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Building Leaders

Early Childhood Development in Indigenous Communities

Final Report
July 2015



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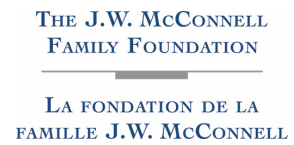
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Thanks to our partners



Max Bell Foundation



Executive Summary

Research and experience have demonstrated that early childhood development (ECD) is integral to future outcomes. Quality ECD programming contributes to healthy growth and development, as well as school readiness and success. Given the legacy of colonialism in Canada, access to culturally relevant ECD programs can play a key role in bridging gaps in life-chances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.

In the summer of 2014, Canada's Public Policy Forum launched a national initiative to improve ECD in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. *Building Leaders: Early Childhood Development in Indigenous Communities* involved a series of four roundtable discussions with ECD practitioners, policymakers, academics, and community leaders in different regions. This report highlights positive developments, common challenges, and key recommendations shared by roundtable participants. Through this project, the Public Policy Forum is reviving a critical national dialogue that has been dormant for the past decade.

The roundtable discussions provided insights into the state of ECD programming for Indigenous communities in Canada. Participants highlighted a number of best practices, although funding models continue to present challenges for program access and sustainable impact. Some of the positive trends include the shift toward community-based models, culturally relevant programming, and collaborative solutions.

While many of the developments across jurisdictions demonstrate progress in ECD, a number of common challenges were raised throughout the roundtable discussions. In particular, discussions focused on funding issues, capacity gaps, and the need for stronger leadership across sectors and communities. As First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities continue to face the same challenges, stakeholders across the country want to see real action in a number of key areas:

- *Improving funding models to meet changing community needs*
- *Increasing investments in capacity building to sustain a strong ECD workforce*
- *Expanding community-based holistic programming to support optimal development*
- *Designing culturally relevant programs to ensure better outcomes*
- *Engaging leaders across sectors and communities to raise awareness of the value of ECD*
- *Leveraging collaboration to bridge gaps in program access and funding*

Advancing these priorities requires a national platform where Indigenous leaders, all levels of government, ECD experts, charitable foundations, as well as private and not-for-profit partners can work together to ensure that quality ECD programming is not only sustainable, but also accessible to all Indigenous children, regardless of their status or where they live.

Introduction

In the summer of 2014, Canada's Public Policy Forum launched a national initiative to advance early childhood development (ECD) in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. Through a combination of research and dialogue among experts, practitioners, policymakers, and community leaders, the Forum explored strategies for enhancing ECD outcomes in Indigenous communities. This report highlights positive developments, common challenges, and key recommendations shared in our discussions with stakeholders across the country. As an independently produced analysis of stakeholder perspectives, this report may not necessarily represent the views of the partners who contributed to this project.

Why ECD matters

The potential to empower a growing youth population and a culture of respect for children are reasons for optimism and inspiration in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. Nearly a third (28 percent) of Canada's Indigenous population is under the age of 14, compared to a sixth (16.5 percent) of the non-Indigenous population.¹ Children are central in Indigenous cultures,² as reflected in the active role that communities play in supporting parents and families.³ Nevertheless, the effects of colonialism and the legacy of residential schools continue to contribute to social and economic disadvantage across communities, undermining the ability of Indigenous children to reach their full potential.

Many factors contribute to optimal or healthy child development, including biology, family, neighbourhood, and the broader socio-political context.⁴ It is widely understood that children living in poverty or suffering from abuse and neglect are more likely to experience physical and mental health issues, as well as social challenges later in life. Neuroscience confirms the critical importance of the first few years of life to long-term human development, in particular, the impact of healthy households and other safe, nurturing environments on the future potential of children.

Early childhood development (ECD) encompasses multiple components, including physical, socio-emotional, and cognitive/language development. From an Indigenous perspective, it also includes cultural identity, pride in oneself, and traditional ways of knowing.⁵ A wide range of policies and programs can contribute to healthy child development, such as those focused on early care and learning, good health and nutrition, parenting skills and economic supports, as well as services for families with special needs.

Quality ECD programming helps advance healthy growth and development, school readiness and success, and overall well-being and productivity in later life.⁶ Research has demonstrated that enriching experiences in the early years not only shape future learning, health, and behaviour, but also support economic growth by enabling children to maximize their potential as adults.⁷ In fact, the economic benefits of investing in ECD outweigh the costs of providing quality support.⁸ Optimal ECD for children in Indigenous communities can also play a critical role in strengthening cultural identity⁹ and enhancing community capacity¹⁰.

By launching *Building Leaders: Early Childhood Development in Indigenous Communities*, the Public Policy Forum is reviving a critical national dialogue that has been dormant for the past decade. The goal is to provide a platform to take stock of ECD programming in Indigenous communities; identify strengths and challenges across current practices; and consider steps that governments, communities, and other stakeholders could take to drive enhanced outcomes for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children.

