and monitoring). It also connects to the OECD (2025) focus on inequality. It differs from the EU because Canada had to negotiate 13 different agreements instead of the consensus approach used for the EU policy frameworks (Bianchi et al., 2022; European Commission, 2019). The access to federal funds is predicated upon set goals, which are driven by a focus on affordability – $10 per day, allowing for greater access and inclusivity to the CWELCC system.

In 2018, Canada shared its I*ndigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework*. Its eight principles are as follows:

1. Indigenous knowledges, languages and cultures,
2. First Nations, Inuit and Métis determination,
3. Quality programs and services,
4. Child and family centred,
5. Inclusive,
6. Flexible and adaptable,
7. Accessible,
8. Transparent and accountable,

9. and Respect, collaboration and partnerships.

Principles 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 intersect with the CWELCC principles while ensuring that the framework reflects the Indigenous perspectives across the country. This document draws attention to the rights of Indigenous children and their families should have access to an ELCC system that respects and values their worldview. The principles also intersect with OECD (2025) and European Commission (2019), especially when considering equity in access to learning and care.

The last iteration of a provincial framework, *Ontario's Renewed Early Years and Child Care Framework*, was in 2017, and refers to the following action items:

1. Increasing access,
2. Increased affordability,
3. Early years workforce strategy,
4. Defining quality in the Early Years,
5. Promoting inclusion,
6. Outcomes and measurement strategy,
7. and increasing public awareness.

This document is aligned with the *Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework* (2017) and helps to understand the bilateral agreements between the Ontario and federal governments. In the latest signed bilateral agreement, the focus in Ontario is on:

1. An average of $10 per day child care by 2025-2026,
2. Increased high-quality, affordable child care spaces,
3. Removal of barriers to provide inclusive and flexible licensed child care,
4. and enhanced compensation, training, and professional learning for early childhood educators.

There are similarities between Ontario's latest bilateral agreement and the frameworks outlined by OECD (2021b) and the European Commission (Eurydice, n.d.). However, it is important to note that Canada and the province of Ontario focus on providing access via increased spaces and affordable costs to parents/families. The country's framework appears to be in the middle of the OECD and EU frameworks, where it is important to reiterate that the process is one of ongoing negotiation between two levels of government, rather than arriving at a consensus, as is the approach in the EU.

Learning Activity

When reviewing the ECE Report 2023 and its benchmarks in your current role, what connections do you see between it and the policy elements outlined by OECD and the EU?

3.4 Research Process and Methodology

The following outlines the research process followed during the five years of the research project. It is important to note that while the researchers were collecting their own data and conducting their analysis at each stage, the two municipalities conducted their regular data collection to monitor the ELCC system. Regular meetings helped everyone to understand trends while helping the iteration of the Early Years policy prototypes.

3.4.1 Research Design

An instrumental case study using mixed methods occurred over five years to address the research question: How can co-construction of an Early Years policy framework prototype help support two Ontario municipalities in building and maintaining a quality child care system accessible to all families and their children? The case study is instrumental as the researchers and community members sought to understand how they could further their understanding of policy co-construction while building their own ELCC policy framework prototype (Patton, 2015; Stake, 1995). This prototype would reflect the goals and expectations of the key stakeholders – parents, child care directors, Early Years professionals, and local employers. It also included the perspectives of the two municipalities' ELCC leaders responsible for constructing their Early Years service plan, a document required by the Ontario provincial government. Including these stakeholders aligns with social constructivism as the theoretical framework and supports the growing understanding of the participants in the research on policy co-construction (Charmaz, 2014).

3.4.2 Sampling

Purposeful sampling of participants was used in all research stages to ensure the range of perspectives of those most impacted by the Early Years policy framework prototype. Recruitment was done via a community partner with access to the Early Years sector in the two municipalities via their online and social media presence. The researchers also had access to the Early Years licensed child care network, London and Middlesex' Licensed Child Care Network (LCCN), which meets regularly and could attend meetings, share the process and progress of the research, and provide information on recruiting possible participants. Written descriptions of participants and contact information of the researchers were provided in various formats. This chart describes the sampling and number of participants in each stage/research component.

Participant Groups	*Criteria*	*Number of Participants*
Parents	• Living in the London/Middlesex municipalities • Have children who are in a child care environment within the municipalities of London/Middlesex	Town Hall #2 (Nov 2021): 1 Zoom Interviews: 5 Focus Groups: 0
Early Years Professionals	• Are employed in a child care environment located in the London/Middlesex municipalities • Are employed in a kindergarten room located in the London/Middlesex municipalities	Survey: 81 Town Hall (Nov 2021): 2 (includes one student) Zoom Interviews: 4 Focus Groups: 2 (London – 4 participants; Middlesex – 11 participants)
Child care providers (directors, executive directors)	• Lead/manage a child care centre in the London/ Middlesex municipalities	Town Hall (Nov 2021): 1 Zoom Interviews: 5 Focus Groups: 2 (London – 3; Middlesex – 13)
Employers	• Employer (or manager/owner) of a company, business operating in the London/Middlesex municipalities	Town Hall (Nov 2021): 1 Zoom Interviews: 2 Focus Groups: 0

It is important to note that the co-construction of the Early Years policy framework prototype research project piggybacked on a previous research project that gathered the voices of Early Years professionals in the London-Middlesex region via an online survey (Bourbonnais-MacDonald et al., 2021), as shown in the above chart.

Three Early Years Town Halls were held in the fall of 2020, 2021, and 2023. The first two were online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Town Hall held in 2021 was a panel discussion that included representation from each of the key stakeholder groups: parents, childcare providers, Early Years professionals, and employers. The transcript of the one-hour panel was used to provide further data. The data from the third Town Hall (Nov 2022) was in person at the local college, where 25 participants attended on site and another 20 joined online.

The role of the researchers involved leading the project, which included constructing and analyzing survey data, facilitating semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The faculty member from the local college acted as the principal investigator and supervised Early Childhood Leadership (ECL) students as researchers. The researchers were also involved in regular Early Years community meetings where they shared the latest updates on the research collection, data analysis and iterations of the Early Years policy framework prototypes. There were also regular updates with faculty at the college, within the School of Community Studies and the Centre for Research and Innovation. The researchers met regularly to discuss the project's progress, looking at the various data sources, reflecting on their analysis and sharing the construction of the prototypes as they evolved. This brought credibility to the co-construction as input was sought regularly between the research team members, the participants, and the Early Years sector.

3.4.3 Data Collection

Data collection required multiple approaches due to the varied data sources used during the project. The Early Years professional survey was on an online Canadian platform to meet the college's Research Ethics Board (REB) expectations. The semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, scheduled at first to be in person, were moved to the Zoom platform due to the COVID-19 pandemic. That platform provided the required security and confidentiality while providing the researchers with a draft transcription. The student researchers were then able to review and ensure the authenticity of the data collected. Charts, dotmocracy processes (use of dots to identify each participant's position on the chart based on a 6-point scale), and transcripts helped capture the data from the focus groups (Diceman, 2010). The two municipalities provided secondary data; the current Early Years

service plan and ongoing data being collected were shared with the research team. The researchers could also use previous student researchers' analysis of Early Years policy frameworks from around the world and the country to inform the first prototype.

3.4.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was a focus on a qualitative methodology. The research team reviewed open-ended questions in the survey, transcriptions of the interviews, the town hall, and the focus groups. The focus group wall charts and dotmocracy data were converted into tables to reflect the voice of the participants and inform the construction of the prototypes. The student researchers established coding frameworks and shared their progress at weekly meetings. This resulted in the verification of the coding of the data and consensus on each of the components of the prototypes.

3.4.5 Ethics

The research project followed the parameters as set by the college's REB. The principal investigator and student researchers completed the online accreditation as per the *Tri-Council policy statement: Ethical conduct for research involving humans* (TCPS 2) (Panel on Research Ethics, 2023). Gatekeepers were used to help recruit participants. Information letters and consent forms were given to all participants in person or via email. If no email was received when interviewing online, it was brought to the participant's attention and consent was requested verbally. Data collected was kept on password-protected and encrypted platforms to ensure the security of the data and the participants' confidentiality. Participants could stop their engagement at any time during the interviews or focus groups with no negative impact. Respecting and valuing the voice of the participants was at the heart of the research process.

3.4.6 Limitations

As in any research project, some limitations must be identified. First, the instrumental case study is bounded by its specific geographical location and captures the perspectives within that specific region of Southwestern Ontario. Secondly, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the semi-structured interviews, planned to be in person in the municipalities' neighbourhoods, had to be changed to online. Accessing the platform may have been a deterrent for some participants. The scheduling of the focus groups after the pandemic also meant that some possible participants were still not ready to meet in a small group. Moreover, within the context of the 2020-2022 period, the Early Years sector was under tremendous pressure to meet the needs of families and children, while also considering the impact on the Early Years professionals. Stress and burnout were key elements that impacted the involvement of participants in the research project.

3.5 Findings

During the project, the researchers and key stakeholders combined their efforts to co-construct an Early Years policy framework prototype, resulting in the charts below. During interviews, town halls, focus groups, and meetings with Early Years leaders in London/Middlesex, the current analysis of the data was provided and discussed. Each prototype iteration looked at the proposed and any new considerations, issues, and challenges identified, as well as possible solutions provided. The researchers started prototype #1 with key elements identified in the federal government's *Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework* (2017). Five pillars were agreed upon, and some of the key elements from the federal document were the Ontario expectations and the two municipalities' child care and Early Years service plan. This prototype then evolved to prototype #2 and the addition of a sixth pillar, relationships. This pillar reflects the voices of all participants in the research project. There was a strong belief that sound relationships were at the heart of a quality ELCC system and needed to be one of the pillars within the framework. The researchers respected the addition of the pillar and ensured that it appeared in prototype #3, as seen in the charts below.

3.5.1 Pillar #1 – Access

The first pillar in prototype #3 was access, the ability of children and families to have quality child care services that met their unique needs. All participants (parents, child care providers, Early Years professionals, and employers commented on the importance of increased, easier access through more child care spaces and lower costs (link to pillar #2). It was also crucial to have flexible time to meet families' diverse work schedules; reliability and dependability were often quoted, especially when addressing the lack of child care during the COVID-19 pandemic. They also identified the lack of child care centres in both parts of the city and the county, speaking about "child care deserts." A final discussion point common with all participants was the confusion about how the waitlist made access to child care spaces confusing.

Some differences were noted between parents and child care providers / Early Years professionals when discussing access to quality child care. Parents' priority was to focus on access first; quality was important, but the need for child care was their focus. Child care providers and Early Years professionals discussed clarifying that access to low-cost child care did not mean low quality. The federal and provincial governments' messaging of $10 per day appeared to have impacted the perception of how this low cost would impact access to quality child care.

Prototype #3 Pillar #1 – Access
1. There is universal access for all children and families to a quality ELCC system.
2. There is flexible access to the ELCC system to meet the needs of children's and families' schedules.
3. There is reliable, dependable access for all children and families to the ELCC system.
4. There is geographical access for all children and families to the ELCC system.
5. There is increased access through a revised approach to waitlists for children and families to the ELCC system.
6. There is access to quality child care programming in the ELCC system.

3.5.2 Pillar #2 – Affordability

As noted in the chart below, affordability was a key area of focus for all stakeholders. They viewed affordable access as a necessity, adding that emergency child care was a need, having experienced disruption of child care during the COVID-19 pandemic. There was also consensus on a different approach to fees when families lose family income due to a delayed return to work. All saw the $10 per day goal as a welcome financial break for families, but it did not come without concerns.

One of the concerns also brought to the attention of the researchers in the first pillar was the perception that low-cost meant low-quality child care. Parents viewed the level of care as substandard due to ongoing changes in the Early Years professionals caring for their children, if there were not enough funds to support a stable workforce. The strong bonding and relationships between the children, the families and the Early Years professionals would be in jeopardy. Child care providers also saw this as an issue; the shortfall of Early Years professionals continues to impact their ability to provide dependable care for the children and their families. The child care directors emphasized the need for a realistic operational budget that supported the recognition of the early professionals' work with appropriate compensation, benefits, and regular professional learning during the workday.

Prototype #3 Pillar #2 – Affordability
1. Universal child care is affordable to all families across Canada, territories, provinces and municipalities.
2. Quality Early Years learning and standard of care is not dependent on cost to parents/families in the ELCC system.
3. The operational budget is realistic and consistent to reflect the management of a quality child care environment in current context.

3.5.3 Pillar #3 – Quality

This pillar brought about the most discussion due to its complexity. How does one define quality? Stakeholders shared their perspectives as outlined in the chart below. All agreed on a quality learning and caring environment for all children in an ELCC system based on highly qualified educators, work time that balanced contact with children and ongoing knowledge building for the most responsive pedagogical approaches. Parents saw quality as key to supporting the diverse needs of children through Early Years professionals who possessed the breadth of knowledge to implement an effective pedagogy. This was also mentioned by the employers who saw the need for dependable, reliable child care and learning as key to stabilizing their employees' ability to focus on work and not worry about their child while in child care.

Child care providers focused on a strong recruitment and retention approach. They saw this at the heart of a quality child care environment. With highly educated teams of Early Years professionals who feel valued

through a strong wage grid, the ELCC system can meet high-quality standards through strong cohesiveness and long-term relationships. Many child care providers shared that currently, Early Years professionals work multiple jobs to meet their basic living needs. Mentions of a work environment that recognizes burnout and a focus on wellness were key to quality in pedagogy and the relationships between the Early Years educators, the children, their families, and their work colleagues. A consistent, reliable workforce also means a safe and engaging learning environment alongside quality learning and care. Lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic were mentioned, especially using technology to stay connected with families. Early Years professionals asserted that they needed to be knowledgeable to communicate effectively with the parents, community members, and the child care providers; their voices should be valued as a key element in a quality ELCC system.

As mentioned above, the concept of quality was a highly discussed aspect by all participants in the research project. Chapter 6 will bring further insights into this pillar.

Prototype #3 Pillar #3 – Quality
1. The Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) are knowledgeable of inclusive programming that is based on teaching strategies that meet the needs of all children.
2. The Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) have access to effective pre-service education as well as ongoing education to build their overall day-to-day practice to meet the needs of all children and families.
3. The Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) have access to preparation/planning time during the workday that supports their day-to-day practice.
4. Recruitment and retention of Early Years professionals / Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) is supported through better compensation via a wage grid that reflects a living wage.
5. The ratios of Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) to children reflect what is essential for the care and learning of all children.
6. Members of the Early Years system need to communicate to parents and the community at large what is quality child care and how it should be considered as important as the school system.

3.5.4 Pillar #4 – Responsiveness

This particular pillar has multiple layers: 1) the CWLECC or Canada-wide system and the federal and provincial/territorial areas of jurisdiction; 2) the cultural acknowledgement of Indigenous, French, and new immigrants needs; 3) the socio-economic support especially for families in need; and 4) the interpersonal connections where support and empathy build strong relationships at level within the Early Years system. Especially during the focus group discussions, responsiveness was seen as being present across the other four pillars; dialogue centred upon the Early Years system and how it needs to respond and support children and families at the local level.

The participants discussed a system that could be responsive by providing the required number of learning and child care spaces in their communities. Access to these quality spaces was a priority for all stakeholders. There was also recognition that consistent child care was key to supporting women in the workforce, including the Early Years sector. Child care providers highlighted sustainable funding to ensure the system's responsiveness. Early years professionals focused on how communication was at the heart of being able to respond and support children and their families.

Some participants saw this pillar as problematic. During the focus groups, participants saw this pillar as more of a guiding principle for the system and not its own pillar. The researchers facilitated the discussion, ending with a consensus on keeping the pillar due to its presence in the federal and provincial framework/bilateral agreement.

Prototype #3 Pillar #4 – Responsiveness
1. The Early Years system supports families' needs through consistent access to quality child care and learning with the required amount of child care and learning spaces needed in each community within the municipality.
2. The Early Years system recognizes and supports female-dominated workplaces, including the Early Years sector.
3. The Early Years system provides sustainable operations funding that supports flexible staffing requirements as needed in the various child care and learning environments within the municipality.
4. The Early Years professionals engage and respond to parents'/ families' needs through effective communication.

3.5.5 Pillar #5 – Inclusivity

Pillar #5 addresses inclusivity, recognizing that all children and families belong and have access to quality early learning and child care. This pillar brought heated conversations in the focus groups with Early Years professionals and child care providers. Some participants added that inclusion was required for all working in the Early Years and that if leaders and educators did not believe in inclusivity, they should not be part of the system. Regardless of socio-economic status, family status, culture, language, gender or disabilities, all needed to be recognized and respected. Some questioned its presence as a pillar, seeing it as embedded in all the pillars within the prototype. Further dialogue resulted in the participants coming to a mutual understanding that while they saw it as key, the reality was that an inclusionary mindset was not present everywhere and constantly needed reflection.

There was a strong belief that inclusivity (the term inclusion was used interchangeably) was part of the day-to-day work, at the heart of the ELCC system within the region. The Early Years of municipal leaders in London and Middlesex have had a history of connecting with many stakeholders to review their goals and outcomes within the Early Years and the child care service plan. During the last town hall meeting, municipal leaders shared how they had set in motion different ways to include the voices of children, parents and families, Early Years professionals, child care providers, employers, and community partners who support children and families. These ongoing connections were crucial to understanding what was needed and which actions would support access to a quality child care, learning, and caring system. This was not a "one of" but part of a process to ensure the inclusion of many voices at regular intervals.

During the semi-structured interviews and Town Halls, parents and employers focused more on the ability of the Early Years professionals to meet the unique needs of all the children. Parents understood the depth of knowledge and the ability to connect with all children as part of their work. This, in turn, meant that the Early Years professionals needed to feel included in creating the ELCC system alongside parents and the child care providers. Having a sense of community meant accepting all stakeholders and respecting different perspectives.

The chart below captures the heart of what the participants shared with the researchers on inclusivity. Clearly, this pillar was seen at the centre of the culture of the ELCC system in London-Middlesex.

Prototype #3 Pillar #5 – Inclusivity
1. There is recognition and valuing of the social location of each child in the ELCC system/child care and learning environment.
2. There is valuing and nurturing of a sense of belonging, of being part of a supportive community that includes all children, parents, families and community members at large.
3. There is acknowledgement and respectful, responsive acts to the voices of key stakeholders within the ELCC system.
4. There is recognition and support of Early Years professionals who have the knowledge and capacity to use various strategies, tools, and resources in their daily practice to meet each child's needs in the ELCC system.

3.5.6 Pillar #6 – Relationships

As outlined in the chart below, all participants were adamant about incorporating relationships as a key pillar in the Early Years policy framework prototype #3. This pillar is not a distinct element in the federal CWELCC and provincial bilateral documents, but has been incorporated in prototype #3. Participants in the panel discussion at the second Town Hall started the conversation, and then it continued during the interviews, the focus groups, and the third Town Hall.

Each data collection added more to the concept of relationships as a key element for stakeholders. Parents discussed the importance of the relationship between their child and the Early Years professional. Child care providers spoke to their relationships with the Early Years professionals, their colleagues who lead other centres, the Early Years municipal leaders, and other community organizations that support children and families. Early years professionals also mentioned their relationship with the children in their care, the parents, their colleagues, and the child care provider to whom they report. Employers addressed their growing relationships with child care providers, trying to understand the ELCC system to support their employees better, as was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Relationships were key to being responsive (Pillar #4) as individuals and a system. Relationships helped strengthen the child care providers and Early Years professionals' understanding of how to support the needs of the children and their families while reaching high standards of quality. Parents spoke about how respectful relationships with those working in the ELCC system helped them understand how the system worked, what was available for their children, and how, as parents, they could support not only their child but also the Early Years professionals. Similarly, the Early Years professionals saw the strong relationships with parents, their peers, and the child care provider as key to being responsive to the children's needs in their pedagogical practice.

