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## **BUILDING LEADERS**

**Early Childhood Development in Indigenous Communities**

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Discussion Paper  
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## Introduction

For children in First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities across Canada, there is much to be positive about. Their communities are young: nearly a third of the total Indigenous population in Canada is under the age of 14, compared to 16.5% for the non-Indigenous population.<sup>1</sup> Also, a characteristic of many Indigenous cultures is the centrality of children,<sup>2</sup> which may be reflected in the active involvement of the community, and in support for families and parents.<sup>3</sup>

Youthfulness and a culture of respect for children are reasons for optimism and inspiration, but the effects of colonialism and the legacy of residential schools cannot be overlooked. These contribute to social and economic problems in many communities, impeding the ability of children to reach their potential as tomorrow's leaders and decision makers. Statistics on virtually every measure of well-being such as family income, education, crowding and homelessness, poor water quality, and health outcomes – reveal the serious disadvantages Indigenous children face compared to non-Indigenous children in Canada.

In recent years, neuroscience has identified the extreme importance of the first few months and years in human development, and the extent to which providing safe and nurturing environments helps to maximize the potential for children to grow. On the other hand, it is now known that obstacles to healthy development, such as poverty, abuse or negative environments can lead to physical, social and/or cognitive challenges later in life. Beyond the social, health and cognitive benefits of supporting optimal early childhood development, improving developmental conditions for children in Indigenous communities is linked to the reconstruction of cultural identity<sup>4</sup> and enhanced community capacity.<sup>5</sup> Research shows that the economic benefits of investing in early childhood education outweigh the costs of investing.<sup>6</sup>

Through *Building Leaders - Early Childhood Development in Indigenous Communities*, Canada's Public Policy Forum seeks to promote a national dialogue on early childhood development in Indigenous communities. This initiative will identify opportunities to expand the impact of existing and potential programs, strategies and partnerships. Through a combination of research and dialogue among thought leaders, the Forum will identify strengths and challenges in early childhood development (ECD) programming, and determine strategies to drive enhanced outcomes for First Nations, Inuit and Métis children.

This paper is a synthesis of a more detailed paper, *Building Leaders - Early Childhood Development in Indigenous Communities: Research Paper*. Both documents were prepared to provide background information for roundtable discussions to be hosted by the Forum in locations across Canada. Given that limited research on early childhood development from an Indigenous perspective is available, the information presented in this paper will be enhanced by the perspective of individuals who have community-based experience promoting early childhood development in First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities.

## What is early childhood development?

Early childhood development describes the development of the whole child, and includes physical, socio-emotional and cognitive/language development. From an Indigenous perspective, it also includes cultural identity, pride in oneself, and traditional ways of knowing.<sup>7</sup> Many factors contribute to optimal or healthy child development, including the child's biology, family, neighbourhood and the broader socio-political context.<sup>8</sup>

A wide range of policies and programs can contribute to healthy child development, such as those directed toward early care and education, (which extends beyond custodial care); the promotion of good health, nutrition and access to primary health care; the development of parenting skills and support for adult mental health; family economic supports; and supports that increase the amount of time parents can spend with their children. Programs and services supporting early childhood development should be inclusive and accessible to children with special needs.

## What is the state of early childhood development in Canada?

Canada has made significant progress in supporting early childhood development. Prenatal and postnatal care are universally provided to mothers and infants, and maternity and parental leave are available in every province. Family centres are found in communities throughout the country, and both federal and provincial governments offer tax benefits and income transfers to help parents with the costs of raising children.

There is, however, no national program or strategy for early childhood development. As the late Clyde Hertzman described, "What we have done so far is a good start, but it is only a start."<sup>9</sup> Policies and programs supporting early childhood development have been developed incrementally across Canada's provinces and territories. Parents and young children are supported through a variety of programs and services that are administered by multiple departments, with varying availability, a range of user costs and different regulatory requirements related to program delivery and quality.

## What is the state of early childhood development in First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities?

In Canada's First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities, responsibility for child rearing rests with the whole community, and has always been considered a sacred duty.<sup>11</sup> The effect of removing generations of children from their communities through the residential school system and through forced adoptions was profound and lasting. If and when children were allowed to return home from residential schools or from their adoptive families, many found they had lost their cultural connection to their communities.<sup>12</sup> Some had been away from their families from the age of four to 16, having spent nearly their entire childhood in residential school.

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

-Hare & Anderson<sup>10</sup>

Without experiencing a nurturing family life, many children grew up without the knowledge and skills to raise their own families, contributing to a breakdown of family structures, and to related social issues that have become widespread in many communities.<sup>13</sup> These issues heighten the need for programs and services that promote optimal early childhood development in Indigenous communities and improve outcomes later in life.