Our approach

From December 2014 to February 2015, the Forum convened a series of roundtables with ECD practitioners, policymakers, academics, and community leaders in different regions. While the range of perspectives was limited by the roundtable locations, the discussions provided a platform for sharing progress achieved, exploring key challenges, and identifying new avenues for greater impact.

Roundtables were held in Edmonton, Halifax, Winnipeg, and Ottawa. Stakeholders from different provinces participated in the Edmonton and Halifax discussions, while the Winnipeg roundtable focused on the Manitoba context. Providing Inuit perspectives, the roundtable in Ottawa coincided with Inuit ECD Working Group meetings organized by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami. This final roundtable discussion included representatives from all four Inuit Nunangat regions, as well as Inuit organizations based in Ottawa. Please refer to the appendices for the roundtable agenda and participant lists.

The findings in this report are based on what we heard at the four roundtables. To set the context for these discussions, the Forum prepared a research paper and a shorter discussion paper that included the following questions, which were used to frame the dialogue:

- What are some of the best practices/notable achievements in early childhood development in your local area or region?
- Where are the current challenges or barriers in early childhood development in your local area or region?
- What lessons can be learned from promising ECD policies or programs across Canada and abroad?
- What are key priorities for enhancing early childhood development in your local area or region?
- How can governments, the private sector, communities, and families play a role in driving better outcomes for young children?

An Expert Advisory Committee was also established to provide advice and guidance on the project. Committee members were drawn from key stakeholder groups, including Indigenous leaders, ECD practitioners and researchers, as well as private and not-for-profit organizations engaged in Aboriginal issues. Prospective candidates received formal invitations to participate in the project, and the final committee was selected based on interest and availability. Please see Appendix C for a complete list of Committee members.

The State of ECD in Indigenous Communities

In First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, responsibility for child rearing rests with the whole community, and it has always been considered a sacred duty.¹¹ The removal of generations of children from their communities as a result of residential schools and forced adoptions has had a profound and lasting effect. If and when children were allowed to return home, many found they had lost their cultural connection to their communities.¹² Some had been away from their families from the age of four to 16, having spent nearly their entire childhood in residential school.

Being deprived of a nurturing home environment while growing up, many Indigenous parents today lack the skills and knowledge to raise their own children, contributing to a breakdown of family structures and to related social issues that have become widespread in many communities.¹³ Given the legacy of colonialism, these challenges heighten the need for culturally sensitive programs that promote quality ECD in Indigenous communities to improve outcomes later in life.

In Canada, key federal programs contributing to ECD in Indigenous communities were introduced between 1995 and 1999, such as the Aboriginal Head Start. Federal ECD programs for Indigenous children and families are funded through three departments and one agency:

- Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC);
- Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC);
- Health Canada; and
- Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC).

These federal bodies provide funding to communities or community-based organizations for a wide range of services, including infant and maternal health, parental support, as well as early learning and child care.

Through multilateral framework agreements in 2000 and 2003, the Government of Canada committed to providing provincial/territorial governments with incremental funding to enhance their existing investments in early learning and child care programs. As a complement to broad multilateral initiatives, the Government of Canada announced a specific Aboriginal ECD Strategy in 2002 that augmented funding (\$320 million over five years) for a range of existing ECD programs for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children and families. A key component of the Strategy was the commitment by the implicated Ministers¹ to explore a “single-window” approach to funding ECD programs for Indigenous children and their families.

When children are removed from their families, how can they learn to parent, when they themselves have not been parented in residential schools?

-Hare & Anderson¹⁴

The federal organizations involved in the Strategy were tasked with identifying gaps, challenges, and inefficiencies in an effort to better integrate and align federal ECD programs. Feedback was also sought from national Aboriginal organizations on the desirability of a consolidated approach.² While some were concerned that the integration of programs would reduce funding levels, efforts to implement a single-window approach continued with pilot projects launched in 17 First Nations and Inuit communities. For a variety of reasons, including challenges integrating programming and funding across federal departments, these pilots were not successful. Since the discontinuation of the 2002 Aboriginal ECD strategy, there have been no major efforts to re-design Aboriginal-specific ECD programs or policies at the national level, as illustrated in the timeline on the following page.

¹ Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Employment and Social Development Canada, Health Canada, and Public Health Agency of Canada

² A more detailed account of Aboriginal perspectives on the “single-window” approach can be found in the [research paper](#) prepared by the Public Policy Forum.