Finally, child care providers shared how their professional interactions with other child care providers during the COVID1-19 pandemic supported them during difficult times. The regular meetings helped build strong relationships that gave them not only valuable information but also confidence in their handling of the challenges during the pandemic. The participants noted that the ELCC system could not provide access to an inclusive and quality care and learning environment for children in the London and Middlesex municipalities without positive, respectful relationships.

Prototype #3 Pillar #6 -Relationships
1. Early years leaders (i.e., child care providers) foster ongoing professional relationships between key stakeholders (i.e., parents, board of directors/parent advisory groups, employers, all levels of government) who are part of the ELCC system.
2. Early years leaders (i.e., child care providers, municipal managers) value and engage in professional interactions with Early Years professionals to support daily practice that benefits all children and families.
3. Early years leaders are responsible for the day-to-day operations of the ELCC system that sees recruitment of long-term staffing as necessary to build and maintain inclusive relationships with all children, families, and professional colleagues.
4. Early years professionals form respectful relationships with all families based on awareness of children's and families' unique needs.
5. Early years professionals value and engage in professional interactions with all children that demonstrate focus on care and learning.
6. Early years professionals value and engage in professional interactions with colleagues and other professionals to support all children and their families

3.6 Results and Implications

The findings from the research project provided the London-Middlesex community with an Early Years policy framework prototype that has incorporated the voices of those most impacted by the ELCC system. Parents, child care providers, Early Years professionals and local employers shared their perspectives with the provincial government representatives and local municipal Early Years leaders during the Town Halls. Their involvement in the co-construction of the prototype made them active contributors to the London-Middlesex Child Care and Early Years Service Plan (City of London, 2024), which is research-based and evidence-informed.

Exercise

Review the London-Middlesex System Service Plan [PDF], page 8 (mention of framework) and the focus of the (service) plan on pages 17-10. How do you see the connections between the Early Years policy framework and the service plan?

The co-construction process of policy involved various activities and policy analysis styles, as outlined in Mayer et al. (2004), as shown in the table below.

Activity	*Policy Analysis Style*
Clarify values and arguments (literature review of Early Years policy frameworks)	**Argumentative style** (critical analysis of information on Early Years policy frameworks)
Research and analyze (construction of prototype #1)	**Rational style** (coding of data from various sources to build prototypes)
Design and recommend (iteration process of prototypes)	**Client advice style** (ongoing input from key stakeholders throughout iteration process of prototypes)
Advise strategically (final prototype as part of child care and Early Years service plan)	**Process style** (iterations of prototype framework shared with key stakeholders)
Mediate (research team finalizes prototype #3)	**Interactive style** (collaborative coding, finalizing of pillars of prototype #3)
Democratize (knowledge sharing with key stakeholders of final prototype)	**Participatory style** (all key stakeholders' voices; each member of the research team during construction of final prototype)

The co-construction of the Early Years policy framework prototype #3 resulted in the guiding principles and pillars that support the following vision for the ELCC system in London-Middlesex:

> An Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system that, at its foundation, is responsive to the needs of the children and their families through relationships that benefit the child, the parents, the family, and the community. This affordable, quality ELCC system provides access and inclusivity for all children through a caring, learning environment led by passionate Early Years professional educators.

This research project was successful in several areas: 1) the creation of a research-based and evidence-informed Early Years policy framework prototype; 2) the building and maintaining of strong community relationships between the research team and the Early Years leaders in London-Middlesex; 3) a realistic applied research opportunity for Early Childhood Leadership students to explore policy making in their “own backyard”; and 4) a greater understanding of how to co-construct a policy.

There were also lessons learned during this process: 1) flexibility and time are key when seeking to involve the community in sharing their voices; 2) building knowledge about a specific service within a community is complex, hence the use of a strong network of the key organizations within that community (i.e., seeking the involvement of more employers in the research study) to be involved in the research process; 3) researchers need to plan alongside the community and its key stakeholders and piggy-back on existing data/information; and 4) the co-construction of policy is a reiterative process that is not linear. It is important to maximize the co-construction of a policy that one considers, where the community is, its current reality. As per the chart above, there may be work already completed on clarifying the values and arguments, which can then be used to focus on specific research that the community or key stakeholders see as crucial to move forward. The iteration process is very fluid, and it needs to respect where the community is at that time.

The following chapters will review each of the above pillars in more depth. They will give you an insight into how the pillars connect to other Early Years frameworks, and how they intersect to form the final prototype that reflects the reality of the ELCC environment in London and Middlesex, Ontario, Canada.

CHAPTER 4: PILLAR #1: ACCESS

Chapter Outline

4.0 Learning Objectives
4.1 What Do We Mean by Access?
4.2 What is Canada's Early Learning and Childcare System?
4.3 How Do We Know What is Happening Across the Country?
4.4 What is Ontario's Current Bilateral Agreement?
4.5 What is the London-Middlesex Early Years System Approach?
4.6 Key Stakeholder Perspectives on Access
4.7 Intersections With Other Pillars
4.8 Implications in the Early Years Field
4.9 Reflective Activity



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4.0 Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

- Explain the access pillar from the lens of various Early Years key stakeholders.
- Discuss the importance of including multiple perspectives when considering access in an Early Years system.
- Analyze the impact of access on an Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system.

4.1 What Do We Mean by Access?

Access is a major element of an Early Years system, as noted in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Starting Strong reports, published since 2001. These reports identify required elements which, with access, are the foundations or pillars to an effective and impactful Early Years system: affordability, quality, responsiveness, and inclusivity. OECD portrays access to an Early Years system as children under the age of 3 who have universal access to early learning and care regardless of a family's social location.

> *Social location, or "social position," refers to the placement of an individual in a particular culture, society, or social hierarchy. Someone's social location accounts for the power dynamic(s) in which they play a part, the systems that they navigate, the resources they have access to, and the formative experiences that they carry with them (Rivers, 2021, para. 4)*

LEARN MORE

Read Article: The Importance of Knowing and Naming Your Social Location for a more in-depth discussion of the concept of Social Location.

4.2 What is Canada's Early Learning and Childcare System?

In the past two years, Canada's federal government has focused on the construction of a national Early Years system, identified as the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system. With funding outlined until 2026, provinces and territories have signed bilateral agreements that reflect their own areas of focus, based on the parameters set in the *Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework* (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2017). It is important to remember that the Early Learning and Child Care system (ELCC) is under provincial or territorial jurisdiction. The bilateral agreements state that the CWELCC system should be flexible and widely available to support the needs of families and children in order to encourage early childhood development. The provincial and territorial action plans acknowledge the role that CWELCC has in supporting the ability of parents to continue to work and their education, while also recognizing the needs of vulnerable families and communities.

The Canadian federal government identifies key indicators of access, such as: 1) the percentage of children who have access to early childhood education, 2) the number of children who are receiving subsidies or financial support, and 3) the number of child care organizations that offer flexible arrangements (i.e. irregular/ non-traditional hours, crisis and emergency services). To increase access to the CWELCC system, the current bilateral agreements continue to see plans to increase the number of child care spaces and to implement '$10 a day childcare' by 2026 to make access affordable for more Canadian families. It is important to recognize the interplay between access and other components of an ELCC system, such as affordability and flexibility or responsiveness.

4.3 How Do We Know What is Happening Across the Country?

In Canada, reports such as the *Early Childhood Education Report* (ECER) have informed the national Early Years sector since 2011. Over the years, the authors of the ECER have tabulated information from across the country, identifying 21 benchmarks, separated into five categories: 1) governance; 2) funding; 3) access; 4) learning environment; and 5) accountability. The ECER 2020 (Akbari et al., 2021) describes access through 3 specific benchmarks, which include: families' ability to have their children in full-day kindergarten; data that shows the provinces and territories have at least 50 % of their children attending child care or kindergarten; and funding to support children with disabilities to attend child care environments.



Read the 2020 Early Childhood Education Report.

4.4 What is Ontario's Current Bilateral Agreement?

In its May 2022 bilateral agreement (Government of Canada, 2022), the province of Ontario focused on the increase of child care spaces in licensed child care centres and home-based centres. It designated a minimum percentage of $.1% of the overall spending of operating funds to ensure child care access for children with disabilities. Specifically, the province committed to increasing the net number of licensed child care spaces for children under the age of 6 to 76,700 spaces by 2025-2026, with a goal of 86,000 spaces by the end of 2026. Ontario, similar to the other provinces and territories, has planned to reduce child care fees for parents to $10 per day by the 2025-2026 year. This increase in spaces and reduction of parents' fees can substantially improve access for many families and children, giving them the opportunity to choose the child care that meets their needs. It is important to remember that the government of Ontario, while working with the federal government through its bilateral agreement, transfers federal and provincial funds to the municipalities that implement the provincial ELCC system through a strategic plan or service plan. This service plan addresses the municipalities' visions, goals, and reflects their own unique approach to meet the needs of their children and families, as seen in the London-Middlesex service plan (City of London, 2019).

LEARN MORE

Review *Canada's 2022 Bilateral Agreement*.
Review London-Middlesex Child Care & Early Years Service System Plan 2019-2023 [PDF].

4.5 What is the London-Middlesex Early Years System Approach?

Based on the information gathered from the review of global, national, provincial/territorial, and municipal documents and the research conducted on the co-construction of an Early Years policy framework prototype for London-Middlesex, access continues to be a major component or pillar for an ELCC system. It is a multifaceted area of focus that ensures an extensive range of opportunities and environments by removing barriers for every child. Access was a key point of discussion from the parents', child care providers', Early Years professionals', and employers' perspectives in the London-Middlesex area. Key aspects of access identified included universal access, flexible access, dependable access, reliable/dependable access, geographical access, access through a revised waitlist approach, and access to quality child care programming.

The chart below provides an overview for each of the six aspects mentioned that helps operationalize this pillar within an ELCC system. The data was, as indicated in the previous chapter on the research on the Early Years policy framework prototype #3, gathered from primary resources that included one-on-one interviews via Zoom, focus groups, and secondary resources such as Early Years community town halls and various national, provincial/territorial, and municipal documents. The next sections of this chapter expand on this information on the access pillar based on the London-Middlesex perspective.

Key Components of Protoype #3 Pillar #1 Access

1

There is universal access for all children and families to a quality ELCC system.

- Increase access by removing / reducing costs to families / fixed vs flexible costs need to be considered.
- Review how leases can be negotiated to reduce cost and time spent on negotiation, while also establishing locations that meet parents/families' needs (child care deserts).
- Consider the perception that some consider high cost equals high quality, which is not available to all.
- Access to centre tours to help inform parents/families; clear information on child intake into programs.
- Review Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) parameters to help support universal access / more spaces (i.e. considering nursery schools as part of Early Years child care

system).

2

There is flexible access to the ELCC system to meet the needs of children's and families' schedules.

- Part-time vs. full-time access.
- Non-traditional hours of operation.

3

There is reliable, dependable access for all children and families to the ELCC system.

- No closures / dependable service at all times.
- Reliable access based on increased staff available; recruitment and retention is key along with higher wages to incentivise students to become Early Years professionals and remain in the sector.
- Increased access through physical spaces that support all needs (physical access, washrooms, light control, outdoor space).

4

There is geographical access for all children and families to the ELCC system.

- Increase access in small towns, rural areas, more remote areas.
- Reduce the number of child care deserts.

5

There is increased access through revised approach to waitlists for children and families to the ELCC system.

- Use of a single waitlist to help remove barriers for parents, child care centres, and community organizations.

6

There is access to quality child care programming in the ELCC system.

- Child care centres reflect/based on community needs.

- Partnerships with family centres provide access to current resources to support children and families.
- Perception of varying levels of quality care in centres across cities, across rural areas.
- Increase access through programming that reflects diverse needs of children and families.
- Increase access to centres through representations of various languages needs (including text-to-speech, Braille), unique to the community served.
- Educate families / supporting families' needs to understand ELCC system/programs
- Expanding education/college for quality educators.

4.5.1 Universal Access for all Children to the ELCC System

Access to the ELCC system for all families who wish their children to attend is a goal for the municipalities of London-Middlesex. Families face many barriers trying to access child care, such as: 1) a lack of centres in their location (child care deserts), 2) a lack of public transportation to get to the child care centre/home-based care, and 3) a lack of educators to help open more spaces. Universal access is also about providing access to high-quality care, another important pillar to an effective Early Years system. The access pillar intersects with other pillars such as affordability, quality, responsiveness, and inclusivity. The high cost of fees, even with the '$10 per day' goal, a lack of workforce, parents' lack of understanding of how to access information on their regional ELCC system, and how it can meet their and their children's needs, impacts universal access.

4.5.2 Flexible Access to the ELCC System

Parents, families, and employers have indicated that they need flexibility in child care. Each family has its own schedules, be it due to older siblings and their own school schedules, work schedules, and other commitments, such as supporting an elder within their family. It is also important to consider that parents may have shift work and no family support to take care of the children during a late evening or night shift. The ELCC system needs to be aware and able to provide access that meets the needs of families and their children living in its region. It was made clear, especially by parents and health care organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic, that child care needed to be available outside of the regular workday hours. There is also a need to consider how the Early Years workforce is supported to create more flexible access for families. If Early Years professionals are provided with the right support, such as flexible hours for their own work, increased wages, benefits, and support in their daily practice, then the ELCC system can provide more flexible access to quality child care and learning.

4.5.3 Reliable Access to the ELCC System

The COVID-19 pandemic made clear the importance of having a reliable ELCC system. Health care providers and essential workers in the province of Ontario were, at times, not able to work due to the closure of child care centres. Emergency centres were opened to meet the needs of working parents to ensure that the children had access to a safe and caring environment. The pandemic created an opportunity to put the ELCC system under a microscope, highlighting its many weaknesses that had been present for many years. Accessing reliable,

dependable child care means that families can rely on the care and services no matter the circumstances, such as pandemics, emergency crises, or personal family matters.

4.5.4 Geographical Access to the ELCC System

Ontario is a large province, and municipalities across the province vary in their population size and diversity. Urban, small town, and rural communities all have their own unique needs which impact the delivery of a quality, accessible ELCC system. Families have indicated that they wish to have the freedom to choose child care that is not far from their home or work. In order to provide families with the freedom of choice, there has to be an emphasis on supplying the demand for child care spaces in various urban, small towns, and rural areas. By increasing the number of child care spaces in 'child care deserts,' this will mean greater access for many children and families to the ELCC system. This was noted when talking with parents and families in the City of London as well as in the County of Middlesex. Geographical location of the child care centre can present a barrier to access, especially if there is no public transportation available.

4.5.5 Waitlists and Access to the ELCC System

The concept of waitlists was part of the dialogue during interviews and focus groups with parents, child care providers, and Early Years professionals. Each Ontario municipality has its own approach; in the London-Middlesex region, parents can access an online waitlist, but it is important to note that each child care organization may also have a waitlist. This was seen as confusing for parents and for the operation of the ELCC system. Parents may have registered a child on the one online waitlist but also on various centres' lists. When the municipality tries to gather statistics on the number of children waiting to be registered, the amalgamation of the one online municipal waitlist and the individual centres' waitlists becomes problematic. Parents register their child on a number of waitlists, creating inflated numbers. This makes it difficult for a municipality to plan effectively on the location and number of child care spaces required to meet the needs of the families within their jurisdiction.

4.5.6 Access to Quality Programs

The ability to access quality child care means that all programs should be adapted to the children registered in them. This should include extra support for children who need it and the removal of barriers to all children accessing a quality-focused program. The following definition of quality, which is expanded upon in Chapter 6, helps us focus on key elements of a quality ELCC system.

> *Definition of a quality ELCC system: a high-quality ELCC system for Canadian children is one that must consider process and structural quality, reflecting the diverse values, beliefs, and rights of children, their families, professionals, and the communities the ELCC system serves.*

The ELCC system in the London-Middlesex region has established sound relationships with other community

Early Years organizations, such as speech and language therapists, health units, special needs resourcing, and Children's Aid Societies. These interdisciplinary relationships provide opportunities for collaboration with families, as well as professional learning opportunities for Early Years professionals. This approach means that the ELCC system can provide access to all, reflecting inclusionary practices as important elements to quality, and further outlined in Chapter 8: Pillar #5: Inclusivity.

4.6 Key Stakeholder Perspectives on Access

4.6.1 Families' Perspectives on Access



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Families see access to quality child care as an essential element for a healthy and viable family unit that is supported by interdisciplinary professionals to ensure the care, safety and development of their children. Working families rely on an ELCC system as a way to meet their needs and provide services that help guide them in being successful in accessing the right services for them. This was made even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when parents were attempting to work from home, or were deemed essential workers. As the pandemic progressed and employers requested the return to the workplace, many parents, especially women, were not able to return due to limited access to quality child care (Vickerson et al., 2022). It is important for families that child care be available to all and is easily accessible for every child. As mentioned in the previous sections, access is complex and must take into account: 1) varied geographical locations; 2) reliable and flexible hours of operations; 3) a stable workforce that can respond to the creation of added spaces and has the required competences to support all children in their care is key. When child care supports every child as a whole, it makes it easier for families to access the proper ELCC they wish and deserve for their children.

4.6.2 Early Year Professionals' Perspective on Access

Early years professionals are crucial to ensure that child care centres are viable and accessible to all children and their families. Currently, a crisis in having a reliable and consistent workforce is impacting not only the current number of child care spaces but efforts in adding spaces for the growing demand. Retention and hiring of Early Years professionals is a dilemma faced by Ontario municipalities; London and Middlesex are experiencing growth and are faced with learning environments that remain closed in existing child care centres. A living wage, benefits, and recognition of the profession are a must-have, as explained by the Early Years professionals. Another key element to having and maintaining a stable, accessible child care system is that the workforce has strong pre-service education programs and ongoing professional learning. This ensures that their day-to-day practice is based on the latest professional knowledge. When qualified staff are retained, and new members are mentored

within a positive, respected profession expands access for families and children. This also creates opportunities for flexible access, such as part-time and full-time availability for families, with the possibility of operating child care through non-traditional hours if needed.

LEARN MORE

Review the document *Position Paper On a Publicly-Funded Early Learning and Child Care Salary Scale* (2023) by A. Powell, Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) and C. Ferns, Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC).

- What are some key elements that surprised you in this report?
- How did you see this report contributing to the access pillar?

4.6.3 Childcare Providers' Perspective on Access



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Child care providers, namely directors and executive directors of child care centres, have the complex role of managing the day-to-day operations while being the educational leaders, helping their educators hone their pedagogical practice. As an Early Years employer, hiring well and retaining staff will ensure high-quality child care. The professionalization of early childhood education and well-trained educators can be ways to provide greater access for children and their families. Child care providers connect with local postsecondary institutions as members of the Program Advisory Council for Early Years programs. Their presence brings the London-Middlesex field perspective to the faculty, helping make the programs attuned to what the Early Years educators need to consider in their professional practice. Strong pre-service learning and ongoing professional learning through organizations such as Strive help educators refine their practice so as to ensure access to quality care and learning for all children in their care.

LEARN MORE

Review website**:** *Strive*. How does Strive approach supporting the access pillar?

Another role of the child care provider, in the province of Ontario, is to establish strong and trusting relationships with the municipality so that they can advocate for the sector. In London-Middlesex, the municipal managers

responsible for the implementation of their service plan work collaboratively with child care providers. The London-Middlesex Licensed Child Care Network (LCCN) works with the two municipalities, representing the voices of the licensed child care centres and home care programs. Child care providers attend regular meetings and present the field perspective at the municipal, provincial and federal levels when consultation is required. This advocacy role is seen as a key leadership role, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two virtual Early Years townhalls and one face-to-face townhall held at the local college were supported by the child care providers and provided an opportunity for key stakeholders to meet and dialogue on an Early Years policy framework prototype that would reflect what a high-quality, accessible ELCC system would look like in the region.