Today, federal ECD programs and services to support Indigenous children and families are administered through four departments:

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

These departments transfer funds to communities for a wide range of ECD supports, including infant and maternal health, parental support, and early learning and care programs. In some cases, the programs have overlapping objectives and responsibilities. Similar to the state of ECD programming in Canada generally, the lack of coordination between the myriad of Indigenous ECD programs has been cited as an obstacle to making such programs and services accessible and effective for all potential users.

The table below provides data on the range of federal departments that fund and administer programs and services to support early childhood development for Indigenous children and families. A comprehensive analysis of relative ECD funding levels in non-Indigenous communities compared to First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities, requires a detailed analysis of federal and provincial/territorial funding sources, and is beyond the scope of this paper. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that there are significant disparities in the per capita funding levels for similar programs that target different population groups. As an example, per capita funding for child care services administered by provincial and territorial governments has increased in recent years,<sup>14</sup> while funding for Aboriginal Head Start On-Reserve has flatlined.<sup>15</sup>

Although federal programs or services are designated for specific populations, it cannot be assumed that all communities within the designated populations can secure access to them. In reality, there is great variability in the capacity of eligible communities to apply for and successfully implement programs. This paper does not attempt to determine the extent to which programs are accessed by eligible populations.



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

Program	Department	Target Population	Type of Intervention	Planned spending (millions)
<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	Child care & early learning, Parent & Family Support, Infant & Maternal Health	\$32.1
<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)***
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	\$53.4****
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****
Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Initiative	Public Health Agency of Canada	Pan-Canadian, including off-reserve First Nations, Inuit and Métis	Parent & Family Support, Infant & maternal health	\$3.3****

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

\*\* 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

\*\*\*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.

\*\*\*\*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.

The federal government has expressed an interest in examining the existing framework of ECD programs and services supporting Indigenous children and families to identify efficiencies, gaps and challenges, in an effort to better integrate and align federal ECD programs.

Between 2000 and 2005, the government announced a series of initiatives aimed at improving existing early childhood development (ECD) programs/services, which included an ECD Aboriginal Strategy to support First Nations and other Aboriginal children. The Strategy pledged \$320 million over five years to enhance existing early childhood development programs in Indigenous communities.

A key component of the Strategy was the commitment of the implicated departments (ESDC, AANDC, Health Canada and PHAC) to explore a “single-window” approach to funding ECD programs for First Nations, Inuit and Métis children and their families. This was intended to improve program coordination and alignment within communities and streamline reporting and accountability. Feedback was sought from Indigenous organizations and individuals on the desirability of a “single-window” approach.

However, with the 2006 change of government, the push for a single-window approach diminished. After the flurry of programs and services established between 1995 and 2005, there have been few developments at the federal level over the past decade (see timeline below).

Although there have been no new federal initiatives in recent years, community-based programs and initiatives continue to evolve. In cities, on reserves and in northern communities across Canada, a range of initiatives are strengthening communities, restoring languages, and drawing upon the inherent strengths of communities to support the next generation of parents and community leaders. There is also an increasing recognition of the value in networking and knowledge sharing amongst Indigenous early childhood educators and ECD program leaders.



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



## Are there 'best practices' for early childhood development programs and services in Indigenous communities?

The inherent danger in attempting to identify 'best practices' in ECD programs and services in Indigenous communities is the generalization of practices across diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis cultures and communities.

The purpose of *Building Leaders* is not to prescribe criteria for programs and policies, but rather to provide context for a discussion of how policymakers, ECD program providers, parents and communities might improve the current framework for promoting and supporting the development of First Nations, Inuit and Métis children.

*The extreme diversity among First Nations and other Indigenous children, families, and communities in Canada, with over 60 language groups and over 600 culturally distinct, registered First Nations, has been raised repeatedly as an obstacle to creating tools that would be valid or meaningful across more than a handful of communities.*

-Dr. Jessica Ball<sup>16</sup>

Based on information gathered through a literature review, the following over-arching principles could be considered when discussing strategies for promoting early childhood development in Indigenous communities:

- **Programs and services are culturally focused** - Research shows that early childhood development is best supported by programs and services that are culturally relevant to the community in which they operate.
- **Programs and services are community directed and engaged** - Any program or service for Indigenous children should be guided by the community in which the children belong. This is consistently called for in reports, evaluations and research on ECD programs for Indigenous children, and is recognized in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- **Programs and services are coordinated** - Lack of coordination can act as a barrier to ensuring that families and children have access to the range of supports that may be available to them. However, the integration of services should serve to enhance and not diminish the role of existing programs.
- **Holistic Approach** – Research overwhelmingly favours initiatives that promote the social, cognitive and physical development of children and families.

## Conclusion

The goal of the Public Policy Forum's *Building Leaders - Early Childhood Development in Indigenous Communities* initiative is to provide context for a national discussion on opportunities and strategies for better supporting Indigenous children in Canada. The thoughts, ideas, strategies and partnerships that emerge through this dialogue will provide insight into next steps that could be taken.

## Discussion questions

- 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?



## Endnotes

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