Timeline of Federal ECD Programming for Indigenous Communities, 1990 – present



Further details on current federal ECD programs for Indigenous children and families are provided in the table on page 5, although it is important to note that not all communities have access to existing programs. The table does not include information on per capita funding levels or an assessment of funding levels relative to need, which is beyond the scope of the current project. In general, funding levels for federal programs have not increased over the past decade, while target populations have seen significant growth. In fact, the Indigenous population in Canada is growing at a rate nearly four times that of the non-Indigenous population.¹⁵

While federal funding has been stagnant, some provincial and territorial governments have made significant new investments in ECD, including programs that target disadvantaged children and families. However, those living on-reserve typically lack access to these supports due to strict jurisdictional divisions. Furthermore, access within target populations depends on the capacity of eligible communities to successfully apply and implement programs. Similar to the general state of ECD programming in Canada, the lack of coordination between the myriad of Indigenous ECD programs has been cited by experts and roundtable participants as an obstacle to improving their accessibility and overall impact.

Federal ECD programming for First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, 2014-2015

Program	Department	Target Population	Type of Intervention	Planned spending (millions)
<i>Day care on reserve in Ontario and Alberta</i>	Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada	On-reserve First Nations (ON) Status First Nations and Métis ordinarily on-reserve (AB)	Child care & early learning, parent & family support	\$14.8 (Ontario)* \$2.6 (Alberta)*
<i>First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI)</i>	Employment & Social Development Canada	On-reserve First Nations and Inuit	Child care & early learning	\$55.0
<i>Aboriginal Head Start On-Reserve (AHSOR)</i>	Health Canada	On-reserve First Nations	Child care & early learning, parent & family support	\$49.0**
<i>Brighter Futures</i>	Health Canada	On-reserve First Nations and Inuit	Infant & maternal health, parent & family support, mental health	\$45.7**
<i>Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP) -First Nations and Inuit Component</i>	Health Canada	On-reserve First Nations and Inuit	Infant & maternal health	\$12.7**
<i>Children's Oral Health Initiative (COHI)</i>	Health Canada	On-reserve First Nations and Inuit	Infant & maternal health	\$5.4**
<i>Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Initiative -First Nations and Inuit Component</i>	Health Canada	On-reserve First Nations and Inuit	Infant & maternal health	\$14.2**
<i>Maternal and Child Health</i>	Health Canada	On-reserve First Nations	Infant & maternal health	\$23.8**
<i>Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC)</i>	Public Health Agency of Canada	Off-reserve First Nations, Métis and Inuit	Early learning, parent & family support	\$32.1***
Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP)	Public Health Agency of Canada	Off-reserve First Nations, Inuit and Métis and Immigrant/Newcomers, Isolated, Low Income	Parent & family support, infant & maternal health	\$27.2****
Community Action Program for Children (CAPC)	Public Health Agency of Canada	Off-reserve First Nations, Inuit and Métis and Immigrant/Newcomers, Isolated, Low Income	Parent & family support, ECD programming	\$53.4****
Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Initiative	Public Health Agency of Canada	Pan-Canadian, including off-reserve First Nations, Inuit and Métis	Health and allied health professionals and other front-line workers	\$1.5****

All figures supplied through Departmental Performance Reports, Reports on Plans and Priorities, or through correspondence with department officials.

*Through the 1991 Arrangement for the Funding and Administration of Social Services, AANDC reimburses the Province of Alberta for social services (including daycare) delivered to First Nations ordinarily resident on-reserve. In Ontario, the province is reimbursed for on-reserve child care and welfare services through the 1965 Memorandum of Agreement Respecting Welfare for Indians.

** Note: Since October 2013, Health Canada's funding allocations have been reduced relative to prior years to reflect the funding transferred to the First Nations Health Authority for delivery of federal health programming in British Columbia under the BC Tripartite Framework Agreement

***Includes the Strategic Fund.

****Expenditures for these PHAC programs include, but are not specifically targeted for First Nations, Inuit or Métis communities. Total spending includes projects or initiatives that serve non-Indigenous populations.

Observations from the Roundtable Discussions

The roundtable discussions provided insights into the state of ECD programming for Indigenous communities across different regions. Participants shared a number of successful programs and promising developments, although funding models continue to present challenges for program access and sustainable impact. Some of the positive trends include the shift toward community-driven approaches, the emphasis on culturally relevant programming, and the focus on collaborative solutions.

Best practices

At each of the roundtables, ECD practitioners described with great pride specific programs in their region that are making a difference in the lives of young children and their families. While examples of successful initiatives are profiled throughout this report, they reflect broader trends that indicate ongoing progress and innovation in ECD.

Community-Based Early Intervention

Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) programs have been running for about 20 years in communities across the country, including those on and off-reserve, which includes northern communities and urban areas. Lauded for its flexibility and holistic approach, AHS is an early intervention, child-centred model driven by families and communities and focused on the physical, mental, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of development. The success of the program is evident in its long-term impact on participants across jurisdictions. For instance, a number of AHS “graduates” from the late 1990s/early 2000s are now assuming leadership roles in their communities, such as returning to the program as staff members contributing to the development of the next generation of leaders.