LEARN MORE

Review Website**:** *Licensed Child Care Network*. How does LCCN approach dialogue of the access pillar?

4.6.4 Employers' Perspectives' on Access

Employers in the London-Middlesex region shared their perspectives on how access impacted their businesses pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic. During the second annual Early Years town hall, one employer shared how the lack of flexible and dependable child care impacted his employees, especially women. Many of them were not able to work from home as they were supporting their partner's work at home, or if they were an essential worker. This employer saw his workforce reduced due to a lack of flexible and dependable child care. Another employer discussed how educator practice could impact access to child care if the educator was not able to meet the special needs of one of their employees' children. The employer was not able to rely on the employee, which then impacted not only their business but the ability to promote this particular employee, who was a very experienced worker. Employers indicated the importance of having an ELCC system that was accessible, dependable and flexible so that their employees could be at work, focusing on their responsibilities without worrying about the care and learning for their children.

Many municipalities during the 2021-2022 year, including London and Middlesex, established various forums to have an open discussion on how they could recover from the economic impact of the pandemic. These round tables or forums included representatives from the community, such as members of the indigenous and black networks, business and manufacturing employers, health units, and post-secondary education from the London, Middlesex, Elgin and Oxford municipalities. The City of London made public a letter they sent to the national and provincial governments regarding its stand on the importance of the national child care framework. In its community recovery framework, the City of London acknowledged the importance of quality, accessible child care, which it saw as an important factor in "investing in people, driving prosperity, [and] fostering community" (Holder, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic made even more visible the impact of a lack of access to quality, dependable child care on the ability of women to continue in the workforce. The reality of balancing work and family responsibilities, which may include child and elder care, meant that many women could not continue to work or complete educational programs.

4.7 Intersections With Other Pillars

The research study made it clear that the access pillar intersects with other pillars, including affordability, quality, responsiveness, and inclusivity. Access relies on consistent government support and funding; this ensures the ability to respond to the needs of diverse families, children and Early Years professionals. Access to a quality ELCC system relies on Early Years professionals who are valued and respected through sustainable funding that reflects livable wages. This affects the quality of the ELCC system and the ability to recruit Early Years professionals. By having a dependable, knowledgeable workforce, the ELCC system can then focus on universal access to a quality system that responds to the diverse needs of children and families. The next pillar chapters will provide more specifics on how they impact and help create a sound Early Years child care system.



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4.8 Implications in the Early Years Field

As discussed in this chapter, universal access for all children and their families to a quality ELCC system depends on a number of factors: 1) flexibility, 2) reliability or dependability, 3) geography, and 4) an operational approach to waitlists. To ensure maximum access, the above factors need to be considered. Early Years professionals are the backbone of every child care centre and home-based centre. They enable children to learn and grow through social interactions, while also keeping child care centres afloat. Increased access to child care depends not only on physical spaces but also on educated, qualified educators. When Early Years professionals are provided livable wages and benefits that demonstrate the value of the work, the use of existing and newly created spaces will be available to more children and their families.

It is important to consider the factors mentioned above, including access to quality child care for children and parents, not only in cities but also in small towns and rural areas. Early Years professionals need to be able to reach these varied geographical locations, engage with communities, and build strong relationships. When one combines livable wages and dependable operating budgets, this can improve overall access to the child care system. The next chapter on affordability will review the factors that impact an Early Years system and provide insights into the current reality of the system within the London-Middlesex region.

4.9 Reflective Activity

This chapter has built your understanding of access and its many aspects within an ELCC system within two Ontario municipalities. The following reflective activity allows you to reflect on the access pillar.

Reflective Activity

While watching the next video, "Is $10-a-day child working in Ontario?", what would be your starting point or area of focus to guarantee access to quality child care to the children and parents in your region?

Watch the following video: *Is $10-a-day Child Care Working for Ontario?* on page 4.9 Reflective Activity in the online version of this OER.

To help your reflection, consider the following:

1. Three key factors impacting access to child care in your area;
2. Three possible solutions to improve access to child care in your area;
3. One starting point or area of focus to guarantee access to quality child care in your region.

CHAPTER 5: PILLAR #2: AFFORDABILITY

Chapter Outline

5.0 Learning Objectives
5.1 What do We Mean by Affordability?
5.2 How is Affordability Unfolding Across the Country?
5.3 How is Ontario Focusing on Affordability?
5.4 What is the London-Middlesex ELCC System Approach?
5.5 Key Stakeholder Perspectives on Affordability
5.6 Intersections with Other Pillars
5.7 Implications to the Field
5.8 Reflective Activity



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5.0 Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

- Explain the affordability pillar from the lens of various Early Years key stakeholders.
- Discuss the importance of including multiple perspectives when considering quality in an Early Years system.
- Analyze the impact of affordability on an Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system.

5.1 What Do We Mean by Affordability?

The first thing that comes to mind when we think about affordability in the Early Years is how child care providers can make child care affordable for all families and children. Reducing child care fees for families while balancing operational budgets aligned with current costs must be considered. These costs must reflect quality child care through living wages that support the recruitment and retention of Early Years professionals who deliver diverse programming as part of their professional practice. Documents such as the 2023 *Early Childhood Education Report* (ECER) (Akbari et al., 2024a), Canada Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC), Ontario's bilateral agreement and an Ontario municipality's service plan help us understand affordability and its key components.

Universal Child Care

The goal of universal child care is to meet the needs of all families within a high-quality Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system that is affordable for all, attained through coordinated efforts at all levels of government. Canada has much diversity across a large geographic region; Indigenous, Francophone, immigrant, rural, urban, and far-north communities seek the best possible learning and care for all their children. The COVID-19 pandemic put the current child care system under a microscope and demonstrated how the piecemeal approach did not serve families and children during and after the crisis. Now, as economies are trying to rebuild, families are also seeking financial stability with the help of affordable child care, specifically as many women continue to find it challenging to return to work. Universal, quality child care impacts children's and families' overall well-being.

Operational Budgets

Operational budgets in the ELCC system are foundational in providing sustainability. When the operational budgets reflect the actual cost of providing access to all children and their families, there is a consistent and coherent approach that will help families' finances and child care services within a community. Having long-term commitment and information on federal, provincial, and municipal funding provides stability to the ELCC system. It helps ensure two critical components of an effective system: quality spaces are available for all children and supported by qualified Early Years professionals. These operational budgets, based on short, mid, and long-term goals and planning, help provide insight into how we should allocate the funds to improve different aspects of the ELCC system.

Quality Child Care

As noted in the research (outlined in a previous chapter; see Chapter 3) conducted in the City of London and Middlesex County over the past four years, quality child care is one of six pillars identified from the data collected.

The research participants, including parents, child care providers (directors of centres), Early Years professionals, early childhood students, and employers, identified elements of this complex concept. The following statements helped identify what they perceived as crucial elements of the quality of an ELCC system in prototype #2 (personal communication, November 2022):

- Rich, caring learning environment that views children as capable, competent learners.
- Relationships that are strong, trusting, and open to support children's learning and wellbeing.
- Recruitment and retention of qualified RECEs that support the growing number of child care spaces.
- Professional compensations and benefits for Early Years Professionals.
- Professional development and training opportunities are part of the day-to-day practice of Early Years Professionals.

It is essential to consider that the quality of an ELCC system depends on the lenses through which we review the system and its services to children and their families. Affordability is essential, as is quality, when looking at the operationalization of the system; we must acknowledge the intersection of these two pillars in short- and long-term financial plans.

5.2 How is Affordability Unfolding Across the Country?

The 2023 *Early Childhood Education Report* (ECER) (Akbari et al., 2024a) reviews various components of the ELCC systems across the country. This iteration of the report takes into account the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the first three years of the CWELCC implementation. Since the 2020 ECER, every province and territory has improved their financing for early childhood education and care. Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia have been able to reduce child care fees by 50% or more. The rest of the country has been able to meet the $10 per day cost or less. According to the data collected by Akbari et al. (2024b), while overall funding has increased in the years between 2020-2023, there remains 85% of the $30 billion is yet to be allotted to specific plans for the next three years. Overall, the investment in early childhood education and care has risen across provinces by $4.5 billion from 2017-2020, which brings the total amount of spending up to $14.6 billion.

Challenges continue to impact the national ELCC system, and families are still left without access to affordable, quality child care in their communities. A focus on affordability from parent lenses in the past three years of the CWELCC has created added demand on a child care system that is not growing as quickly as needed, where spaces are, at times, empty due to a lack of qualified staffing. Operational budgets do not reflect the real costs of operating a child care centre, such as inflation, living wages, and benefits to recruit and maintain a quality workforce. This is evident in the ECER 2023 (Akbari et al., 2024a) results and trends: 1) a lack of salary and fee scale in licensed child care in Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia; and 2) not meeting the ⅔ of teacher wages in New Brunswick, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories.

LEARN MORE

Learn more by reviewing the 2023 Early Childhood Education Report [PDF].

5.3 How is Ontario Focusing on Affordability?

Through its 2022 bilateral agreement (Ministry of Education, 2025a), Ontario committed to reducing parents' fees by 50% by the end of 2022, leading toward the larger goal of reducing parents' fees for children under 6 to $10 per day by the end of 2025-2026. As mentioned in *Ontario's Early Years and Child Care Annual Report 2023*, the goal is to increase child care spaces for children ages 0-5 by 70% or higher by the end of 2026 (Ministry of Education, 2025c). Yet, as of the end of 2023, Ontario was meeting the needs of only 50% of its 2- to 4-year-olds. While Ontario has committed to improving access and affordability, it is evident that if a wage framework that values the work of the staff in child care environments is not in place, it will be difficult to provide affordable access to all families.

5.4 What is the London-Middlesex ELCC System Approach?

Similar to other municipalities in the province of Ontario, the City of London and the County of Middlesex have the responsibility of delivering an ELCC system that meets the needs of their families. In its 2019-2013 plan(City of London, 2019), the City of London and Middlesex County are part of a growing region in Southwestern Ontario. In-migration has increased the overall population in both the City of London and the County of Middlesex as Toronto prices become more and more out of reach for families (Watson & Associates Economists Ltd., 2022). The two municipalities have used a community-based approach for many years, most evident in the creation of the Child & Youth Network and its 2019 progress report. This supported the gathering of data to inform the co-construction of the Early Years policy framework prototype for the London and Middlesex regions, which added further evidence to support the 2024 child care and Early Years service plan. As this resource is being written, the City of London and the County of Middlesex are in the final confirmation of their child care and Early Years strategic plan for the next 5 years.

Affordability is a major concern for families, Early Years professionals, child care providers and employers in the area. Through the four years of listening to various perspectives, affordability is anchored in both lower costs to families and consistent, realistic funding has been a recurring theme. Three key aspects that were identified included affordable universal childcare, quality care, and realistic operational budgets.

The chart below provides an overview of each of the three aspects mentioned that help provide a better understanding of the affordability pillar within the ELCC system. The data and research in this chart were gathered from the Early Years policy framework prototype 3, which included interviews via Zoom, focus groups, Early Years community town halls (online and in person), and secondary resources such as various national, provincial and municipal documents.

Key Components of Protoype #3 Pillar #2 Affordability

1

Universal child care is affordable to all families across Canada, territories, provinces, and municipalities.

- Maintenance of large number of spaces to meet the needs of all children and families.
- A system of subsidies that supports those families not able to pay the $10/day fee.
- Must consider the cost for emergency spaces (for crises, i.e., pandemic).

- Child care costs are flexible and reflect current family realities (i.e., loss of family income when not able to access child care / delayed return to work).

2

Quality Early Years learning and standard of care are not dependent on cost to parents/families.

- Ongoing learning for Early Years professionals as part of operations cost to guarantee quality and standard of care for all children.
- Ensuring professional pathways (i.e., varied roles within the system) that include the development of strong leaders.

3

Operational budget is realistic and consistent to reflect the management of a quality child care environment in the current context.

- Recognition of slow decision-making process at government level and how it impacts flexibility in budget planning.
- Required staffing numbers and competences to meet the needs of all children and families.
- Recruitment and retention of staff to reduce the ongoing costs of hiring/re-hiring.
- Creation of wage grids/staff compensation to ensure staff for current and added spaces (Support from all levels of government in creation of wage grids).
- Operations funding that includes consistent professional learning/development in daily routine, benefits, technology access and well-rounded staffing model.

5.5 Key Stakeholder Perspectives on Affordability

What Does Affordability Mean to Families?

Child care is an essential resource and need for families who want to provide quality care and support for their children. Access to affordable child care became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when parents, especially women, were not able to return to work as quickly as they wished. Described as the "she-cession" (Big Thinking Podcast, 2023), women were, and continue to delay their return to work due to challenges accessing affordable, quality child care. Parent participants in the study spoke of the exorbitant costs of child care and the increased financial burden if a family has more than one child in care. Affordable child care for families means that fees are reduced to a point where parents do not have to worry about the financial burden and can have a certain amount of disposable income. Making child care affordable for all means that families and children are able to gain access to the child care they desire without feeling the pressures of financial hardship. If there is an ability to balance the low fees, to provide subsidies for those families not able to pay the $10 per day cost and create wage grids for Early Years professionals that reflect the work, then universal child care may be a reality. Parent participants noted that while they were looking for affordable child care, they stated that the quality of the child care was a key element in choosing a child care and learning environment. They were supportive of the $10 per day goal set by the federal government but saw a need to recognize the role of the Early Years professionals as key to affordable, quality child care.

With the *Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC)* agreements set in place, families across the country are starting to see child care as more affordable. However, at the midpoint in the CWELCC agreements, as noted in the 2023 ECER (Akbari et al., 2024a), access to affordable child care spaces continues to be an issue in both urban and rural communities across the country, in Ontario, and in the London-Middlesex regions.

What Does Affordability Mean to Early Years Professionals?

The Early Years professionals are at the heart of the ELCC system; they are the practitioners who connect with families on a daily basis and provide a caring and learning environment for all children in their care. Similarities in perception are evident across the data from a national, provincial and regional perspective. Affordability, through the lenses of the Early Years professionals in London and Middlesex, includes parent fees that are affordable and a realistic operational budget that includes funding for sustainable and consistent living wages through a salary grid and ongoing professional development. Akbari et al. (2024a) state similar areas of focus in their report on their funding and learning environment benchmarks. According to the analysis of the data collected for Ontario, the province needs to consider the following two areas: 1) a salary and fee scale for licensed child care (currently, the early ECEs' salary is not two-thirds of the teachers' wages); and 2) a minimum of 3% of the overall provincial budget is dedicated to ECEC.

In order for child care to sustain high-quality care of children, there must be support in place for those who educate and take care of children. Affordability needs to provide professional development opportunities in order to support Early Years professionals in managing the increasing demands of their daily practice. In many cases, Early Years professionals take on various tasks that can hinder their ability to effectively build positive interactions with children, as well as engage in pedagogy efficiently. This became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when the need to ensure a healthy environment became part of the day-to-day work of Early Years professionals. It meant time away from children while also reducing the number of spaces available for families.

Early years professionals often perform various tasks in their practice which demonstrate their passion, commitment, skills and knowledge in the field. This includes meeting with parents to discuss the day-to-day happenings within the child care and learning environment, mentoring newly hired Early Years professionals, and taking time to learn new pedagogical strategies to support the diverse children in their care. With the specific knowledge and skills that are part of Early Years professionals' practice, it is crucial that they get compensated for the work that they do.

Consistent and sustainable funds are required to support the Early Years professionals' practice; they must have access to quality resources and materials for all children's needs. London and Middlesex educators are faced with the issue of keeping various resources stocked due to a lack of funding; it is important that updated materials, including technology, are available in the centres in order to support children's development and overall well-being. Akbari et al. (2024a) indicate in their funding benchmark that two-thirds of child care funding must go towards program operations for a viable, quality learning environment for all children. At the time of the 2023 report, Ontario was not meeting this benchmark. It is then difficult for municipalities across the province to provide the required funds for program resources and materials when other operational costs take precedence (i.e., rents, mortgages, insurance, food, and staff salaries), including inflation.

What Does Affordability Mean to Early Years Employers?

A child care provider or Early Years Employer (directors, executive directors, municipal managers), is responsible for the day-to-day operations of an early childhood centre, which include supervision of program planning and delivery, capital expenditures for up-to-date learning and caring environments, staff hiring and retention, professional learning for staff, and relationships with child and parent support organizations to meet the needs of the children in their care. During the course of the research, Early Years employers described affordability as having a sustainable operating budget that can ensure there is the required staff with the competencies to meet the needs of all children and families. Many of the children's needs include the availability of various foods that are both healthy and connect to the various communities' cultures, daily necessities such as extra clothing that may not be available to some families, diapers, and hygienic products that are required for children's overall well-being. The child care program relies on the Early Years employers being able to provide the necessary resources in the caring and learning environments, as well as ongoing access for Early Years professionals to be able to have a wide pedagogical understanding of program delivery that will be responsive to the needs of the children in their care.

While Early Years employers in the municipalities of London and Middlesex fully support the federal government's goals for low-cost fees for parents, which will increase access for children to quality child care and learning, they also point out that this adds to their concern about having a strong workforce in the Early Years sector. The more highly qualified staff means better child engagement, as well as responding to the needs of all children. However, with highly qualified staff, there needs to be aspects that entice staff to stay, such as benefits, wage enhancements and a well-rounded work environment. The Ontario government and the Ministry of Education overseeing the

child care sector must consider a wage grid that reflects the various roles, responsibilities, and qualifications held by the Early Years professionals. This was a key element of discussion during the one-on-one interviews, the town hall discussions, and the focus groups with Early Years employers, as it eliminates the need for ongoing recruitment and retention of staff, which can reduce the overall costs of hiring and training. London and Middlesex municipalities have worked with the sector and ensured the most up-to-date information to include a workforce strategy outline in their 2024-2028 service plan that will meet the growing needs of their families (City of London, 2024).



The 2024-2028 London-Middlesex Child Care and Early Years Service System Plan [PDF] outlines the government's plan to address affordability.

Professional learning is a key component to secure a qualified workforce and must be seen as part of the operating cost and funding of a child care system that can be responsive to the needs of all the children it serves. Ongoing learning is valued by the London and Middlesex Early Years employers and child care providers. They see access to quality professional learning as part of the day-to-day work, and this was mentioned numerous times in the research. They also see a need for Early Years professionals to be part of the ongoing discussion on the vision and overall goals of the child care and learning system in their own region, in the province and across the country.

What Does Affordability Mean to Other Employers?

Through a panel discussion and one-on-one interviews, employers in the region of London and Middlesex shared their perspectives on the importance of their employees being able to access consistent and affordable quality child care. This was made apparent by an employer during an Early Years town hall panel, where he described the impact on his employees when not being able to access affordable child care during the COVID-19 pandemic and confirmed with other employers during the one-on-one interviews. Healthcare providers were provided with emergency child care so that they could continue to work; later, other essential workers were also provided access to free child care or were able to care at a reduced cost. The impact of the 2020-2022 pandemic emphasized the need for affordable child care post-pandemic as a key economic recovery factor, increasing existing job productivity and helping fill vacant jobs across all sectors. Employers saw affordable child care as key to attracting businesses and workers to Ontario.



The *Knowing Our Numbers: Executive Report [PDF]* document provides an overview of how municipal service managers in the province of Ontario work together to provide data to support an accessible and affordable child care and learning system.

5.6 Intersections with Other Pillars

Affordability is linked to other pillars, such as quality, responsiveness, and access. Opening a child care centre and allocating funds that reflect the true cost to support a child care system is the first step in creating wider access, with both the required physical spaces and Early Years educators needed to support those spaces. It is important that funding be allocated in a way to ensure high-quality care and access for all children. Access is linked to affordability when operational costs address quality through the hiring and retention of qualified staff. This also ensures that child care providers, directors and Early Years professionals can respond to the needs of children; the faster we can increase the quality and standard of care. Affordability is a way to ensure that quality child care is made accessible to families by removing the barriers for low-income families. This, in turn, creates more access for families with diverse incomes as well as increases the responsiveness of the child care system to meet the needs within a community.

5.7 Implications to the Field

There can be many implications if funding is not allocated in a way that best fits the needs of children, families and Early Years professionals. Balancing capital funding with operational funding is a crucial component of a child care system that can support all children and their families.

As discussed in this chapter, reducing fees to make child care affordable for families and children is an efficient way to increase access to licensed child care. However, reduced fees produce a higher demand for child care. With the reduced fees and increased demand for child care, there are not enough spaces to meet the demand. There is an urgent need to open more child care centres, especially in rural communities; however, the government funding or support to open new child care is a slow and cumbersome process. Balancing – $10/day fees to make child care affordable is an efficient way to create access for all children; however, there needs to be responsive measures to balance affordability, access, and quality within the child care and learning system.

5.8 Reflective Activity

Reflection

Watch the video Ensuring Access to High-Quality, Affordable Early Care and Education for Low-Income Families on page 5.8 of the online version of this OER.

CHAPTER 6: PILLAR #3: QUALITY

Chapter Outline

6.0 Learning Objectives
6.1 What do we Mean by Quality?
6.2 How does Quality Connect to the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Program?
6.3 Current Landscape in Canada Related to the Quality Pillar
6.4 Ontario's Bilateral Agreement and Quality
6.5 Current Landscape in Ontario Related to the Quality Pillar
6.6 Current Landscape of Quality in the London/Middlesex Region
6.7 Key Stakeholder Perspectives on Quality
6.8 Intersections with Other Pillars
6.9 Moving Forward in Quality



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6.0 Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

- Explain the quality pillar from the lens of various Early Years key stakeholders.
- Discuss the importance of including multiple perspectives when considering quality in an Early Years system.
- Analyze the subjectivity of quality as a term of measurement in the Early Years.

6.1 What do We Mean by Quality?

Quality means something different to each stakeholder in the Early Years system. Many networks, committees, professionals, government officials, and policymakers have attempted to define quality over time to determine what quality looks like in the Early Years. The lens of the stakeholder and their purpose for defining quality influences both spoken and written policies present in Early Years settings. Our goal in seeking multiple perspectives on defining quality was to provide insight into these different lenses and purposes, helping to develop some consistent components. What do families, Early Years professionals, child care providers, and employers value in a quality Early Years system? This holistic approach provides us with numerous ways to move forward in developing a local system that respects the rights of children, families, professionals, and the communities where Early Years services are provided.



"Person Holding Baby's Hand" by Ricardo Moura, Unsplash License.

6.2 How does Quality Connect to the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Program?

Canada's Vision

> *This Framework sets the foundation for governments to work toward a shared long-term vision where all children can experience the enriching environment of quality early learning and child care that supports children's development to reach their full potent*

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Review: the Government of Canada's Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework.

It is clear from Canada's vision that quality is a foundational pillar necessary to move an equitable and inclusive system forward for children and families. The Framework emphasizes the importance of viewing children as competent and capable learners, the value of building strong relationships, and ensuring the workforce is qualified and well-trained (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2017). Additionally, the Canadian vision holds that a high-quality Early Years system must be flexible, accessible, and affordable to meet the needs of all Canadian families. These priorities have been evident across the bilateral agreements between the Federal government and each province and territory.

Process Quality vs. Structural Quality

Structural quality standards have been the traditional measurement for quality in the Early Years. Structural quality is influenced by regulated standards, including child-to-educator ratios, maximum group sizes, designated spaces, curricular frameworks, and minimum staff qualifications (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021a). While these measures are important for the healthy and safe development of children, they

are not indicators of high-quality responsive relationships that support holistic wellness and learning in the Early Years.

Process quality includes structural quality indicators but also involves meaningful but difficult to measure standards such as educators' abilities to meet the individual needs of children, to ensure ongoing engagement in a variety of enriching activities, the understanding of children's temperaments, and the retention of educators to develop responsive relationships (OECD, 2021a). Process quality is more difficult to quantify and requires a much deeper analysis to truly understand the connections afforded to all children accessing Early Years settings.

Canada's vision for a high-quality Early Years system includes structural quality measures, such as minimum qualifications for educators, as well as training and professional development to reach their full potential (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2017). There is also mention of process quality measures, such as Early Years providers adopting innovative new tools, including evidence-based curricular frameworks for early learning and child care. Some work has been completed in this area with the introduction of the *Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework*, 2018. While this framework is available throughout Canada, it hasn't been widely adopted in Early Years settings. This may be a result of provincial and territorial education ministries being mandated to oversee curricular frameworks, which overlook federal, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis initiatives.

As Canada continues to implement the CWELCC program nationwide, both structural quality and process quality remain disjointed, with significant variations between provinces and territories. Lessons can be learned from New Zealand and its approach to embedding both Māori values, through *Te Whariki a te Kohanga Reo*, an Indigenous framework, and settler/newcomer values, through the *Te Whariki Early Childhood Education Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2017), a bicultural framework. These different curricular streams allow for local approaches honouring linguistics and culture. The *Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework* (Government of Canada, 2018) includes frameworks for First Nations, Inuit, and Metis Peoples, but most provincial and territorial curricular documents for early learning and child care are not multicultural. The province of British Columbia's *Early Learning Framework* was developed in consultation with the BC Aboriginal Child Care Society, the First Nations Education Steering Committee, and Métis Nation BC, and aims to advance Truth and Reconciliation (Government of British Columbia, 2019).



To learn more about other curricular frameworks, consult: Tāhūrangi – Te Whāriki Online or the British Columbia Early Learning Framework [PDF].

6.3 Current Landscape in Canada Related to the Quality Pillar

> *Early in 2025, the Canadian government announced continued funding for the CWELCC program until 2031 in 11 provinces and territories across the country. For more information, please review the following statement from Child Care Now.*

This much-anticipated news was celebrated across 11 of the 13 provinces and territories by key stakeholders, recognizing that ongoing Federal support is required to ensure a universal Early Years system will gradually be fully implemented (Child Care Now, 2025b). The ongoing investment by the Canadian government will ensure more children have access to affordable licensed child care spaces and accessible Early Years programs. Affordability and accessibility have been key considerations in many provincial and territorial bilateral agreements. Quality is included as a key pillar in the bilateral agreements; however, due to its definitional complexity, it can be more challenging to implement and measure than the other prominent pillars.

Advocates have voiced their concerns regarding the provinces that have not agreed to continue the CWELCC program after 2026, potentially eliminating more affordable and accessible Early Years programs for children and families in those provinces. Alberta and Saskatchewan have not signed on to renew their bilateral agreements with the federal government, noting that Alberta has already reduced child care fees by 80%, hired 10,000 early childhood educators, and added 31,000 new child care spaces under the CWELCC program (Building Canada's Childcare System, n.d.).

LEARN MORE

For more information on Canada's Early Years workforce, consult the Atkinson Centre's Canada's Children Need a Professional Early Childhood Workforce Report [PDF].

6.4 Ontario's Bilateral Agreement and Quality

> *Ontario continues to move forward with its commitment to the CWELCC program. A brief overview of the current landscape can be found at the Government of Ontario's Website.*

As noted on the Government of Ontario's website, Ontario's focus on quality includes increased compensation for lower-paid RECEs in the profession, as well as a workforce strategy that includes the recruitment and retention of qualified staff, along with professional learning supports for Early Years professionals (Ministry of Education, 2025). Retention of qualified Early Years professionals in Ontario remains challenging, particularly when the focus on increased compensation prioritizes lower-paid staff. Early years professionals who have dedicated many years of service are not being recognized in Ontario's quality priorities. A wage scale based on qualifications and years of experience is necessary to ensure long-term qualified professionals remain in the field.

The Atkinson Centre compiled data for a workforce strategy report, *Canada's Children Need a Professional Early Childhood Education Workforce*, comparing workforce conditions across the country (McCuaig et al., 2022, April). According to the report, in 2021, Ontario met many of the quality indicators related to curriculum, qualified staffing levels, and a regulatory college; however, it had not met the quality indicators necessary for an appropriately compensated workforce. Ontario has not implemented mandatory benefits or pension plans for all Early Years professionals, and it has not met the important milestone of Early Years professionals being compensated at a minimum of ⅔ of a teacher's salary (McCuaig et al., 2022, April).

6.5 Current Landscape in Ontario Related to the Quality Pillar

Ontario has agreed to renew the bilateral agreement with the Canadian government to ensure the CWELCC program continues for families in Ontario until 2031. This promising news allows for more time to fully implement the CWELCC program in Ontario. According to the *Women in Ontario's Labour Market report*, women with young children continue to lag behind men in the workforce in 2022 (Jamasi et al., 2023). The Financial Accountability Office of Ontario predicted that women's participation in the labour market would increase from 84% in 2022 to 86.4% in 2027, if objectives in the bilateral agreement were met. Challenges such as a lack of child care spaces, underfunding in the Early Years, and a shortage of early childhood educators were noted in the report as potential barriers to the anticipated increase in women in the labour market in Ontario (Jamasi et al., 2023).

The retention of Early Years professionals in the ELCC profession has been a longstanding struggle in Ontario. While Ontario has a high graduation rate of Early Years professionals, approximately 50% of graduates leave the profession within the first five years (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2022, September 14). Many RECEs find work in other professions that pay higher wages, include extended health care benefits, and lower levels of accountability. The impact of higher wages in other provinces, such as PEI, Manitoba, and Alberta, also drives Early Years professionals in Ontario to relocate to other provinces, increasing their annual income by $6,000 to $10,000 (Seward, Dhuey, & Pan, 2023).

Ontario has maintained its commitment to quality by increasing wages for the lowest-paid Early Years professionals, implementing a new wage floor of $23.86 in 2024. The implementation of an increased wage floor in Ontario was an initial step towards a workforce strategy with a focus on recruitment and retention. Additionally, funding has been issued to each municipality to create recruitment and retention campaigns.



For more information regarding the increased wage floor, consult the Government of Ontario's news release.

The Ontario Ministry of Education has implemented two professional learning days per year for Early Years professionals under the CWELCC program. This demonstrates a commitment to providing professional learning support for those working in the Early Years profession. Each municipality has varied methods for distributing the funding in its region, which allows for autonomy for child care operators and Early Years agencies. System-wide professional learning events have taken place, along with funding for Early Years professionals to engage in funded opportunities of their choosing.

Ontario was the first province to introduce a regulatory body to oversee the registration of early childhood educators. As the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) became more established, a Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) program was introduced to ensure that all RECEs engaged in professional learning as an ongoing part of their practice. RECEs must set a professional learning goal each year, reflect on this goal by connecting it to the CECE *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (2017, July), and maintain proof of their ongoing professional learning. RECEs must sign a declaration each year upon renewal and may be audited by the CECE. This process has enhanced the quality of the Early Years profession in Ontario by ensuring all RECEs engage in lifelong learning. While this is a step in the right direction towards enhancing quality in the Early Years profession, the recent increase in accountability towards professionalism has not been matched with appropriate workforce conditions, such as a provincial wage scale that recognizes qualifications and years of service.



Information regarding the accomplishments of the bilateral agreement to date can be found on the Government of Ontario Website.

Ontario has made significant strides to ensure that licensed child care is more affordable for families and is working towards increasing capacity to support more families in accessing affordable child care spaces. As noted in the above-linked website, Ontario has introduced a wage floor for Early Years professionals and continues to support a recruitment and retention campaign as part of its quality pillar initiatives. While these are important first steps towards enhancing quality, they are not enough to truly recruit and retain qualified Early Years professionals who are essential to a quality Early Years system.

6.6 Current Landscape of Quality in the London/ Middlesex Region

The municipalities of London and Middlesex have been working together to define quality in Early Years services for many years. As mentioned in Chapter One, the municipalities supported the Early Years community in establishing a working group tasked with defining quality. As a result of years of collaboration, the working committee evolved into the Advisory Committee for Strive. Strive has continued to collaborate with the City of London and County of Middlesex Children's Services Managers, the Licensed Child Care Network, Early Years professionals, and multiple community partners to ensure a shared vision of quality Early Years services for children and families in the region.

This continued work aligns with the perspectives shared by key stakeholders in focus groups, interviews, town halls, advisory panels, and local documents. The data collected over several years has been compressed into the following chart to focus on key priority areas that help define quality in the Early Years for London and Middlesex. Each priority will be discussed in detail, but a quick glimpse reveals that Early Years professionals are one of the key assets in a quality Early Years system.

6.7 Key Stakeholder Perspectives on Quality

Compressed Data

The following includes the key components specific to quality and the relevant needs to help build and operate within the Early Years system, as discovered during the research project.

Key Components of Protoype #3 Pillar #3 Quality

1. **The Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) are knowledgeable of inclusive programming that is based on teaching strategies that meet the needs of all children.**
2. **The Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) have access to effective pre-service education as well as ongoing education to build their overall day-to-day practice to meet the needs of all children and families.**
3. **The Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) have access to preparation/planning time during the workday that supports their day-to-day practice.**
4. **Recruitment and retention of Early Years professionals / Childhood Educators (ECES) is supported through better compensation via a wage grid that reflects a living wage.**

5

The ratios of Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) to children reflect what is essential for the care and learning of all children.

6

Members of the Early Years system need to communicate to parents and the community at large what quality child care is and how it should be considered as important as the school system.

6.7.1 Families' Perspectives on Quality

When considering quality in Early Years services, parents consistently expressed their desire to know more about their child's daily activities, whether through documentation of children's learning, regular communication via digital platforms, or daily contact with their child's primary educators. Parents emphasized the importance of individualized care for their children, including a portfolio tailored to their child, more one-on-one time between their child and educators, and attention to their child's unique needs. An idea shared was the implementation of a personalized process, such as an individual education plan, as observed in children receiving special needs resourcing support. Individualized care for children in group settings has been challenged by high child-to-educator ratios and a reduction in support due to staffing challenges. According to the *2023-2024 Annual Ontario School Survey*, 24% of elementary schools reported facing teaching shortages, while the shortage of educational assistants was even higher, affecting 50% of elementary schools (People for Education, 2024, March 24). Reduced ratios of children to educators would allow for more individualized care but would require an increase in the workforce, along with funding for enhanced ratios.



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Another indicator of quality discussed by parents related to the importance of outdoor learning. Many families have recognized the importance of nature in relation to their children's well-being. This is one of the key foundations for learning, as outlined in both Ontario's early learning curricular documents, *How Does Learning Happen?* (Ministry of Education, 2014) and *The Kindergarten Program* (Ministry of Education, 2016, August 12). Parents suggested that children have access to outdoor spaces for physical activity, as well as opportunities to engage with nature throughout all seasons. Research has consistently shown the positive impact of nature and outdoor learning on children's well-being. De Lannoy's article, posted on the Outdoor Play Canada website, indicates that not only does regular outdoor play support children's physical health and well-being, but it also supports their mental health, sense of self, stewardship of the land, spatial awareness, and confidence gained through learning to take risks (2022). These skills are not as easily acquired through indoor learning.

Understanding pedagogical documentation, recognizing the value of outdoor learning, meeting children's individual needs, and communicating professionally with families are just some of the skills taught in pre-service early childhood education programs. Families shared their beliefs in a quality Early Years system that can be achieved with qualified staff who possess unique expertise in teaching and caring for young children. Some of these values included understanding how children develop and learn, the ability to role-model caring interactions, supporting social-emotional learning, and providing rich learning environments. Parents recognized that much care needs to be dedicated to the recruitment and retention of qualified Early Years professionals. Recognition must be provided for experience, years of service, and qualifications when hiring and providing ongoing support for the workforce caring for society's most vulnerable.

Families indicated that Early Years professionals require a wage increase to ensure financial viability. This would reduce the amount of turnover of Early Years professionals, increasing the sustainability of responsive relationships between educators, children, and families. Parents indicated they would advocate for better workforce conditions for Early Years professionals as they put themselves at risk during the pandemic and continue to be essential workers in society. Parents also shared that Early Years professionals should have access to paid professional learning to ensure the workforce is well-educated when caring for and teaching the next generation. Families emphasized that educators working in the Early Years require the same respect and working conditions as those working with older children. RECEs are required to adhere to the *College of Early Childhood Educators' (CECE) Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (2017, July) similar to Ontario elementary and secondary Teachers adhering to the *Ontario College of Teachers'* (OCT) *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession* (Ontario College of Teachers, n.d.-a) and *The Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession,* (Ontario College of Teachers, n.d.-b). Both regulatory colleges monitor educators' professional and ethical practice to prevent professional misconduct in learning spaces. These regulatory colleges have processes in place to address professional misconduct, ensuring educators are held accountable for their practice.

6.7.2 Early Years' Professionals' Perspectives on Quality

The important work of education and care cannot be undervalued in today's society. Early years professionals, who work with young children, are shaping the future of society through their impact on young minds and hearts. Early years professionals must be aware of how young children learn, be prepared to meet varied and unique needs, use critical thinking skills to solve ongoing ethical decisions that arise daily, and ensure a sense of belonging for all who enter the learning space. The ability to multitask these skills requires empathy, compassion, knowledge, awareness, creativity, confidence, and the ability to quickly problem-solve with limited resources. The data gathered reveals that Early Years professionals are seeking additional education, meaningful ongoing professional learning, and resources to ensure the sustainability of their commitment to the profession.



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One area where division is observed in the Early Years system in Ontario is between Early Years professionals working in publicly funded school boards versus the licensed child care system. According to the *Atkinson Centre's Early Childhood Education Report*, the benchmark for wages for RECEs is two-thirds of a certified teacher's wage, taking into account educational differentials (McCuaig et al., 2022, April). This has yet to be achieved in Ontario for RECEs, whether they work in the publicly funded school system or licensed child care (McCuaig et al., 2022, April). RECEs working in Ontario's publicly funded school boards are typically more well-compensated through wage scales, extended health care benefits, and retirement savings plans compared to RECEs working in licensed child care. The *Early Childhood Education Report* demonstrates the 2018 average annual earnings by employer type in the chart linked below (McCuaig et al., 2022, April).

LEARN MORE

Average Annual Earnings by Employer Type 2018

The infographic details the discrepancies in RECE wages by employer type in 2018. With the implementation of the Ontario bilateral agreement in 2022, RECEs in Ontario working in the licensed child care system should have witnessed a levelling of compensation with publicly funded wages for school board RECEs. While some improvements in compensation have been made with the introduction of a wage floor for RECEs working in licensed child care programs, gaps remain, further exacerbating the challenges of retention. According to Child Care Now (2025a), the number of qualified full-time RECEs working in child care in Ontario has dropped from 58.9% in 2022 to 56% in 2025.

The implementation of a workforce compensation plan for RECEs in many provinces and territories across Canada, excluding Ontario, is surprising, given that Ontario was the first province to introduce the kindergarten team, which is composed of an OCT and an RECE. Ontario was the first province to introduce a regulatory body for RECEs,

amplifying the accountabilities of Early Years professionals. The implementation of the College of Early Childhood Educators in Ontario ensured that the field of early childhood education and care was indeed a profession. The Early Years profession began to be regulated by the regulatory college in 2007, which directly relates to an improvement in the quality of service provision through enhanced accountability.