Eagle's Nest Aboriginal Head Start Preschool *Vancouver, British Columbia*

Hosted by the BC Aboriginal Child Care Society, Eagle's Nest Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) preschool opened in East Vancouver in 1998. The preschool is fully licensed with dedicated, qualified staff, including three early childhood educators, a bus driver, a program coordinator, as well as practicum students and volunteers.

The Eagle's Nest program is based on the six key components of AHS: Culture and Language, Education and School Readiness, Health Promotion, Nutrition, Social Support, and Parent and Family Involvement. Developed with extensive parent and Elder input, the preschool has focused on family participation and cultural integration from its inception. The goal is to create a culturally safe environment for children and their families to share traditions and culture, foster a love for lifelong learning, and enrich all areas of development – emotional, intellectual, physical, and spiritual. As a result, many parents reconnect with their cultures through the lessons their children learn in the preschool and share at home.

While the preschool prioritizes professional development, parent and Elder involvement plays a key role in the success of the program. In addition to the Parent Elder Advisory Committee, two Elders who teach Coast Salish songs and dancing, as well as carving, drum-making, and smudging help guide the program and ensure participants benefit from an inclusive, culturally rich environment.

For more information about Eagle's Nest AHS Preschool, please visit http://www.acc-society.bc.ca/files_2/preschools-eagles-nest.php.

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Nunavik Childcare

Nunavik, Quebec

Since the launch of Quebec's family policy and universal childcare program in 1997, Nunavik has been able to expand childcare centres and provide subsidized childcare services across all its 14 communities. The Kativik Regional Government currently oversees 19 childcare centres and 1,009 childcare spaces in Nunavik. Over 80 per cent of Nunavik's childcare program is funded through the Quebec government, with remaining support provided by the federal government and paid by families.

While Nunavik childcare centres are based on a Quebec model, staff and children speak mainly in Inuktitut. Regional organizations have also helped develop culturally appropriate curricula and educational tools that celebrate Inuit culture. Applying a global development approach, the centres are focused on fostering school readiness, promoting cultural identity and language proficiency, and supporting healthy lifestyles.

Since the centres opened in 1998, graduation rates have increased in Nunavik. Offering \$7-a-day childcare has also created broader economic benefits, such as enabling more parents to go back to work and school, reducing the number of single mothers on welfare, and creating hundreds of permanent jobs in the region. Nunavik childcare centres employ 249 full-time and 56 part-time staff, who make more competitive salaries than most childcare workers in other regions.

For more information about Nunavik Childcare, please visit <https://www.nunavikchildcare.ca/en/>.

Culturally Relevant Programming

Children benefit from environments that expand their mind and help cultivate a strong sense of belonging. For Indigenous children, culturally appropriate instruction is particularly important for building self-esteem and a sense of belonging, given the impact of colonialism on identity development and the lack of legislation to protect Indigenous languages. Faced with a limited pool of Indigenous educators and a lack of dedicated funding for cultural content, some communities are leveraging their own resources, such as elders and local experts, to provide language and cultural instruction. As the first Inuktitut daycare in Iqaluit, Tumikuluik Saipaaqivik is an example of programming grounded in Inuit culture and language that is contributing to better educational outcomes.

Community Ownership and Management

Community control of ECD programming can provide many advantages, from supporting cultural knowledge transfer to ensuring that supports are responsive to Aboriginal-specific needs. For example, the Inuit ECD Working Group recognizes the value in sharing knowledge and expertise, while the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations has established child care policies and regulations that emphasize the importance of incorporating culture and language in ECD programming. Recognizing the benefits of community-based approaches, some Indigenous leaders have worked with different levels of government to enable local management of ECD programming. In British Columbia, the creation of the BC First Nations Health Authority shifts health governance from the federal government to First Nations communities.

Aligned with new policy directions in Quebec during the late 90s, leaders in Nunavik, with the support of those at the municipal level, established greater autonomy over ECD programming by securing long-term block funding. The stability and flexibility provided by this funding arrangement has enabled the Kativik Regional Government to allocate resources according to community needs, such as building child care facilities,

offering language immersion and culturally appropriate programs, and providing ECD training in communities. Due to the success of this approach, Nunavik stands out today as a model for other Inuit regions to consider.

Innovative Partnerships

A select group of ECD program sites across the country have managed to overcome funding and capacity constraints through collaboration. Success is particularly pronounced in provinces where political leadership and alignment have helped to overcome jurisdictional divisions. For example, support from the Government of Alberta has led to the establishment of five Aboriginal Parent Link Centres in urban communities. Most common in urban or northern settings, innovative program leaders are combining funding from different levels of government and partnering with local organizations to establish “one-stop” child development centers offering holistic services to Indigenous children and their families.

Reflecting this partnership approach, the Opokaa'sin Early Intervention Society, not only secured federal and provincial resources, but also mobilized Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations to work toward common goals. While sustainable funding remains an issue for many successful programs, they are promising examples of what could be accomplished across the country with political will and community leadership.