In *Reimagining Communities of Practice: Using Marginalized Feminist Knowledge to Create Spaces of Resistance,* Nidhi Menon (2022) discusses the issue of enhanced accountabilities for RECEs in Ontario, such as ongoing professional learning, adherence to a Code of Ethics, and increased pedagogical knowledge to document children's learning, all without the accompaniment of increased compensation. The data collected from local Early Years professionals resonates with Menon's work, as it has been stated many times that the availability of paid time to document children's learning and the compensation for opportunities to engage in professional learning are limited. Many RECEs in Ontario complete these important tasks on their own time, without compensation. This is not standard practice for many other professions, which may contribute to the challenge of retention of qualified educators in the Early Years system in Ontario. There is a concern among Early Years professionals that the level of quality decreases for children and families when time is not allocated for documenting children's learning or when Early Years professionals do not have access to more flexible professional learning opportunities to continue to grow their pedagogical practices.

LEARN MORE

For more information on national changes in wages and workforce compensation across Canada, please refer to the Atkinson Centre's *Early Childhood Education Report* ECER (2023).

Another way RECEs give back to the profession is through mentoring pre-service students during their placements. These mentorships are invaluable for the Early Years community, helping to prepare future RECEs for the important work they will do in teaching and caring for children. *Standard IV in the College of Early Childhood Educators' Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* states that RECEs give back to their profession by engaging with networks, committees, research, or by role-modelling and mentoring (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2017, June). Due to the shortage of RECEs working in licensed child care, many new graduates are asked to mentor pre-service students. While this is an important task to demonstrate leadership and professionalism, it requires time and expertise. The paperwork involved in collaboration with post-secondary programs requires a significant amount of time to complete. Additionally, effective mentoring relationships must be established and nurtured. RECE mentors often complete these tasks on their own time, during breaks or after hours. The data indicates early year professionals are seeking more resources to support their roles, whether it be in meeting the unique needs of all children or for effectively training future RECEs to continue this important work.

The data collected revealed the importance of Early Years professionals dedicating time to advocate for quality child care and how it needs to be valued as highly as learning and care in the school system. Another practice noted under *Standard IV in the CECE Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (2017, June) for RECEs is the ability to advocate for children, families, colleagues and the Early Years community. As discussed in Chapter One, many Early Years professionals are well-versed in advocating at the silent or meso level. Advocacy requires a great deal of emotional and mental strength, traits that are often present at the silent and micro levels in the daily work of Early Years professionals. With the expectation that RECEs will advocate at the macro level, more training and support are needed to help Early Years professionals develop the political acumen necessary to collectively bring about the much-needed changes to the Early Years system at all levels of government. These advocacy efforts

should not fall solely on the shoulders of Early Years professionals. Families, communities, Early Years providers, and society as a whole need to have a vested interest in early learning and child care for the betterment of future generations.

6.7.3 Child Care Providers' Perspectives on Quality

Child care providers in the London/Middlesex region offer a variety of Early Years services, including, but not limited to, licensed child care, licensed home child care, nursery schools, Indigenous led programs, Francophone programs, Montessori schools, a Waldorf school, Early ON and Family centres, and many more. Programs are inclusive of both profit and non-profit agencies and organizations. These various programs offer numerous options for families, whether they require part-time or full-time care for their children.

The London/Middlesex region has a highly collaborative child care provider community, supported by the City of London and the County of Middlesex's Child Care Services Departments. Representatives from both municipalities hold bi-annual child care provider meetings and participate in various professional community committees. The child care operators participate by contributing to multiple advisory committees and community networks. These spaces for collaboration also include special needs resourcing, represented by All Kids Belong, public health, represented by the Early Years Team from the Middlesex-London Health Unit, and professional learning initiatives, represented by Strive. Additional community partners, including Fanshawe College and local school board Early Years managers, participate in collaboration through networks such as the Licensed Child Care Network. These multiple opportunities for collaboration are attended by child care representatives, including supervisors, executive directors, financial directors, board members, business owners, centre directors, coordinators, pedagogical leaders, and other key stakeholders representing child care agencies.

Many important themes emerged from the child care providers' perspectives on quality in the Early Years for the London/Middlesex region, as demonstrated in the prototype three compressed data charts related to the quality pillar. Themes include educator training related to inclusive practice, the importance of pre-service training and ongoing professional learning, the challenges of recruitment and retention without a provincial wage grid, and the ability of educators to advocate for a quality Early Years system.

Quality Through Inclusion and Professional Learning

The inclusivity chapter discusses in detail the importance of inclusive practice in the Early Years system. Inclusion cannot be separated from quality in the Early Years, as part of a quality system is ensuring all children have access to authentic and compassionate education and care. Education has been at the forefront of quality care in Ontario, with the introduction of the *Early Years Study Final Report*, facilitated by Margaret McCain and Fraser Mustard (1999). The focus of this report was to ensure society and the Ontario government were aware of the importance of neuroscience in the Early Years. The understanding that children learn more in the first six years of life than at any other point in their educational journey demonstrates the importance of viewing early learning as education, not simply as babysitting. This study marked a significant milestone in Ontario, as it played a crucial role in shifting the societal lens to view the Early Years as education rather than a social service. This shift ultimately led to the Early Years portfolio being transferred from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to the Ministry of Education in 2010.

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For more information regarding this transition, the news release "Working Together For Ontario's Children" can be found on the Government of Canada's website.

As the Ministry of Education moved forward in absorbing the Early Years portfolio there was also an emerging trend in Ontario to move away from a more prescriptive curriculum based on developmentalism as observed in the *Early Learning for Every Child: A Framework for Early Childhood Settings* (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007) curricular document (or commonly referred to as the ELECT document) to a more socially constructed emergent curriculum guided by *How Does Learning Happen?: Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014). *The Kindergarten Program* was introduced in 2016 to support the implementation of Full-Day Kindergarten in Ontario, utilizing a play-based approach to learning that shares many elements with *How Does Learning Happen?* This approach is inspired by the guidance of Dr. Charles Pascal, providing a seamless transition for the Early Years. The new kindergarten program not only provided access for children all day, every day, but it was implemented by a team of a certified teacher (OCT) and a registered early childhood educator (RECE), both bringing specific skill sets to the team to benefit the growth, care, and learning of young school-age children.

As London/Middlesex child care operators in Ontario embraced the new pedagogical guide, they were supported by the Ministry of Education through consultation sessions, funding for professional learning, and collaboration with municipalities. As mentioned in chapter one, the London/Middlesex region benefited from the implementation of a working committee to define quality for the Early Years community. This working committee evolved into what is now known as the Strive Advisory Committee, overseeing the implementation of an intentional professional learning plan for London/Middlesex and surrounding counties.

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Review Strive's Strategic Plan 2024-2026 [PDF].

The *Strive Strategic Plan* encompasses collaboration, care, and continuous learning as its three core values (Strive, n.d.-b). As observed in the Early Years Prototype Framework research, specifically in relation to the quality pillar, diversity and inclusivity are key priorities for child care operators as part of a quality Early Years system. Diversity and inclusivity are also key directions outlined in the Strive strategic plan. Through ongoing, intentional professional learning, Strive provides child care operators with a valuable resource for Early Years professionals to enhance their knowledge of current and relevant practices in early learning.

The municipal funding of Strive's initiatives provides an invaluable resource for child care operators as they continue to grow their organizations, requiring current pedagogical practices to be embedded in their daily work with children, families, and communities. The opportunity for London/Middlesex and surrounding counties to have professional resources available for Early Years professionals, a product of collaboration among community partners, amplifies the quality pillar in the local Early Years system. Additionally, the local school board's Early Years managers participate in advisory committees and networks to ensure a seamless transition for children and families entering kindergarten programs.

6.7.4 Employers' Perspectives on Quality

According to the Smart Prosperity Institute's (2021, June) research paper on the City of London's economic recovery post-COVID, one of the key drivers of the city's recovery was the influx of international students. Fanshawe College and Western University attract a growing number of international students, with the trend increasing annually since 2015 (Smart Prosperity Institute, 2021, June). Local employers in London and Middlesex benefit from the increase in international students, who are eligible to work 20 hours per week. During the pandemic, international students were temporarily allowed to work up to 40 hours per week. While this put pressure on the students, who were also enrolled in school full-time, employers were able to tap into this talent pool to meet their employment needs. Employers also benefit from having additional candidates for employment once the international students graduate from full-time studies, as they are able to apply for a three-year work visa.

As of January 2024, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada capped the number of international students coming to Canada by approximately 40% to reduce the strain on housing, healthcare, and other services (Government of Canada, 2025a, January 24). This cap was further reduced by another 10% in 2025 (IRCC, 2025, January 24). This change at the federal level of government impacted many regions in Ontario, as post-secondary programs were affected, resulting in downsizing by employers, including those in the London and Middlesex regions. Early childhood education remains a highly sought-after profession in Canada, and as a result, Early Years preservice training programs in Ontario continue to attract international students. Ongoing changes with post-graduate work visas continue to impact the number of international students enrolling in post-secondary programs in Canada.

Employers expressed their desire for quality child care space availability in the London and Middlesex regions to provide parents with supportive and dependable options. Child care concerns prevent parents from focusing on their work, which was amplified during the pandemic when child care centres and schools were mandated to close. Many parents and guardians needed to stay home with their children, forcing them to take time off from work or even leave their careers altogether. This gap in employment had a significant impact on employers and the local economy.

Employers expressed their desire for families to have access to a variety of options in Early Years programs with high-quality curricula, providing choice. Parents and guardians who feel confident in the care and learning their children are receiving are able to focus more on their work. This includes consistent Early Years professionals who can build strong relationships with children and their families. Employers view this positive collaboration between families and Early Years programs as a valuable asset to their organizations, particularly in terms of recruiting and retaining their employees.

Employers discussed the importance of a well-compensated Early Years workforce in maintaining quality Early Years programs. Concerns about burnout, resulting in a high turnover of Early Years professionals, were expressed as a potential barrier for families in accessing quality learning and care for their children. Qualified Early Years professionals require compensation for their knowledge and expertise in working with young children to attract and retain them in the Early Years profession. A reduction in turnover of Early Years professionals provides families with confidence in their children's learning and care.

The City of London continues to fund Strive as a valuable resource for professional learning for Early Years professionals in London and the surrounding regions. A collaborative effort to recruit and retain Early Years professionals between the City of London, the County of Middlesex, Strive, and the Licensed Child Care Network (LCCN) began as a result of community feedback and provincial and federal initiatives following the pandemic.

The pandemic demonstrated the importance of a robust Early Years system to all levels of government and to employers. A new website and marketing campaign were developed through a collaborative community effort, replacing a previous recruitment and retention campaign, *Unsungheroes*. The current collaboration efforts focus more on utilizing various social media platforms and marketing strategies to target specific audiences who may be interested in becoming Early Years professionals. The rich experiences of working as an Early Years professional are highlighted in the Little Moments, Big Impact campaign, which supports ongoing retention efforts in London and Middlesex.



The Collaborative efforts for recruiting and retaining Early Years professionals in the London and Middlesex regions can be found on the Little Moments, Big Impact website.

6.8 Intersections with Other Pillars

The quality pillar intersects with the accessibility pillar from the employer's perspective. Employers believe quality exists when Early Years programs are available for their employees. This comes with the understanding that families will only enroll their children into a program they consider safe and that offers quality learning and care for their children. A lack of quality Early Years spaces reduces accessibility for families, potentially leading them to exit the labour market. Accessibility has increased slightly with the implementation of the CWELCC program, as child care fees are now more affordable, leading to increased demand for access to regulated, quality early learning spaces among more families.

Quality early learning and child care must be accessible to all children, regardless of family income and social status. A key indicator of a quality Early Years system is universal access and affordability for all families. According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the two main issues affecting families in 2019 were affordable child care fees and long waiting lists (Macdonald & Friendly, 2025). The implementation of the CWELCC has made child care more affordable for families, allowing more families the option of accessing regulated Early Years settings. While this is great news for offering more quality child care choices for families, the bad news is that waiting lists have grown, preventing many families from accessing quality early learning and child care options.

The quality and inclusivity pillars intersect in many ways. An Early Years program that isn't inclusive of all children may lack the quality programming necessary to support individual children's needs, resulting in harm to children's growth and learning. A sense of belonging is one of the four foundations for learning, according to Ontario's Early Years curriculum documents. A child who does not feel a sense of belonging in an Early Years space will not experience quality learning and care. Early years providers, professionals, and community partners must engage in interprofessional collaboration to ensure that children and their families feel valued, seen, and heard when accessing Early Years services.

Responsive early learning and child care settings are closely connected to the perspectives of families and employers on key elements of a quality Early Years system. Families need responsive early learning and care settings for their children to feel supported as they embark on careers, particularly women who have been most impacted by a lack of responsive programs. This was amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic when child care centres and schools closed. Many parents, predominantly women, left the workforce to avoid disruptions in their workplaces due to a lack of early learning and child care. The Early Years profession was further impacted by having a mostly female-dominated workforce who were pulled away from their work to care for their own children.

Families indicated that regular and ongoing communication with their children's educators is an indicator of a quality system. This was also indicated as a key component of the responsiveness pillar. Families were not allowed to enter Early Years settings during the pandemic to prevent the transmission of viruses, which broke down communication between families and educators. Agencies quickly pivoted to digital platforms, virtual classrooms, and outdoor locations for drop-off and pick-up to ensure ongoing communication between Early Years settings

and family members. This response demonstrated the resilience of early learning and child care programs and their desire to be responsive to the needs of children and their families. Responsiveness is embedded in quality early learning and child care environments.

The quality pillar intersects with the relationships pillar, as building relationships is crucial to building longevity in an Early Years system. From different levels of government collaborating to local Early Years community partners networking, to daily interactions in an Early Years setting, all stakeholders need to feel heard, connected, and engaged.



The Canadian Child Care Federation provides an excellent illustration of the elements required for a quality early learning and child care system. Relationships are one of the nine elements necessary for quality: Interaction of the Nine Crucial Elements of Quality Learning & Child Care

Please access the following document to learn more about the Canadian Child Care Federation's vision for quality child care in Canada: CCCF Vision for Quality Child Care in Canada

6.9 Moving Forward in Quality

Consistent messaging from key stakeholders focused on the importance of qualified Early Years professionals, compensated adequately for their expertise. Qualified Early Years professionals whose time was honoured to ensure children's learning and care were at the forefront of professional practice. The recruitment and retention of qualified Early Years professionals remains a top priority for stakeholders to ensure a universal, equitable, and inclusive Early Years system is sustainable across Canada.

Becoming a qualified Early Years professional takes many years and dedication. Qualified Early Years professionals require access to pre-service training that focuses on children's rights and the belief that children are co-constructors of the knowledge necessary to build a just and democratic society. Learning does not stop when the pre-service training ends; qualified Early Years professionals commit to a lifetime of research and learning to meet the unique needs of children in their care.

Early years professionals must be adept at advocating for the rights of children, ensuring that care and education are equally embedded in social policy, and promoting inclusive, diverse, and equitable early learning spaces. This responsibility cannot lie solely on the shoulders of Early Years professionals and must become the responsibility of all key stakeholders within the system and society as a whole. Children are the future citizens of society who will carry on the values of a democratic society.

Reflective Activity

Please read *Why Can't We Get Beyond Quality?* by Peter Moss. Reflect on what the term "quality" in the Early Years means to you. What are some other practices we can consider to co-construct the values necessary for building a meaningful Early Years system in society, one that is sustainable, equitable, diverse, inclusive, and includes a shared responsibility for future generations?

Reflection Questions

Your Thoughts

Document your thoughts on Peter Moss' writing. What does "quality" mean to you in the context of Early Years systems?

CHAPTER 7: PILLAR #4: RESPONSIVENESS

Chapter Outline

7.0 Learning Objectives
7.1 What do We Mean by Responsiveness in an ELCC System?
7.2 How is Responsiveness Unfolding Across Canada?
7.3 How is Ontario Focusing on Responsiveness?
7.4 How is London-Middlesex Focusing on Responsiveness?
7.5 Key Stakeholders' Perspectives on Responsiveness
7.6 Implications to the Field
7.7 Reflective Activities



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7.0 Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

- Explain the responsiveness pillar from the lens of various Early Years key stakeholders.
- Discuss the intersection of the responsiveness pillar with other pillars in an Early Years policy framework prototype.
- Analyze the impact of responsiveness on an Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system.

7.1 What Do We Mean by Responsiveness in an ELCC System?

An ELCC system that purports to meet the needs of key users must be able to adapt and demonstrate flexibility at multiple levels. Responsiveness is a key element in Canada's *Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework* (2017) and is clearly articulated when describing how it is part of an effective ELCC system where "building strong, responsive and respectful relationships in which purposeful interactions support optimal learning for children" (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2017, p. 2). While this explanation of responsiveness focuses on the interpersonal connections between the stakeholders within the Canadian ELCC system to ensure a quality learning and caring environment for children, it is essential to note that the concept of responsiveness is also seen at the heart of cultural adaptability and recognition of the different levels of abilities of children across the Canadian provinces and territories. The federal acknowledgement of the uniqueness of each Canadian province and territory is seen as an essential aspect of the framework, both at the macro level, within the system, and at the micro level, involving stakeholders within the system.

At the global level, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has communicated aspects of responsiveness through its focus on quality (OECD, 2021a, 2021b) and through policy levers intended to support an interactive ELCC system (OECD, 2012). That system, to be effective, needs to respond to the needs of children, families, and the society it supports. In its latest reports, OECD has also included both quality and equity as key elements. The OECD, when examining the ELCC systems in over ten countries (OECD, 2001) and twenty-eight countries (OECD, 2025), twenty-four years later, provides information on how countries meet the needs of their children and families. It is essential to note that responsiveness is more a latent analysis or interpretation of the information provided than a direct, manifest mention of responsiveness. The OECD's focus on quality in policy levers (2012), on quality (2021b), and on removing barriers to quality ELCC systems (2025) is clearly communicated.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) approaches the review of an effective ELCC system from a different perspective: the rights of children around the globe. Its 2024 report provides insights on how all children have the right to access quality child care and early learning. UNESCO views a responsive ELCC system as one that can address inequalities and respect the roles of families, communities, societies, and cultures. It also acknowledges the importance of the role of early childhood educators and the crucial link they have with children and families. These professionals are a critical element of an ELCC system; through their professional expertise, they ensure that the system is responsive at its core. The personal interactions are based on family-friendly connections that inform their everyday pedagogy and curriculum. To address the needs of all children, including those with disabilities, UNESCO also presents policy levers that inform the ELCC system, similar to those presented by the OECD. While they address the operational aspects of an effective, high-quality ELCC system, including workforce growth and stabilization, increased overall financial

support, and family social support, their primary focus is on creating a legally binding framework grounded in the rights of children and families worldwide.

How do these global reviews of ELCC systems and their frameworks, and responsiveness in particular, compare to Canada's latest attempts at creating a national ELCC system? The OECD (2021b, 2025) views the operation of a quality ELCC as a key factor within countries' jurisdictions, based on responsive relationships among educators, children, and families that, in turn, address diversity, equity, and inclusion, supported by a well-developed workforce. UNESCO (2024), while recognizing similar factors of an ELCC system, emphasizes the need to focus on the global imperative of implementing universal children's rights, particularly for the most vulnerable. This is seen as being responsive to the needs of all children, regardless of their country of origin. Canada presents a combination of similar key elements to provide a responsive ELCC system: 1) quality, caring, and learning environments accessible to all children and their families; 2) recognition of the diverse cultures and abilities of children across the country; 3) a strong workforce that has the professional expertise to be responsive in their relationships with children and families to maximize their impact; and 4) its ability to respond to the uniqueness of Canada's provincial and territorial jurisdiction in the area of early education.

7.2 How is Responsiveness Unfolding Across Canada?

An overview of the bilateral agreements between the Canadian provinces and territories provides insights into how they approach responsiveness within their own jurisdictions. The chart below examines the key areas of focus related to responsiveness within the agreements and action plans from 2021 to the present.

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More detailed information on the bilateral agreements and the action plans can be reviewed on the Government of Canada website: Canada-Ontario Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement – 2021-2026.

It is important to note that Québec has an asymmetrical agreement with the Canadian government. This is a unique agreement between two different jurisdictions in the country that respects the Constitution Act of 1982, recognizing the province of Québec as having a distinct role rooted in French-Canadian culture, language, and legal traditions. Québec has had its own ELCC system since the 1990s and continues to update and expand its operations to include more children and their families (Building Canada's Childcare System, n.d.; Employment and Social Development Canada, 2022).

Table 7.2.1. Responsiveness in CWELCC bilateral agreements and action plans

Province/Territory	Manifest (explicit) and Latent (implicit) Mentions of Responsiveness	Responsiveness Focus	Intersection with other Pillars in Policy Framework Prototype
Alberta	Latent	• Cultural and language diversity • Workforce cultural responsiveness	• Access • Inclusivity • Quality • Relationships
British Columbia	Latent	• Geographic and demographic targets • Indigenous co-development • Flexible hours	• Access • Inclusivity • Quality • Relationships
Manitoba	Manifest/Latent	• System flexibility • Data-informed planning • Culturally awareness as part of programming • Attachment and relationship-driven interactions • Options in choices of spaces	• Access • Quality • Relationships
New Brunswick	Manifest/Latent	• Cultural and language are respected and valued components of system • Equity data based on language and culture • Affordable fees and range of hours of operations to meet needs of families	• Access • Affordability • Inclusivity • Relationships
Newfoundland and Labrador	Manifest/Latent	• Supporting unique, individual needs through educator practice • Governance framework is inclusive and culturally anchored	• Access • Inclusivity • Quality
Northwest Territories	Manifest/Latent	• Culturally relevant programs • Flexible to needs of all children, families, communities: geography, hours of operation	• Access • Inclusivity • Quality
Nova Scotia	Manifest/Latent	• Child care options to support family needs • Cultural safety; ELCC curriculum framework anchored on culture • Equity supported through professional training for culturally sensitive practice • Listen to workforce needs • Anti-racism • Flexible spaces, hours of operation • "Nimbleness	• Access • Inclusivity • Relationships • Quality

Nunavut	Latent	• Language and culture recognition through appropriate practices • Non-traditional system with flexible hours • Geographical access for all children • Staff participation in identifying professional learning needs	• Access • Inclusivity • Quality • Relationships
Ontario	Latent	• Integration of system (with Ministry of Education) • Pedagogy based on relationships • Flexible services • Funding that reflects local community and Indigenous needs • Funding that supports workforce strategy for more hiring and retention	• Access • Affordability • Quality • Relationships
Prince Edward Island	Latent	• System that supports relationships within communities • Community consultation to support seasonal workers with non-traditional hours of operations, child care arrangements • Funding to create more spaces	• Access • Affordability • Inclusivity • Relationships
Québec	Latent (Note: Asymmetrical agreement)	• Meet the expanding needs of affordable child care spaces • Increase workforce wages to support expansion and adaptive programming	• Access • Affordability • Quality
Saskatchewan	Manifest/Latent	• Pedagogical and curriculum based on what is developmentally appropriate • Flexible professional development to meet needs of educators in the field • Partnerships with Indigenous communities • Non-traditional child care arrangements, hours • Parental choices	• Access • Inclusivity • Quality • Relationships

Yukon	Latent	• Recognition of culture, language • Collaboration with First Nations • Universal access for all children • Continued reduction in parent fees • Funding to support operations and capital needs of operators • Funding for increased wages for workforce	• Access • Affordability • Inclusivity • Quality • Relationships

A highly responsive ELCC system demonstrates its impact through various indicators that evaluate its effectiveness in meeting the needs of the children and families it serves. Since 2011, starting with the *Early Years Study 3: Making Decisions, Taking Action* and then every three years, the *Early Childhood Education Report (ECE Report)* has provided an evaluation of the ELCC systems across Canada, for each province and territory. The authors base their analysis on detailed information from various sources, including global (i.e., OECD, UNESCO), federal, provincial, and territorial documents. After 2017, they were able to use *Canada's Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework*. This helped refine the review process, resulting in 21 benchmarks under five different categories: governance, funding, access, learning environment, and accountability. The *Early Childhood Education Report 2023* (Akbari et al., 2024a) utilized these categories and benchmarks to assess the progress of ELCC systems across the country in implementing the *Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC)* system. It was also able to see the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the responsiveness of the ELCC systems to the needs of children and families nationwide.

The chart below shows the ranking of provinces and territories according to the latest analysis in the ECE Report 2023 (Akbari et al., 2024a), providing insight into the responsiveness of the ELCC systems in meeting the needs of children and families.

Table 7.2.2. ECE Report 2023 Ranking

Province/Territory	Ranking (out of 15)
1. New Brunswick	13.25
2. Prince Edward Island	12.00
3. Québec	11.75
4. Newfoundland & Labrador	11.50
5. Ontario	11.00
6. Yukon	10.75
7. Nova Scotia	10.50
8. Northwest Territories	10.50
9. British Columbia	10.00
10. Manitoba	9.25
11. Saskatchewan	7.50
12. Alberta	7.50
13. Nunavut	6.75

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To familiarize yourself with the details of the ECE Report analysis, you can explore the report and interact with some of its many layers of information at this website: 2023 Early Childhood Education Report [PDF].

The categories used in the *ECE Report 2023* (Akbari et al., 2024) intersect with the pillars of the Early Years policy framework prototype as follows:

- Governance → inclusivity, relationships, quality
- Funding → access, affordability, quality
- Access → access, inclusivity
- Learning Environment → quality
- Accountability → quality

An ELCC system that has: 1) focused governance with a common policy framework under shared authority; 2) support through realistic funding that provides access for all children to a high-quality learning and caring environment, created by professional educators who are confident in their practice by including the voices of the children and their families; and 3) demonstrates accountability through regular communication on its impact on children's learning and wellbeing, demonstrates responsiveness. As the chart above indicates, the CWELCC is meeting some of the benchmarks; however, no province or territory has achieved all of them, with 8 of the 13 jurisdictions meeting less than 75% of the benchmarks within the five categories.

7.3 How is Ontario Focusing on Responsiveness?

The main areas of priority for the province of Ontario, when reviewing the bilateral agreements, action plans, and addenda between Ontario and the federal government from 2021 to 2026, focus on: affordability; access, inclusion, and workforce through the lenses of quality, and ongoing funding for the operationalization of an expanding ELCC system within the province (Government of Canada, 2025b). Under its Ministry of Education, Ontario is responding to the need for affordable fees for families, while also adding spaces that will support children and families across the province (71,000 new spaces by 2026). While it initially aimed to provide $10/day child care by 2025, it is now considering a maximum of $19/day by 2027, with subsidies to offset the cost for qualifying families and tax credits to help reduce the overall cost for those families who do not qualify for subsidies. Its budget also includes operator subsidies to help lower the cost of child care centres. This reduction in overall fees helps increase access to quality child care for more children and their families. It is essential to note that while the Ministry of Education oversees the expansion of the ELCC system within the province, municipalities are responsible for its implementation and operation.

By increasing physical spaces, Ontario also wishes to address availability for children with disabilities with special needs resources, for French and bilingual children, and Indigenous children. This inclusive perspective addresses the varying abilities of children and the diverse populations within the province. French and bilingual communities, through their municipalities, can meet the needs of their children and families. Child care on reserves, led by Indigenous educators, helps support the needs of Indigenous communities.

At the heart of a quality ELCC system are educators who are professional and qualified to meet the needs of all the children in their care. Ontario is the only province or territory with a professional college responsible for accrediting early childhood educators. The College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) is responsible for: 1) ensuring that its members follow the standards of the profession; 2) supervising continued professional growth and learning; 3) leading a discipline process when required (College of Early Childhood Education, 2023b). While Ontario focuses on creating inclusive spaces to meet the needs of its children and families, it is currently facing a workforce crisis. Hiring and retention are seen as key to ensuring that the physical spaces include quality educators. In their action plan, the province has created a wage enhancement component, a wage floor that informs the salaries of ECEs in the province. As mentioned above, it has also provided funding for professional learning to support the ECEs' ability to provide a responsive, inclusive, and caring learning environment for all children.

What is the current reality in Ontario? Has it responded to the needs of its children and their families? Returning to the ECE Report 2023 (Akbari et al., 2024a), one notes that Ontario scored 11.0 out of 15 on its benchmarks.

Table 7.3.1. Ontario benchmark score

Category	Score (Total: /15)
Governance	1.5/3
Funding	2.0/3
Access	2.0/3
Learning Environment	2.5/3
Accountability	3/3
Total:	11.0/15

While there is some level of flexibility in Ontario's approach to CWELCC, there are areas that make it more challenging for the system to respond to the needs of all children and families. In the governance category, Ontario has not been able to ensure alignment between the care, learning within child care centres and the education system. While the funding and overall lead are in the province's Ministry of Education (MOE), more needs to be done to make the transition between child care and kindergarten more seamless. Secondly, in the funding category, Ontario did not receive a score in the area of wages. While other provinces and territories have created a wage grid, Ontario has a wage floor. This has compounded issues in hiring, retention and promoting the role of Early Years educator as a promising profession that is valued and reflected in its wages and benefits. As other provinces and territories offer better wages and benefit packages, the limited workforce means a reduced ability to increase access. Finally, while other Canadian jurisdictions have linked funding to the inclusion of children with special needs, Ontario has not implemented this parameter. Hence, Ontario demonstrates some responsiveness; however, the above areas of concern will need to be addressed to ensure a greater ability to meet the needs of all its children and families.

7.4 How is London-Middlesex Focusing on Responsiveness?

The municipalities of London and Middlesex have collaborated to establish the required early learning and child care services, respecting each other's diverse communities. Part of their responsibility includes developing an early learning and child care service system plan that supports the needs of children and their families living in their jurisdiction, while also meeting the expectations set by the province of Ontario and CWELCC.

The latest service plan (City of London, 2024, pp. 18-19) outlines its goals and commitments for the period up to 2028. Five strategic areas anchor the plan:

- Accessibility → includes affordability, access, and flexibility
- Inclusion → includes policies, environments, professional learning and Truth and Reconciliation
- Quality → includes workforce plan, professional learning, leadership and standards of excellence
- Collaboration → includes connections, thoughtful transitions, and interprofessional relationships
- Backbone → includes data sharing, evidence-informed decision-making process, funding and sustainability, third-party relationships, and financial accountability

These building blocks, as referred to in the service plan, are seen as part of a responsive ELCC system for the London-Middlesex region. Specifically, the following examples of actions are clearly delineated in the document:

Table 7.4.1. Components Supporting a Responsive ELCC System

Components Seen as Supporting a Responsive ELCC System	Details of Components
1. Relationships	Healthy, respectful relationships between children, educators, families, and supporting organizations within the London-Middlesex ELCC system
2. Programs	Pedagogy and curriculum anchored on responsive practice to the needs of all children and families being served in the system
3. Workforce	A qualified workforce that is supportive of children, families and each other in the day-to-day work of the ELCC system, assisted with ongoing, relevant professional learning
4. Choices	Affordable access to a variety of programs within the ELCC system, where parents have options to meet the needs of their children and family life
5. Infrastructure	Management within the ELCC system shares data, using the evidence to regularly inform its key stakeholders and decide on next steps collaboratively

Regular pulse checking is part of the ongoing protocol followed by the London-Middlesex municipalities. Ongoing data collection is crucial for responding to any concerns that arise within the ELCC system, rather than waiting to seek input only prior to creating the next service plan. At the heart of the responsive system are strong, ongoing

relationships between all key stakeholders, including families, educators, childcare providers and operators, supporting community organizations, local employers, and representatives from local, provincial, and federal governments. These connections are nurtured through regular surveys, focus groups, sector-wide meetings, and child-focused input settings. The data is shared, discussed and informs progress and next steps that will make the ELCC system adaptive to the ever-changing dynamics of children and families within London-Middlesex.

7.5 Key Stakeholders' Perspectives on Responsiveness

As outlined in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4, there is specific information on responsiveness, the fourth pillar in the Early Years policy framework prototype #3, and specifically on the third pillar, namely responsiveness. Data were collected over a four-year period, involving key stakeholders of the ELCC system and various methods for gathering data. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a shift from face-to-face to online semi-structured interviews, utilizing the Zoom platform. Focus groups with parents and employers were cancelled, and data from these stakeholders were collected via town halls (online panels). This limited access to these two groups, however, working collaboratively with the City of London and the County of Middlesex meant access to some of their data from sector meetings, as well as their economic recovery table set up during the pandemic. The following chart outlines who was involved in providing their perspective as we went through the iteration process to co-construct an Early Years policy framework prototype that reflected the London-Middlesex reality:

Table 7.5.1. Pillar #4: Data collection process and key stakeholders

Data Collection Method	Key Stakeholder Participants
1. Survey (online)	• Early years professionals (educators, RECEs and ECEs)
2. Town Halls (online panel; in-person and online co-construction process)	• Town Hall #2: a parent, an Early Years professional, a child care provider, an employer, and an Early Childhood Leadership (ECL) student • Town Hall #2: Early Years professionals, child care providers, municipal ELCC leaders; ECE and ECL students, Early Years and policy academics)
3. Semi-structured interviews (online via Zoom)	• Parents; Early Years professionals; child care providers (directors and executive directors of child care centres); employers
4. Focus groups	• Early years professionals; child care providers (directors, executive directors)
5. Early years sector meetings	• Municipal meetings • London and Middlesex licensed child care network meetings

The data were analyzed after each collection to construct the next version of the Early Years policy prototype. The process was followed for each of the pillars, including responsiveness. The following chart provides an overview of four key responsiveness components, along with details that expand on the participants' perceptions of how responsiveness is integrated into the ELCC system and expressed in prototype #3.

Key Components of Prototype #3 Pillar #4 – Responsiveness

1

The Early Years system supports families' needs through consistent access to quality child care and learning, with the required amount of child care and learning spaces needed in each community within the municipality.

- Recognition and ability to support child's needs/interests for program planning and access to materials/resources.
- Ability to support parents in understanding role and challenges faced by educators to meet, respond to the needs of their children.
- Recognition and understanding of how child care affects/impacts families.
- Overall adaptability of Early Years system and each child care centre to respond to needs of children, families, and educators.
- Enhanced staffing of educators; ample resources available to enhance care and teaching/learning.
- Consistent and reliable access to school spaces to provide quality before and after-school care.
- Strong links between family centres and child care centres to be able to support all children and their families.

2

The Early Years system recognizes and supports female dominated workplaces, including the Early Years sector.

- Flexible responses to mat leaves, parental leaves, and educational leaves.

3

The Early Years system provides sustainable operations funding that supports flexible staffing requirements as needed in the various child care and learning environments within the municipality.

- Continued ability of City, County, and LCCN to adapt to respond to local needs.
- Autonomy: framework that can meet government requirements while keeping flexibility for each child care centre site's realities.
- Child care providers are able to accommodate families' unique financial situations.
- Creation of a better system that can respond to staffing needs (wages, benefits, working conditions), which will lead to retention of staff; budget flexibility to consider innovation and changes in operation.
- Creation of multiple pathways for professionals working in the field to ensure sustainability of

operations of quality child care and learning/retention of experienced staff to stabilize and ensure timely responses to the needs of children and families.

4

The Early Years professionals engage and respond to parents'/ families' needs through effective communication.

- **Strong relationships** between all stakeholders to help respond to children and families (intersection with pillar #6 – relationships).
- **Connections** with family centres and other community resources.
- Ability of EY professionals to use up-to-date technology to facilitate communication between key stakeholders.
- Educators able to use **reflective practice skills** to adapt and accommodate children's and parents' needs.

The above chart summarizes the overall perspectives of the participant groups: parents, Early Years professionals, child care providers (directors, executive directors), and employers in the municipalities of London-Middlesex. It communicates how the ELCC system, at the macro level, needs to react and demonstrate flexibility through the operationalization of key system elements. It also presents, at the micro level, the importance of the Early Years professionals' relationships and their connections to community resources, which will inform their pedagogy in meeting the needs of all the children they serve in the ELCC learning environments.

When examining the perspectives of each participant group, we observe some similarities and differences in their overall understanding of what a responsive ELCC system entails. The chart below provides a more detailed examination of some key specifics. Parents and employers view responsiveness through the lenses of flexible access, reliability in emergencies, and a program that supports all children. Employers share similar perspectives, as they observe their employees who are parents trying to juggle employment and family responsibilities. Early years professionals focus more on their applied practice that adapts to the needs of the children. While they understand that an ELCC system must have flexible hours of operation and be in geographical areas easily accessible by all parents, they are also aware of their professional responsibilities to the children and their families. Child care providers, as leaders in the ELCC system, serve as connectors between various stakeholders and view themselves as responsible for operationalizing key elements of a responsive, high-quality ELCC system.

7.5.2. Responsiveness from multiple participant groups' perspectives:

Participant Group	Link to responsiveness
Parents (with children currently in the ELCC system within the municipalities of London and Middlesex)	• ELCC system provides flexibility for parents' multiple roles (impact of pandemic) • ELCC system provides choice, return to work (impact of pandemic) • Consistent, qualified workforce means responsive programming for children • Flexible access to care when needed • Flexible fees when child is not able to attend
Early years professionals (educators)	• Quality relationships between educators, children, and families to respond to 21st century expectations • Increased access due to responsive hours of operations that meet the needs of families • Increased access due to responsive geographical locations that meet the needs of families • Educators' job is to be responsive to the diversity and needs of the children they serve • Increased access to further education, professional learning/ training to help build responsive practice
Child care providers (directors, executive director)	• ELCC system provides choice, return to work (impact of pandemic) • ELCC system can adapt, is resilient when faced with emergencies (i.e., pandemic) • Hours of operations mesh with families' work hours • Return of part-time programs to meet the needs of families' varied work/life schedules • Educators' job is to be responsive to the diversity and needs of the children they serve • Professional learning to support responsive pedagogy and curriculum
Employers (small and larger businesses in the municipalities in London and Middlesex	• ELCC system provides choice, return to work (impact of pandemic) • Flexible hours that mesh with employees work schedule • Emergency care policies, protocols to support children, families when in need • Quality relationships between educators, children, and families to respond to 21st century expectations

7.6 Implications to the Field

Through the study, the participant groups helped co-construct the responsiveness pillar by sharing their lived experiences, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This brought some of the strengths and future areas of focus that they saw as vital to a responsive ELCC system in the municipalities of London and Middlesex. Strengths are:

- The London and Middlesex Licensed Child Care Network leads and nurtures the respectful relationships between child care providers, the municipalities, Fanshawe College, and Strive through regular meetings that promote open and honest discourse.
- There is a strong understanding of the importance of the 'care economy' and a qualified, resilient workforce that is respected and valued.

The following implications need to be considered when looking at future steps to help make the system more responsive:

- Continue to seek various ways to bring all parents to the table regularly, keeping in mind the diverse nature of the London-Middlesex population.
- Continue to recognize and advocate for the recognition of the ECE profession to ensure hiring and retention of qualified educators as part of an ongoing workforce strategy.
- Continue to advocate for a balance between affordability and a realistic operations budget that meets the needs of children, families, and Early Years professionals.
- Continue to provide professional learning for Early Years professionals that is mindful of the reality of a post-pandemic world, where multiple approaches to communication are used to keep all stakeholders apprised of the latest developments.
- Continue to use the leadership of the London-Middlesex Licensed Child Care Network and its community connections to anchor the ELCC system so that it can respond promptly to support all children and their families who use the system.