Shifting Frameworks and Integrated Models

To improve supports for children and families, many governments and community leaders are rethinking ECD governance structures and program approaches. Across the Atlantic region, provincial governments are integrating ECD programming into Departments of Education. While the reception may have been mixed, this trend reflects a recognition of the significance of the early years for healthy child development.

Through the support of charitable foundations, such as the Wallace and Margaret McCain Family Foundation and the Jimmy Pratt Foundation, select Maritime communities with a high prevalence of special needs are also experimenting with an integrated ECD program model. This approach provides intensive support to all children rather than targeting those with specific challenges. In Manitoba, the provincial government created the cross-departmental organization known as Healthy Child Manitoba to strengthen the province’s overall approach to ECD and to respond more effectively to community needs, including housing and nutrition. Building on best practices, Healthy Child Manitoba advances four strategic priorities: promoting healthy starts; supporting strong and nurturing families; fostering safe, secure and supportive environments; and strengthening communities.



The Winnipeg Boldness Project

Winnipeg, Manitoba

The Winnipeg Boldness Project is an initiative launched in 2014 to ensure that children and families in Point Douglas experience improved wellbeing in all aspects of self: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. By combining knowledge from local residents with early childhood development (ECD) science, the project aims to achieve three main objectives: design a 6-year ECD intervention strategy, create a positive community narrative of Winnipeg’s North End, and build an ECD model grounded in community wisdom and best practices.

Unique in its approach, the project applies tools from the fields of social innovation and collective impact to enable a collaborative process that incorporates an array of community stakeholders and knowledge bases. Rather than creating a large strategy to be designed and implemented all at once, the project is developing small-scale prototypes that can be tested, tweaked, scaled, and layered to build an overall strategy. Essentially, The Winnipeg Boldness Project is in itself a social lab.

Key highlights from year one include establishing a local office and staff team, completing and documenting a child-centric model, establishing a grassroots community engagement process, and hosting co-creation sessions to begin prototyping ideas for change.

The Winnipeg Boldness Project is funded primarily by the Province of Manitoba and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, with organizational support from the United Way of Winnipeg and additional funding from the Richardson Foundation, the Winnipeg Foundation, Investors Group, the Public Health Agency of Canada, and an anonymous donor.

For more information about The Winnipeg Boldness Project, please visit www.winnipegboldness.ca.

Common challenges

While many of the developments across jurisdictions demonstrate progress in ECD, a number of common challenges were raised throughout the roundtable discussions. Participants expressed frustrations regarding funding models and shared concerns about the need for stronger leadership across sectors and communities. Discussions also identified a number of issues specific to Inuit communities, highlighting potential limitations of pan-Aboriginal approaches.

Jurisdictional and Program Barriers

According to roundtable participants, jurisdictional divisions are artificial barriers that significantly limit access to resources and services as they are not reflective of the realities facing Indigenous communities. The Government of Canada primarily supports health, education, and social programs outside of the territories for on-reserve and remote Inuit communities. Although the federal government provides funding for a wide range of ECD programs, roundtable participants have indicated notable gaps, particularly in small or remote communities. Furthermore, the federal services offered are often not comparable to what is provided to the general population by provincial governments.

According to roundtable participants, jurisdictional divisions are artificial barriers that significantly limit access to resources and services as they are not reflective of the realities facing Indigenous communities.

As a result of the differences in available supports, families may be forced to leave their community to access ECD programs, especially if they have children with special needs. Conversely, First Nations families that seek services in urban centres adjacent to reserves may be denied access on the basis that their communities are already funded by the federal government. For Inuit, Métis, and urban First Nations populations, the jurisdictional barriers are even more pronounced as ECD falls within the regulatory supervision of provincial and territorial governments, with the exception of the semi-autonomous Inuit region of Nunavik.

Participants expressed frustrations about the amount of time required to secure small amounts of funding from different departments and jurisdictions and to fulfill reporting requirements for multiple agreements.

In our Edmonton and Winnipeg roundtable discussions, participants noted that First Nations communities have been successful in accessing provincial resources for ECD training and curriculum programs. However, progress in overcoming jurisdictional barriers remains tentative without a clear commitment on the part of the two levels of government to find workable solutions in collaboration with Indigenous communities.

Divisions between departments within the same level of government can also undermine the effective use of resources. For instance, Health Canada funds Aboriginal

Head Start on Reserve, while ESDC funds the First Nations and Inuit Childcare Initiative in some of the same communities, resulting in the potential duplication of services. The situation is more complex in Ontario and Alberta, where on-reserve child care is also funded by AANDC. Differences in program philosophy, funding models, and accountability requirements have made it difficult to pool resources to ensure greater responsiveness to community needs.