7.7 Reflective Activities

Select one of these activities to explore how you see responsiveness as an element of an ELCC system that meets the needs of its children and families:

Reflective Activity A

Through your own lenses (ELCC student; Early Years professional/educator; child care director; municipal, provincial, or federal leader), how would you use this pillar to evaluate the level of support a particular ELCC system is providing to children and families in their jurisdiction? (Suggestion: consider using an ELCC system that you are familiar with and can access its most current child care and Early Years service plan.)

Reflective Activity B

Select one municipality in the province of Ontario and access their service plan (Example: City of Hamilton – Hamilton's Early Years Community Plan [PDF]). Once you familiarize yourself with the document, navigate to the Government of Canada's website to review Ontario's bilateral agreement and action plan (Canada-Ontario Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement). Create a chart where you outline the intersections between Ontario's bilateral agreement, its focus on responsiveness, and how the city you have selected (in this case, the City of Hamilton) demonstrates responsiveness in its ELCC system for its municipality.

CHAPTER 8: PILLAR #5: INCLUSIVITY

Chapter Outline

8.0 Learning Objectives
8.1 What is Inclusivity
8.2 What is the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care System
8.3 How Do We Know What is Happening Across the Country?
8.4 What is in Ontario's Current Bilateral Agreement?
8.5 What is the London-Middlesex Early Years System Approach?
8.6 Being an Ally
8.7 Key Stakeholder Perspectives on Inclusivity
8.8 Intersections with Other Pillars?
8.9 Why is Inclusivity Its Own Pillar?
8.10 Inclusivity Related to Access, Affordability, and Relationship Pillars
8.11 Impact on Operationalizing the EY Systems Implications to the Early Years Field



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8.0 Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

- Explain the inclusivity pillar from the lens of various Early Years key stakeholders.
- Discuss the importance of including multiple perspectives when considering inclusivity in an Early Years system.
- Analyze the impact of inclusivity on an Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system.

8.1 What is Inclusivity



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What is meant by inclusivity? It is accepting, valuing, respecting, and acknowledging diversity and bringing awareness to the importance of social location. These actions pave the way for understanding community differences and supporting equitable opportunities regardless of status.

> *The 'Inclusion and Diversity Committee Report: What's Your Social Location?' from the National Council on Family Relations defines social location as "the combination of factors including gender, race, social class, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation, and geographic location. This definition indicates that social location is particular to each individual; that is, social location is not exactly the same for any two individuals" (Brown et al. 2019, para. 3).*

Service provision for children, families, educators, and communities involves daily interactions that impact the belonging and well-being of these key stakeholders. Inclusivity must be at the forefront of the work to ensure equitable and accountable Early Years settings.

8.2 What is the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care System

Inclusivity is the fifth pillar in the Early Years Policy Framework prototype #3 that expands on a caring and learning environment for all. This system recognizes each person as having a purpose and connection within our society, which should be embedded into daily practice. This chapter will focus on the critical components of inclusivity related to social location, what's happening across the country and in Ontario (Government of Canada, 2022, May 9), Ontario's current Bilateral Agreement, the London-Middlesex Early Years system approach (City of London, 2024), allyship, how it impacts the community, and how it connects with the access, affordability, quality, and relationship pillars.

8.3 How Do We Know What is Happening Across the Country?

The Canadian federal government is gaining support from multiple stakeholders, including "provincial, territorial, and Indigenous partners" (Government of Canada, 2022, p. 1) within the Early Childhood Learning and Care (ELCC) system to make sure that all guidelines and legislations are true to and up to standards across the country. Particularly in the area of inclusivity, all forms of government, along with partners, are developing culturally accepting programs in education and care, specifically for Indigenous families. Across Canada, many government officials identifying as Indigenous have been acknowledged, represented and have been collaborative partners throughout the establishment of the policy framework called the *Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework* (IELCC) published in 2018. This framework provides a set of legislative measures that support the vision of all children, youth, and families being thriving and safe within their environments. Additionally, it is "centred on children and grounded in culture, and can be used as a guide for all actors involved in Indigenous ELCC" (Government of Canada, 2022, p. 1).

8.4 What is in Ontario's Current Bilateral Agreement?

In Ontario, investments in inclusive practice and licensed child care under the Ontario *Early Learning and Child Care Bilateral Agreement* are improving child care access for all children and families. Each child will have the opportunity to be included and have access to child care organizations and programming. This includes all children, regardless of their diverse backgrounds, languages, disabilities, vulnerabilities, or family income status.

As this is an ongoing plan outlined in the Bilateral Agreement, families still face challenges when accessing child care. Parents have been fully participating in ongoing collaborative work to support the decisions they make regarding child care options for their children and the services that meet each child's unique needs. The goal is to expand child care agencies so that all families are included and have a guaranteed space for their children. This includes center-based and licensed home child care. Parents recognize that the child care and ELCC system is not fully available to all children, as licensed child care options cannot meet their needs. Parents are missing work to take care of and attend to their children. This makes finding child care difficult, so many parents "settle for whatever care is available" due to lengthy waiting lists (City of London, 2019, p.26).

8.5 What is the London-Middlesex Early Years System Approach?

In the City of London and the County of Middlesex, the goal is to make inclusive participation transitional for all families and children to connect to child care and other early year services within their local area of living. When connecting families and children to these care and service organizations, diverse cultural engagement is indicated throughout the *London-Middlesex Child Care and Early Years Service Plan 2019- 2023 document*. The system approach highlights different ways for families and children to engage, share perspectives, and include them in the decision-making process regarding programming that will support their needs and interests (City of London, 2019). This has been working well for London and Middlesex.

With the connection to diverse cultural engagement, responsiveness extends from the inclusivity pillar as a primary role in child care and Early Years programming.

LEARN MORE

Pages 29 and 30 in the London-Middlesex Child Care and Early Years Service Plan 2019-2023 [PDF] document further explain the parent/caregiver and service providers' perspective.

Compressed Data

The following chart includes the key components specific to inclusivity and the relevant needs to help build and operate within the Early Years system.

Key Components of Protoype #3 Pillar #5 Inclusivity

1

There is recognition and valuing of the social location of each child in the ELCC system/child care, and learning environment.

- Socio-economic status.
- Family status.
- Culture.
- Language.
- Gender.
- Disabilities.

2

There is a valuing and nurturing of a sense of belonging, of being part of a supportive community that includes all children, parents, families and community members at large.

- Voice of children/children's rights.
- Voice of parents, families.
- Voice of Early Years professionals in planning and delivering inclusive programs.
- Voice of child care providers in the planning and operationalizing of an inclusive child care centre(s).
- Voice of key community partners who support children, families and Early Years professionals in the delivery of inclusive programs.
- Voice of municipal leaders in planning fiscally sustainable child care systems in their geographical region, including special needs resourcing.

3

There is acknowledgement and respectful, responsive acts to the voices of key stakeholders within the ELCC system.

- Appropriate number of qualified staff that can work with all children (supported through funding for professional learning/development, mentoring/coaching).
- Strong interprofessional connections/relationships between child care centres and Early Years community supports – (i.e., medical profession, speech, and language therapists, Children's Aid (CAS) social workers, resource consultants) to support all children.

4

There is recognition and support of Early Years professionals who have the knowledge and capacity to use various strategies, tools, and resources in their daily practice to meet each child's needs in the ELCC system.

- Inclusivity at the heart of each pillar.
- Part of the day-to-day culture, climate of the ELCC system.

8.6 Being an Ally

When many are inclined to take on an allyship role, it means that those in the community actively support each person's rights and take the necessary steps to practice professional engagement (Pietri et. al., 2024). Aspects of allyship may include listening to personal stories and experiences shared by individuals and advocating for their needs. Within the Early Years system, families, professionals, partners, and the community as a whole respectfully work together to create strong, inclusive relationships that offer a deep, unique lens that should open others' minds, eyes, and hearts. Each individual represents diversity in many ways, contributing to inclusive practice within Southwestern Ontario's fast-growing population. This growth indicates that the ELCC system aligns with inclusive practice by supporting "a collective desire to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families" (City of London, 2019, p. 19) through engagement and learning to educate.

8.7 Key Stakeholder Perspectives on Inclusivity

What does this Pillar Mean to Parents?

Parents want what is best for their children's future and are the first experts in knowing what their child needs to succeed. Parents want to ensure their children are included, feel a sense of belonging, are engaged, and can express themselves. The ongoing projection in ensuring that children are able to develop a healthy sense of belonging, engagement, and expression is through "look[ing] and listen[ing] to children from multiple perspectives" and asking questions (Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 18).

Parents in Southwestern Ontario are involved with focus group meetings to discuss diverse cultural services and programs. Various infrastructure organizations are available in the community to support newcomers and help them have a smooth transition into the Early Years community.

What does this Pillar Mean to EY Professionals?

For Early Years professionals, inclusion involves engagement in reflective practice and advocacy to support the community. Professionals in this field implement inclusive practice by participating in conversations with families, other childhood professionals, stakeholders, and children to learn and acknowledge social norms. Early Years professionals can be informed about issues the community faces daily by lending a listening ear. When educators lend a listening ear, it provides a way of considering the actions of being an ally, demonstrating our commitment to understanding what the community needs, and respecting their identities by introducing and referring to individuals by their proper pronouns. Integrating inclusion into educators' professional practice has helped create a welcoming, non-judgmental, caring environment that gives people in the community a sense of relief, knowing they feel safe to be their true, authentic selves.



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Early Years professionals show evidence of what the inclusivity pillar is by also wanting what is best for children. Early Years professionals build their knowledge to share various strategies, tools, and resources that will meet the needs of every child and make them feel welcomed and included. This requires having enough qualified educators to support and work with the children, building strong connections and relationships with community partners such as child care centres, and supporting children with a network of specialized services.

Some examples are speech and language programs, connecting families with medical and educational professionals, essential living services, and accommodations specific to any family of child's needs. This would include children with disabilities, immigration status who are new to the country (English as a second language and may not have living arrangements), and the rights of protection for Indigenous children and families who have lived on the land for centuries.

> *"RECEs work in diverse cultural contexts. Therefore, it's important to consider the origin of personal beliefs and associated biases, and the ways they influence professional practice. Also consider how personal beliefs influence relationships with members of the learning community" (CECE 2020, page 10)*

What does this Pillar Mean to Child Care Providers?

Child care providers are, in essence, the first caregivers for a child after family members, and play a predominant role in the well-being of children and families. London and Middlesex child care providers are continuing to expand on pre-developed programs and spaces for all families and children in their local community and are using their voices to include all those who enter the centres and circle of care because each need is equally valued and deemed important. Some examples are:

- Multiple diverse culture and language centres, such as Francophone and Indigenous centres, are available throughout the London and Middlesex community.
- Valuing the different beliefs of all educators, children, families, and other Early Years professionals.
- Special needs resources and implemented into child care centres and licensed home child care that support and include all children with special needs.
- Partnering with the Federal government, culturally diverse community leaders such as Indigenous leaders, and working with families and children to create a more diverse, culturally accepting, and high-quality learning and care environment.
- Non-binary language, such as natural phrases for the identities of individuals.

LEARN MORE

The *Canada-Ontario Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement- 2021-2026* contains more in-depth information in *Section 4.5.3 Priority Area #3: Inclusion*.

What does this Pillar Mean to Employers?

When it comes to the ELCC system, Early Years employers are at the heart of the whole operation and the early childhood profession, as they often work face-to-face with every child and family in their daily practice. Educators working in these settings reflect on the needs of the population and provide a diverse perspective by taking the necessary steps to understand, review, practice, and discuss how groups of individuals are affected within the caring and learning environment. Educators demonstrate inclusive practices and consider it a top priority because they respond to high demand from the local population and focus on the overall quality of programs, care centres, and a positive interactive environment. However, the ELCC system still does not fully acknowledge the ethical considerations related to cultural awareness, the labour market, and parental perspectives.

Firstly, when addressing cultural awareness, the system must recognize that many students attending school to become Early Childhood Educators are immigrants from other countries. According to the *Report to the Community* document (City of London, 2021), "immigration and migration are important contributors to the economy, labour force, population growth, creativity and innovation, culture, and diversity" (p.34), and come with many diverse perspectives and skill sets. These new educators are eager to work in the Early Years field and are ready to contribute to their community. However, to work in Ontario, you must either be a Canadian citizen or a permanent resident in order to be eligible to apply for employment. It has been challenging for the immigration population to apply for permanent residency to work and participate in the Early Years system, so they have to relocate to other provinces in order to expedite the pathway to permanent residency for a career in the Early Years field. This evidence indicates that inclusivity is not where it should be for immigrant early childhood educators within our own geographical location.

Secondly, when thinking about a woman's role in society, individuals often assume that women are the primary nurturers and caregivers for children while pursuing careers outside the home. This is reflected in caring more for child care responsibilities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the predominantly female child care workforce and other economic businesses took a hit when a stay-at-home order was mandated for the province of Ontario. The pandemic affected many female child care workers, resulting in added stress, increased mental health challenges, recruitment and retention issues in various labour sectors, and increased responsibilities with the care of children. Additionally, the parent perspective needs to be considered. Parents have responded to the child care system and its impact on families and their futures. According to the Child and Youth Network (2023), families would benefit from child care services and from connecting with their neighbourhood, especially one that reflects cultural acceptance and a sense of belonging for all.

LEARN MORE

Read the Child and Youth Network page “About Creating a Family-Centred Service System” to the end of the “approach” section.

8.8 Intersections with Other Pillars?

As previously mentioned in *Section 8.1, What is Inclusivity?*, the inclusivity pillar has been interconnected and embedded throughout the access, affordability, quality, and relationship pillars. However, through professional dialogue, there have been conversations that have drawn attention to the importance of inclusivity and whether it should still be reflected in the other pillars or become its own pillar. London and Middlesex' Licensed Child Care Network (LCCN), alongside with Fanshawe College, hosted an Early Years Town Hall meeting in the fall of 2022 that invited perspectives from the London and Middlesex Early Years community regarding why child care and the system as a whole matter to families, children, Early Years professionals, and Early Childhood Education and leadership students.

8.9 Why is Inclusivity its Own Pillar?

It quickly became evident that inclusivity needed to be an independent pillar within the Early Years system, particularly for those in child care and family centres. Inclusivity represents and demonstrates the commitment to "ensuring a learning environment [that] maintains a diverse, healthy organizational culture and climate that is equitable" (CECE, 2020, p.31). The diverse cultures, non-binary and gender identities, accessibility, and the labour market are increasingly being discussed, supported, and acknowledged in daily life. These discussions are important and have been embedded into practice to educate and support high-quality programming and care within the Early Years system. This change in practice situates the inclusivity pillar as its own because of the growth of the London, Ontario, population and the community's vision.

Common ideal thoughts that represent the inclusivity pillar are:

- Being flexible
- Advocating
- Helping individuals overcome barriers
- Fostering a sense of belonging
- Listening and engaging with different diverse perspectives
- Encouraging conversations around inclusivity
- Participating in collaborative work that supports the community
- Being culturally represented within the community

Inclusivity aligns with respecting the dignity of every individual and reconnects everyone to the neighbourhood and community. There is an awareness that inclusivity is not quite fully implemented yet, and that is why it needs to stand on its own.

8.10 Inclusivity Related to Access, Affordability, and Relationship Pillars

The inclusivity pillar connects and is embedded throughout the access, affordability, quality, and relationship pillars because each key component supports the others and is deemed important. Without interconnecting each pillar, the overall system would lack value, fall apart, and not operate properly. When considering how inclusivity connects to access and affordability, an example would be subsidy funding for families, especially those living in low-income neighbourhoods. These families can access child care services through subsidized fees, which reduce the cost of care. Families with children who have special needs are also granted subsidized child care and educational program fees under the *Canada-Ontario Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement- 2021-2026* (Government of Canada, 2022). All of Ontario's child care centres are committed to being welcoming and inclusive to all families, which "include those from low-income families and diverse and vulnerable communities" (p. 5). This is a part of the province's action plan. The inclusivity pillar connects to the quality and relationship pillars by focusing on the recruitment and retention of all professionals working in the Early Years field. This means the workforce focuses on the diverse dynamics of equality and rights amongst all employees and how these qualified staff build relationships with children, families, and working professionals in their environment. With this, educators are mindful of the relationships being built around them and maintain a strong work ethic to create or continue to provide professional pedagogical curriculum and care.

These are a few examples of how inclusivity is part of each of the pillars mentioned above. With this in mind, what other connections can be made?

Reflecting on the Inclusivity Pillar

Reflective Questions

Connections to other pillars

Inclusivity is embedded in many of the pillars discussed in this text, including examples shared in this chapter. Reflecting on the information shared, what are some other ways the inclusivity pillar may be connected to the other pillars?

What are some ways you can think of in which the inclusivity pillar is connected to the pillar of access?

- To the pillar of affordability?
- To the pillar of quality?
- To the pillar of responsiveness?
- To the pillar of relationships?

Inclusivity in your practice

Can you think of any specific examples of inclusivity considerations that you have experienced in your practice?

Failing to consider the Pillar of Inclusivity

What are some policy implications when inclusivity is not considered in a particular pillar?
What might occur if inclusivity is not considered in the pillar of access?

- To the pillar of affordability?
- To the pillar of quality?
- To the pillar of responsiveness?
- To the pillar of relationships?

8.11 Impact on Operationalizing the EY Systems Implications to the Early Years Field

In 2022, the *Canada-Ontario Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement* was implemented to enhance the ELCC system, aiming to make it more inclusive for children, families, and the community. This program includes opportunities to discuss how the system can support culturally diverse families by providing access to child care and making it more affordable, with an emphasis on supporting Indigenous partners. The operationalization of the Early Years system then expanded through legislation supporting families with other cultural backgrounds and those with children with special needs. While this creates a more inclusive practice within the sector, the plan has not been fully implemented. The goal is for the program to be fully implemented, with a focus on affordability, by January 2025, and then to move forward with changes to the ELCC system and to its inclusivity.

CHAPTER 9: PILLAR #6: RELATIONSHIPS

Chapter Outline

9.0 Learning Objectives
9.1 What is the Relationship Pillar?
9.2 What is Meant by Relationships?
9.3 Key Stakeholder Perspectives on Relationships
9.4 Intersections with Other Pillars
9.5 Reflective Activity



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9.0 Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

- Explore the relationship pillar through the lens of stakeholders
- Discuss the importance of interprofessional collaboration
- Analyze responsive relationships to ensure the unique needs of children and families are respected, embraced, and prevalent in the learning space

9.1 What is the Relationship Pillar?



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Relationship is the sixth and final pillar in the Early Years Policy Framework prototype #3, focusing on professional relationships between multiple stakeholder partners, including parents, parent advocacy groups, employers, levels of government, and support organizations, all working alongside Early Years leaders and professionals. This chapter will focus on key components of relationships, including what this pillar means to the Early Years community, how the COVID-19 pandemic affected people's connections and their ability to initiate in-person interactions, and how the relationship pillar interconnects with the access, quality, responsiveness, and inclusivity pillars.

9.2 What is Meant by Relationships?

Relationships foster a sense of belonging, engage with those around us, and are at the heart of connecting with others through a caring lens. The stakeholder relationships surrounding children, families, and Early Years professionals are crucial to the overall well-being of every child, family member, and staff member involved in and engaged with the Early Years system.



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Image Description
Three concentric circles. Level One: Children – Children and youth; Level Two: Direct Relationships – Family and Early Years Professionals; Level Three: System Support – Child care owner/operators, board of directors, executive directors, centre directors, parent advisory groups, employers, all levels of government, professional networks.committees, professional advisory groups, regulatory colleges, pre-service training providers, researchers, and community partners.

Democratic Participation in the Early Years

Democratic participation and relationship building go hand in hand in the Early Years profession as we consider whose perspectives are valued and visible at all levels of the system. According to the *Building Canada's Child Care*

System website (n.d.), one of the ten critical components necessary is democratic participation. All key stakeholder perspectives need to be engaged in developing participatory policies that reflect the needs of service users and those with a vested interest in early learning and child care. Participatory policy-making requires time to build relationships and space to co-construct the knowledge necessary to ensure that multiple perspectives are honoured and prevalent.

LEARN MORE

For more information regarding Democratic Participation as one of the critical components of Building Canada's Child Care System, please refer to: Democratic Participation.

At an international level, democratic early childhood education has been at the forefront of discussions for many years. Chapter Three outlines the various early learning and child care frameworks that have influenced Canada's shift in its vision for a more democratic and participatory Early Years system. As a nation with a renewed vision of democracy for the Early Years, relationships must be at the centre of the co-construction of policy. We cannot discuss the pillars of inclusivity, quality, and responsiveness without including relationships.

Peter Moss shared his insights with the World Organization for Early Childhood Education in 2021, discussing ways that we may work together to move towards democratic early childhood education (OMEP, 2021). To learn more about Moss's insights and how relationships are embedded in these transitions, please access: Towards a Democratic Early Childhood Education for All.

Compressed Data

Key Components of Protoype #3 Pillar #6 Relationships

Locally, through research and data collection, the key components have been compressed into the following chart, which is specific to the relationship pillar, and are needed to help build and operate within the Early Years system.

1

Early years leaders (i.e., child care providers) foster ongoing professional relationships between key stakeholders (i.e., parents, board of directors/parent advisory groups, employers, all levels of government) who are part of the ELCC system.

- Regular, ongoing communication between all key stakeholders using a variety of approaches (i.e., in person, technology, documentation).

- "In kind" donation of time to serve on Early Years networks.

2

Early years leaders (i.e., child care providers, municipal managers) value and engage in professional interactions with Early Years professionals to support daily practice that benefits all children and families.

- Positive image of colleagues.
- Professional learning within communities of practice that thrive based on sound relationships.
- Value of strong interprofessional collaboration and professional relationships to ensure quality care for all children in the system/centre.

3

Early years leaders are responsible for the day-to-day operation of the ELCC system that sees recruitment of long-term staffing as necessary to build and maintain inclusive relationships with all children, families, and professional colleagues.

- Leading and managing respectful staff relationships; staff appreciation that supports the day-to-day work.

4

Early years professionals form respectful relationships with all families based on awareness of children's and families' unique needs.

- Ability to be responsive to families (pre, during, and post pandemic) through continued relationship building/engagement with parents.
- Value of engaging and professional interactions between the educator and parents/families.

5

Early years professionals value and engage in professional interactions with all children that demonstrate focus on care and learning.

- Promote a sense of belonging for all, including children, families, and colleagues, to support a positive, quality care and learning environment.

6

Early years professionals value and engage in professional interactions with colleagues and other professionals to support all children and their families.

- Continue in-person and online meetings (i.e., LCCN meetings, Strive, City of London/County of Middlesex).
- Continue with projects to support interpersonal connections (i.e., LCCN Subcommittees).

9.2.1 Interprofessional Collaboration

Collaboration between professionals is crucial in Early Years settings to support the well-being of children and families. Collaboration happens daily among Early Years professionals, typically in teaching teams. Community partners engage with children and families in Early Years spaces to offer additional perspectives,

including speech and language supports, special needs resourcing, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, social services, and so many other important services. Professionals come together, alongside families, to support children by meeting their unique needs.

Teaching teams often collaborate to mentor pre-service Early Years professionals on placement as they complete their education and training. The opportunity for pre-service students to put theory into practice in Early Years settings provides invaluable experience in interprofessional collaboration, before Early Years professionals enter the field as qualified educators.

Child care operators, school board managers, municipal children's services managers, public health officials, special needs resource supervisors, pre-service faculty members, and multiple community partners donate in-kind time to regularly meet and collaborate, ensuring the needs of the Early Years' community are at the forefront of their service provision. These collaborative opportunities take many forms, such as network meetings, advisory committees, strategic planning sessions, town halls, and professional learning opportunities. The City of London and County of Middlesex have been provincial leaders through their continuous efforts to bring professionals together in a multitude of ways to engage in interprofessional collaboration, reflecting on and critically evaluating improved methods of service provision for children, youth, and families in their communities. Examples of this tremendous work have been discussed in previous chapters, linking to Strive, LCCN, Familyinfo.ca, the CYN, and other networks, advisory committees, and town halls.

For more information regarding the importance of interprofessional collaboration in building relationships in the Early Years profession, the Practice Guideline on Communication and Collaboration from the College of Early Childhood Educators has been included.

9.3 Key Stakeholder Perspectives on Relationships

9.3.1 What does this Pillar Mean to Parents?



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Relationship for families means having multiple opportunities to build and maintain meaningful connections with those around them. This means families want to be part of their local community and participate in the service system programs. From the parent perspective, Early Years programs should offer cultural and lingual activities, as many of London's growing population speak a language other than English. According to the '*London-Middlesex Child Care & Early Years Service System Plan 2019-2023*' document, families in the city speak either "Arabic, Spanish, Chinese, Polish, Portuguese, French, or Indigenous languages" (City of London, 2019, p.21) at home. With that being said, there have been Indigenous and Francophone family and child care centres built that cater to these

specific cultural and linguistic communities, which are known thus far. Parents connect inclusivity to relationship building because Early Years educators, employers from government and system levels, and family and child care providers offered these families support in meaningful ways that 1." connect and engage them in their neighbourhood, 2. experience reduced storytelling, 3. have a better and more consistent experience when accessing services, 4. easy access to a full range of services, and 5. experience shorter wait times" (City of London, 2019, p. 20) and have the space to connect with their loved ones.

9.3.2 What does this Pillar Mean to EY Professionals?



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Early Years professionals form caring and respectful relationships, valuing and engaging in professional interactions with all families, children, colleagues, and other professionals. This demonstrates the awareness of all individuals' unique needs, focuses on care and learning environments, and creates a sense of belonging for all. With this, community belonging is connected to building responsive relationships, as it

Watch the following YouTube video from the College of Early Childhood Educators on the Standards of Practice – Standard 1: caring and responsive relationships. This perspective from the Early Years professional focuses on the importance of relationship building between educators, children and families.
Watch the video *Snapshot: Standard I – Caring and Responsive Relationships* on page 9.3 of the online version of this resource or on YouTube.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, maintaining a sense of community belonging became very challenging due to Ontario's closures and stay-at-home orders. According to the *Report to the Community* document (City of London, 2021), the pandemic affected in-person interactions, leading to a substantial decrease in individuals' connection to the community and bonding experiences. With mandated isolation, Early Years professionals, along with many others, also felt a lack of belonging and were disconnected from their engagement with the neighbourhood and community. As the pandemic restrictions lifted, "reconnecting people and neighbourhoods will be vital to ensuring all Londoners experience improved community belonging post-pandemic" (p.30).

For more information regarding the key components of professional relationships for Early Years professionals, the College of Early Childhood Educators provides an excellent overview in Practice Note: Professional Relationships. The key components discussed include the ethics of care, culturally responsive teaching, and balanced professional relationships.

9.3.3 What does this Pillar Mean for Child Care Providers?

Child care providers support daily practice within the education and care environment that benefits all children and families. Community Connectors are Early Years professionals who connect with the local community and have a big supporting role in encouraging and providing opportunities for all individuals to "participate in meaningful ways (that they are most comfortable with)" (Ministry of Education, 2014, p.18). These Early Years professionals work within a wide range of service and resource centres, ensuring that all individuals are connected and maintain active and valuable relationships with those around them. Located on the Familyinfo.ca website, there is a list of various family centres, earlyON programs, and numerous services and resources for children, families, and other community members that support and foster a sense of belonging for all. Child care providers establish relationships within the first few moments of interacting with each individual, creating a welcoming and engaging interactive experience that supports and cares for all families and children. This means that child care providers have a leadership "role they may play in the achievement of desirable outcomes" (Seers & Chopin, 2012, p.43 as cited in Uhl-Bien, 2012) that connects all individuals to form meaningful relationships.



Image by Andrej Lišakov, Unsplash License.

Child care providers engage with community partners and key stakeholders in multiple ways to ensure a meaningful journey for children and families occurs while they are enrolled in Early Years programs. Non-profit organizations are generally operated by a volunteer Board of Directors, comprised of parents, caregivers, and knowledgeable community partners. These Boards work collaboratively to develop policies, envision possibilities, maintain fiscal oversight, and support the Executive Director, who is guiding Early Years professionals in serving children and families. Often, the Executive Director or senior leadership within organizations donate time in kind to participate in Early Years committees and networks. The in-kind donation of time is extensive and provides valuable insight into the Early Years system at the local level. Private or profit Early Years organizations also donate in-kind time to engage with Early Years committees and networks, providing an additional lens into the local Early Years system and vision.

The City of London and County of Middlesex Children's Services Managers collaborate regularly with child care operators through bi-annual meetings, engagement in Early Years committees and networks, and ongoing in-person and remote meetings to ensure updates are shared regularly, supporting the sustainability of the Early Years sector. Child care operators and Early Years professionals are involved in strategic planning and played a crucial role in supporting the development of the *London-Middlesex Child Care & Early Years Service System Plan for 2024 – 2028* (City of London, 2024), cited in Chapter Three. This ongoing interprofessional collaboration ensures the voices of key stakeholders are present in building a system that values the unique needs of the Early Years communities in the region. As an author of this text, I can attest to the admiration shared remotely around the province of Ontario during the pandemic for the collaborative work taking place in the London and Middlesex region for the Early Years profession. This collaborative work continues today through various methods of collaboration and relationship building at all levels of the Early Years system, including the engagement of all key stakeholders accessing Early Years services.

9.3.4 What does this Pillar Mean for Early Years Employers?

Employers who work in London's Early Years and child care services naturally establish professional and connective relationships with all children and families they work with. Early Childhood Educators come together to build a well-rounded, purposeful, and valuable work culture that supports children's learning, overall healthy development, and creates meaningful, collaborative, and impactful connections with others (Little Moments. Big Impact, n.d.). Relationship building and communication take time, and the London and Middlesex Early Years sector has been refining its approach to provide a successful community-building plan. Through networking, employers can help strengthen community bonding within the city and county, prioritizing what families and children need. This means that through knowledge sharing, families were able to connect with child care and Early Years professionals to obtain accurate information about care, essential services, schooling, and other local services and resources that support those in need. This fosters positive interactions and marks the beginning of a relationship-building process.

Simon Sinek, author and inspirational speaker on leadership, discusses the importance of great leaders inspiring action by following the 'Golden Circle' that centers around the why, how, and what method (Sinek, 2010). This method integrates the 'why' equals connection, which builds on trust, shared belief and purpose, and inspiration. The 'how equals action' refers to the ways employers take meaningful steps to communicate and connect with those they work with and for. This means within the Early Years sector, the goal is to hire educators who reflect and bring purpose to the diverse community and partner with families that share the same sense of inclusion, belonging, and intention. This will ensure that every child is supported, with their individual identity, cultural background, and comprehensive educational development recognized through an inclusive environment and meaningful relationships with others. Lastly, the "what" method equals the services and interactions that Early Years employers provide for the community and are driven to meet end goals with the belief of what is available (Sinek, 2010). Relationship building stems from these methods, as it enhances effective practice in the Early Years field and reflects the core value of Simon Sinek's 'Great Leaders Inspire Action' TED talk (2010), which emphasizes believing in what employers believe and being there to support one another through collaborative efforts. When word of mouth spreads, as Simon Sinek says, about inspired actions to care, to foster trust, and make a difference in people's lives, the community responds by showing up to Early Years organizations because they hear and see how employers care, invest, and commit to providing meaningful support in a nurturing way.

Watch Simon Sinek's TED Talk video on Great Leaders Inspire Action' that connects to this relationship pillar in the Early Childhood and Education field
Watch the video *How Great Leaders Inspire Action* on page 9.3 of the online version of this resource or on YouTube.

9.3.5 What does this Pillar Mean for Employers in London-Middlesex?

Employers have a significant stake in the Early Years profession, as they are invested in ensuring their employees have access to quality, licensed child care and before- and after-school programs. The more employees feel their children are receiving quality care and education, the more they are available and focused on their work. Employers who shared their perspectives during the pandemic recovery period were focused on providing flexible arrangements for employees to work from home, aiming to achieve a better work-life balance, a preference revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Family members working from home continue to require access to

quality Early Years settings for their children, ensuring their needs are met while parents and caregivers are working from home.

Employers also expressed openness to working-from-home arrangements for employees, given global markets and the ease of expanding these remote employment opportunities. This was seen as a positive change post-pandemic, and the possibilities for growth were at the forefront of employers' minds. A theme of hope and leadership was present in discussions with regional employers. The COVID-19 pandemic taught many valuable lessons, leading to new ways of rebuilding the community. While many employees have returned to work, some continue to work remotely where possible. According to the Institute of Professional Management (IPM), the employer-employee relationship has evolved over the years, with a reduced power imbalance between employers and employees. Employees are seeking opportunities with a better work-life balance, requiring employers to be more flexible with employment contracts (Doughty, 2025).

A trend noted during the COVID-19 pandemic was the loss of women in the labour force as they left the workforce to care for their children while Early Years settings and schools were closed. Upon rebuilding post-pandemic, one of the largest increases of women in the workforce in Canada was in the care economy. According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the number of women in the workforce in Canada has increased after significant job losses during the COVID-19 pandemic, with women now working in the care economy, such as hospitals, educational services, and social assistance, at a rate of 32.9% of women in the workforce (Scott, 2024). Early years professionals are directly impacted by this increase in labour market demands, as the need for licensed child care spaces has increased. This post-pandemic need for quality Early Years services, coupled with the *Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC)* program, has led to an increased demand for Early Years services across all regions in Canada. London and Middlesex are collaborating with community partners to increase the number of licensed child care spaces, meeting the growing demand, which includes both child care operators and employers from other sectors. These collaborative relationships extend beyond the local community to include ongoing conversations at the provincial level, which has oversight of the Early Years profession both through legislation and fiscal responsibility. The oversight of the Early Years portfolio now also includes the federal government, with the implementation of the CWELCC program, requiring interprofessional collaboration with all levels of government as it pertains to the Early Years.

Leaders in the Early Years community in London and Middlesex continue to engage with the Licensed Child Care Network (LCCN) and the Child and Youth Network (CYN) to build and maintain collaborative relationships, ensuring that multiple voices are represented at community tables to help determine next steps to benefit children and families in the region. The ongoing communication and implementation of strategic plans depend on responsive relationships between the key stakeholders to ensure the main pillars of the Early Years policy framework are upheld in the community.

9.4 Intersections with Other Pillars

The relationship pillar has been interconnected and embedded throughout the access, quality, responsiveness, and inclusivity pillars, as the Early Years system is rooted in a foundation of trust, connection, "participation, [and] responding positively to children" (Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 24-25) and families. A quote from *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* document highlights the importance of these fundamental pillars by emphasizing the need for families to have full access to programming/services in Early Years settings and engage with responsive, inclusive, and high-quality care. The quote states, "cultivate authentic, caring relationships and connections [are] to create a sense of belonging among and between children, adults, and the world around them" (Ministry of Education, 2014, p.13), and is a strong representation of how the concept of belonging interconnects with the relationship-building process. Much like the inclusivity chapter, it aligns with supporting and respecting every individual, as well as reconnecting them to their community and neighbourhood. This provides every child, youth, adult, and senior with "opportunities to make and explore connections between home, early childhood programs" (Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 25), and other services.

9.5 Reflective Activity

The reconstruction of Familyinfo.ca was a collaborative Early Years community effort, supported by the City of London and County of Middlesex Children's Services. This website offers families an excellent resource for accessing information about various community services.

Reflective Activity

Activity Description

Take some time to review the familyinfo.ca website. Reflect on what you learn and document your findings here.

- What services did you learn about that you were not aware were available in London and Middlesex?
- How can this website support you in your work, whether it be in the Early Years community or supporting employees with children?
- How can you get involved in interprofessional collaboration or relationship building in your community?
- Are there any additional thoughts you have about the usefulness of this resource?

CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION

Chapter Outline

10.0 Conclusion



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10.0 Conclusion

The purpose of this online resource was to share the knowledge gathered during the co-construction of an Early Years policy prototype framework through the lenses of key stakeholders in the municipalities of the City of London and the County of Middlesex, Ontario, Canada. The collaboration between ELCC leaders, which included municipal managers, directors, and executive directors, as well as faculty from Fanshawe College and Early Childhood Leadership students, was foundational to the co-construction process.

In our current reality, participatory democracy is not to be taken for granted. Policy-making is a complex process that requires the responsibility of all in a democratic society (Vaillancourt, 2009). This was evident to the researchers when many participants' initial responses to becoming involved in the co-construction of the Early Years policy prototype were characterized by uncertainty and the belief that they lacked the necessary information or skill set to co-construct an Early Years policy framework prototype. They saw this process best handled by policymakers at all levels of government, including local, provincial/territorial, and federal. Some participants also shared that they had been involved in past consultation processes and that their voices and ideas had not been respected or valued because of the lack of follow-through on the suggestions they provided. Vigar (2017) warns of tokenism when claiming to seek input from key stakeholders, while in reality, the policy is already being validated. The hesitancy to get involved in the co-construction of the Early Years policy framework prototype may be a combination of a lack of confidence in one's knowledge and distrust of the process itself. The researchers involved in this study had to be respectful of their participants' unease and reassure them that their voice mattered through ongoing communication of the policy framework prototype's iterations.

The City of London and the County of Middlesex have established a robust interactive process to inform their child care and family service system over the years. Ongoing communication with Early Years leaders through regular LCCN and municipal meetings helped maintain a sound collaboration that continued to evolve throughout the research project. The co-construction process of the Early Years policy prototype framework meshed with the municipality's approach to change (Family Centres London, & Child and Youth Network, 2015). where one of its key strategic components, leading to change, as outlined in the city's Approach document (2015), involved the intentional movement of all service providers, within the family-centred service system, from sharing locations, to coordination, to collaboration, to the full integration of the service delivery, be it child care or family centre programs.

The development of an effective Early Years system hinges on ongoing, trusting and respectful relationships which include those most impacted by the system. This was made clear during the project, where all participants (parents, Early Years professionals, child care providers, and local employers) clearly articulated the importance of relationships as part of a strong, impactful Early Years system. To acknowledge their voices and recognize the importance of relationships in this context, the researchers added a relationship pillar. In turn, the inclusivity pillar emphasized that the system needed to continue focusing on ensuring the voices of all were part of the strategic planning and day-to-day operations of the Early Years system. As acknowledged by Blomkamp (2018), this is not an easy component of the co-construction of policy, and this was recognized during the research project; however,

it needs to be addressed in future iterations of the policy prototype. Early Years leaders and researchers need to continue exploring ways to refine the inclusion of children's voices, engage more local employers, and develop diverse data collection processes to maximize input on Early Years policy from the growing, diverse population in their municipalities. The London and Middlesex municipalities' intense focus on relationships provides an example of how the co-construction of an Early Years policy framework prototype can offer strategic advice through a democratic, participatory research project.

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Version History

This page provides a record of changes made to the open textbook since its initial publication. If the change is minor, the version number increases by 0.1. If the change involves substantial updates, the version number increases to the next full number.

Version	Date	Change	Affected Web Rage
1.0	May 2026	Publication	N/A