Funding processes and conditions create further hurdles for communities. Some program funding is determined on the basis of applications, which continually disadvantages communities with limited capacity to prepare proposals. Participants expressed frustrations about the amount of time required to secure small amounts of funding from different departments and jurisdictions and to fulfill reporting requirements for multiple agreements. Navigating these funding silos can be demanding, leaving little time for other priorities like program planning. To complicate matters, ECD funding is increasingly tied to specific conditions set by governments, which can include curriculum guidelines, partnership requirements, and child care licensing regulations that may not take into consideration community constraints or perspectives.

To put the wage issue into perspective, some participants noted that parking lot attendants and fast food employees are paid more than ECD educators who work with some of the most disadvantaged children in the country.

Funding Levels

Participants were unanimous in stressing the need for increased funding levels. Generally, federal program budgets have not increased for a decade, even though target populations have grown and service demands have expanded, including supports for children with special needs. Based on the range of issues shared by ECD practitioners, some programs appear to have been designed to fail. For example, the First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative managed by ESDC is a major source of funding for child care programs on-reserve and in Inuit communities. However, this initiative does not include dedicated funding for such operational costs as replacing decaying infrastructure, meeting basic health and safety requirements in food preparation and sanitation, or complying with provincial licensing regulations.

Evidence on the relationship between the quality of ECD programs and long-term developmental outcomes is clear. One of the key determinants of program quality is the skills and knowledge of staff. However, with few exceptions, current funding levels do not allow for appropriate training and remuneration of ECD practitioners, resulting in high turnover and burnout rates. To put the wage issue into perspective, some participants noted that parking lot attendants and fast food employees are paid

more than ECD educators who work with some of the most disadvantaged children in the country. These conditions are not only problematic at the operational level, but they also affect continuity at the program level.

Although Inuit ECD programs face many of the challenges discussed, their circumstances are compounded by other issues specific to and particularly acute in northern, isolated regions, such as food scarcity, inadequate infrastructure, and capacity constraints.

Leadership and Accountability

A common challenge raised in all four roundtable discussions was leadership support. Some Indigenous and other political leaders still view ECD programs as simply babysitting or a “nice-to-have”, rather than a necessary investment in the long-term prosperity of their communities. While many understand the impact of school completion on the life chances of individuals, there appears to be limited awareness of the relationship between healthy, stimulating environments in the early years and outcomes such as school readiness and educational achievement.

Participants would also like to see greater accountability in program delivery and community leadership, as well as research and government to ensure meaningful outcomes. Despite ample data on the range and severity of challenges facing Indigenous communities, resources are not flowing to where they are needed most. Some participants stressed that more effort is needed to put ECD evidence into practice, especially when research grants can be easier to secure than program funding. To find the right balance between research and action, accountability on the part of all stakeholders is needed to ensure that findings are being shared and leveraged to improve outcomes and that further study can add value by identifying new opportunities.

Additional Barriers facing Inuit and Other Remote Communities

In addition to the challenges already identified, remote Indigenous populations, particularly Inuit communities in the north, face other issues that include food insecurity, inadequate infrastructure, and capacity constraints. Meeting staffing requirements for licensing is especially challenging for isolated communities located far from educational institutions and dependent on informal child care arrangements. Communities are also concerned about access to culturally relevant training delivered in their own language. The urban context presents other disadvantages for organizations delivering Inuit ECD programs. As federal ECD funding is primarily focused on First Nations and Métis communities, programming tends to overlook the specific needs and realities of Inuit children and families who reside in urban areas.

Key Recommendations

While roundtable participants shared a range of ideas for future action, much of the emphasis was on addressing funding and capacity issues, as well as promoting culturally appropriate, holistic approaches to ECD. Other recommendations focused on ensuring greater leadership and accountability across sectors and stakeholders. From program delivery and community leadership, to research and government, a concerted effort is needed to promote the value of ECD and to provide comprehensive, sustainable supports that are accessible to Indigenous children and families across the country.



Opokaa'sin Early Intervention Society *Lethbridge, Alberta*

Established in July 1996, Opokaa'sin has been an early intervention best practice in southern Alberta for nearly twenty years. Meaning 'children' in Blackfoot, Opokaa'sin strives toward a vision of proud, healthy, connected, and resilient First Nations families. Through culturally appropriate services and innovative partnerships, the organization has become a hub for Aboriginal families in the southern Alberta and Treaty seven area.

Opokaa'sin has established partnerships both on and off reserve with innovative leaders, such as Family Centre (Parent Link Centre), Kainai Board of Education, Boys and Girls Club, Lethbridge College, and the Institute for Child and Youth Studies at the University of Lethbridge. For instance, the organization has linked current research on early brain development with culturally appropriate pedagogy in working with Aboriginal families.

Opokaa'sin's success can be attributed to the ability to bridge the traditional teachings of Elders with innovative practices by collaborating with service providers on and off reserve. The organization also tracks outcomes and have adapted approaches to better serve the ever changing demographic of the families it serves.

Currently serving well over 250 clients annually, Opokaa'sin's programs and services include Head Start, kindergarten and grade one classes (Blackfoot language and culture focused), an afterschool program, daycare services, parent education classes, programs for persons with developmental disabilities, as well as family support and youth mentorship initiatives.

For more information about Opokaa'sin, please visit www.opokaasin.org.



Mi'kmaq Child Development Centre
Halifax, Nova Scotia

Created as an extension program of the Friendship Centre in 1994, the Mi'kmaq Child Development Centre is an Aboriginal family resource centre in the north end of Halifax that provides culturally appropriate programs to First Nation families off reserve, although all Aboriginal families are welcome. The centre offers a wide variety of programs, ranging from pre/postnatal support and parent/child cultural initiatives to the long running Parent Support Group and family events that have become a part of community life. Vital to the centre is the Community Outreach Program for existing and new clients who need support.

The Mi'kmaq Child Development Centre works with diverse organizations, including Native Council of Nova Scotia, Native Women of NS, Public Health, IWK Health Centre, Nova Scotia Legal Aid, and Dal Legal Aid. The centre focuses on increasing networks to raise awareness of and drive positive outcomes for the urban Aboriginal community in Halifax.

Serving as a community hub for parents with young children, the centre's success is attributed to the inherent strength of the urban Aboriginal community and its team of committed, passionate staff. Culture and language is the strongest pull for the majority of families served by the Mi'kmaq Child Development Centre.

Some of the program outcomes include rising uptake in conversational Mi'kmaq, more parents pursuing further education, high enrollment in the prenatal program, and increasing rates of breastfeeding. Demonstrating the far-reaching impact of Aboriginal Head Start 4+, past participants who benefitted from the initiative are returning with their own children.

Improving funding models to meet changing community needs

Funding ECD programs for Indigenous children and families at levels that are nominally “equal” to those targeting non-Indigenous populations will not be sufficient to address the significant historical inequities experienced by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. As Indigenous communities struggle to overcome the legacy of residential schools, proportionate universality, whereby communities receive funding based on their particular level of need, may help close the gap in life chances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. Most participants also support flexibility in approach as long as programs and services meet community needs. Priority actions include reviewing funding levels for current ECD programs and addressing the jurisdictional barriers that are creating resource and service inequities across communities.

To streamline processes and address long-term community needs, recommendations included multi-year block funding and a single-window model. As demonstrated by the positive outcomes in Nunavik, long-term, flexible funding enables communities to plan ahead and allocate funds in a responsive manner. With the challenges presented by program silos, it may be timely to consider a new model that would improve coordination between funding bodies and streamline processes for delivery partners. Greater policy and program integration, particularly at the federal level, may help to eliminate inefficiencies, reduce reporting burdens, and foster holistic approaches. While participants at the Inuit roundtable were especially supportive of a single-window model, some raised concerns about the importance of considering specific community contexts rather than a pan-Aboriginal approach. An effective model would need to reflect cultural values and be responsive to the diverse needs among Indigenous communities.

Increasing investments in capacity building to sustain a strong ECD workforce

Increased funding levels and integrated program models can help expand ECD training opportunities and improve recruitment and retention through better compensation. Given the current application-based approach to funding, communities with limited capacity will benefit from training and supports that enhance their ability to develop successful proposals. Greater access to community-based and online training programs grounded in Indigenous cultures and knowledge is also important for remote communities.

Although more programs are tapping into local knowledge and expertise, especially through the engagement of Elders, working with outside experts may be another way to fill capacity gaps. For instance, researchers and educators can conduct community-based studies and develop tools while providing training opportunities to community educators and program providers.

Expanding community-based holistic programming to support optimal development

ECD is a continuum as the early years serve as the foundation for lifelong development. It also consists of multiple components, from physical and mental health to cultural and spiritual connection, which are all shaped by the overall well-being of families and communities. For instance, the very success of Aboriginal Head Start programs can be attributed to their focus on six critical components: culture and language, education and school readiness, health promotion, nutrition, social support, as well as parent and family involvement. To foster optimal development, ECD programming needs to reflect a broader vision that goes beyond meeting basic needs. Policymakers and practitioners can improve outcomes by taking a holistic approach that considers lifelong learning, the different dimensions of well-being, and the importance of ensuring safe, healthy environments. However, providing a broad suite of supports that are accessible to all will require an integrated, sustainable funding model that reflects the complexities of ECD.

Designing culturally relevant programs to ensure better outcomes

Cultivating a strong sense of cultural identity is not simply a component of quality ECD, but foundational to the overall well-being and future success of Indigenous children. Cultural connection is integral to building pride in one's community and confidence in oneself. Culturally appropriate instruction is particularly important to the development of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children given the impact of colonialism and the vulnerability of Indigenous languages. Participants emphasized the value of incorporating Indigenous cultures, languages, and teachings into the design of ECD curricula and assessment tools. Teaching Indigenous knowledge across ECD programs can also benefit non-Indigenous children by exposing them to diverse world views.

Engaging leaders across sectors and communities to raise awareness of the value of ECD

To generate a sense of urgency, leaders across sectors and communities need to understand the impact of quality ECD on future life chances. Parents, families, as well as local, regional, and national organizations all need to become champions of ECD to raise public awareness and build the political will to invest in action. For instance, corporate recognition of the role of ECD in creating a competitive workforce can lead to more comprehensive development agreements with Indigenous communities that include support for such programming. Changing public perceptions of the value of ECD can build greater respect for practitioners, which may help increase interest and compensation in the field of ECD. In addition to public and leadership engagement, evaluating programs and sharing successes also fosters a better understanding of what actually works and how to expand the benefits across communities.

Leveraging collaboration to bridge gaps in program access and funding

A common theme throughout the discussions was collaboration across departments, governments, and sectors, as well as with and between communities. By working together, stakeholders can not only share best practices and combine resources, but also improve coordination to ensure that funding models as well as programs and services continue to meet community needs. Technology opens up new collaborative opportunities by improving access to supports and connecting rural and urban communities. However, effective collaboration requires mutual respect, as overly prescriptive approaches tend to overlook community assets and perspectives. In particular, partnerships need to respect the self-determination of Indigenous communities and appreciate the complexity of ECD.

Driving Change: Is it time to reimagine a new Aboriginal ECD strategy?

Entering into an election year with national debates about universal child care, there is an opportunity for renewed national discussions on ECD strategies that can bridge the gap in life chances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. As First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities continue to face the same challenges, many want to see real action given that much research has already been done. Although promising developments are emerging across the country, a number of key areas for action remain. Priorities include coordinated funding that aligns with community needs, increased investments in capacity building, improved access to community-based holistic programming, concerted efforts to raise awareness of the value of ECD, and greater collaboration to bridge gaps in program access and funding. Furthermore, future action must not only focus on the operational barriers to ECD, but also reflect an understanding that Indigenous cultures, languages, and ways of knowing are foundational, rather than supplementary, to quality programming.

Advancing these issues requires a national platform where all stakeholders can work together to identify shared goals and define a collective path forward. The Government of Canada may be well-positioned to lead such a national dialogue that will help identify opportunities to maximize the impact of ECD programs to improve outcomes for Indigenous children, families, and communities. Bringing together Indigenous leaders, all levels of government, ECD experts, charitable foundations, as well as private and not-for-profit partners, this dialogue can help advance collaborative strategies for overcoming key barriers to the equitable and efficient delivery of ECD programs. It can also expand quality programming by showcasing best practices across Canada and building an alliance of diverse stakeholders who can work together to ensure that community-driven, culturally appropriate initiatives are not only sustainable, but also accessible to all Indigenous children, regardless of their status or where they live.

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Appendix A: Roundtable Agenda

Note that all roundtable discussions followed a similar format. The only differences were the addition of a working lunch session, following the first roundtable in Edmonton, and a later start time for the last roundtable in Ottawa.

Building Leaders: *Early Childhood Development in Indigenous Communities*

Agenda

9:00am – 9:15am	Arrival and breakfast
9:15am – 9:25am	Opening blessing
9:25am – 9:45am	Opening remarks and introductions <i>Why is the topic of this roundtable important/relevant? What is our aspirational goal for the outcome of this project?</i>
9:45am – 11:30am	Moderated discussion <i>Roundtable participants will explore a number of questions, including:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are some of the best practices/notable achievements in early childhood development in your local area or region?• Where are the current challenges or barriers in early childhood development in your local area or region?• What lessons can be learned from promising ECD policies or programs across Canada and abroad?• What are key priorities for enhancing early childhood development in your local area or region?• How can governments, the private sector, communities and families play a role in driving better outcomes for young children?
11:30am – 12:30pm	Working lunch <i>In small groups, participants will identify key priorities for future action</i>
12:30pm – 12:55pm	Conclusion of moderated discussion
12:55pm – 1:00pm	Closing remarks

Appendix B: Roundtable Participants

Edmonton Roundtable, December 11, 2014

Lynn Allan

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Sherry Fowler

Team Leader
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Bent Arrow Traditional Healing
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Cree Elder
Alexander First Nation

Eva Yellowdirt

Alexander First Nation

Halifax Roundtable, January 22, 2015

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Scholar
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Harry Sock

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Lee Thomas

Our Children and Our Way
Aboriginal Head Start
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Winnipeg Roundtable, January 29, 2015

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Ottawa Roundtable, February 19, 2015

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