



## Early Childhood Education and Care

More than two-thirds of families with children under age 16 are families with two working parents, and over half of parents with children under age 4 rely on child care.<sup>1,2</sup> Unfortunately, high quality early childhood education and care costs are so high that many families are unable to afford it. High-quality care is important for the growth, development and the health of a child; it is more than a place for parents to leave their children when they go to work. Its quality matters. Early childhood experiences leave their mark on our mental and physical health<sup>3</sup>, and inequitable access to quality education and care leads to poorer health down the line. Properly supported, early childhood education and care creates an even playing field: Research has shown low-income children in early childhood education to have over twice the rate of college enrollment and score higher on a variety of academic measures<sup>4</sup>. Ensuring all children have access to these high quality programs is an important step towards achieving equity within our communities.

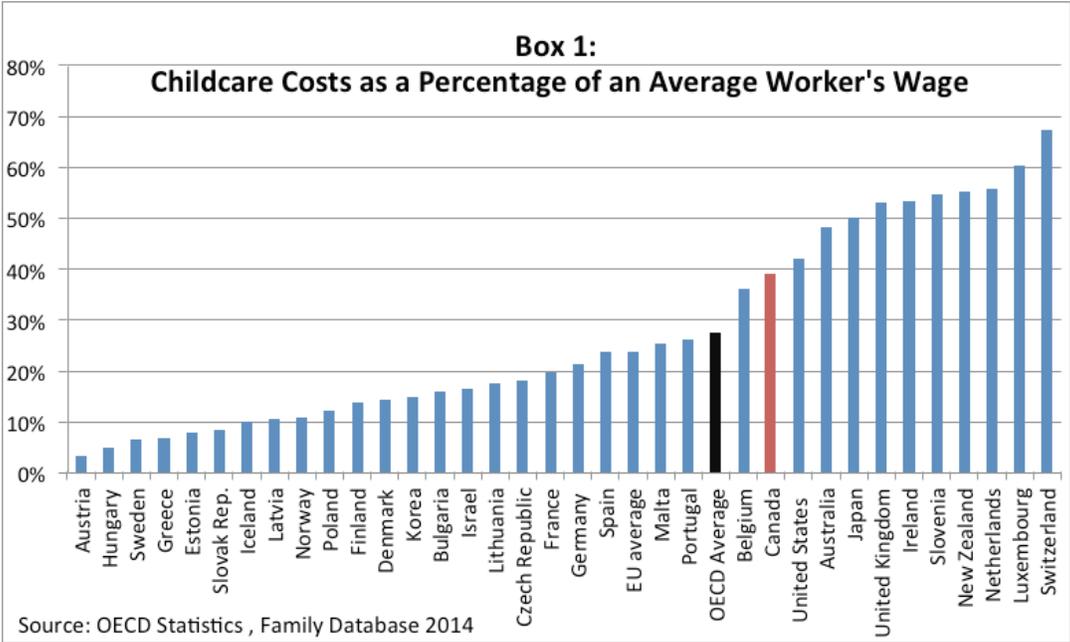
There is no national program for early childhood education and care in Canada and, with the exception of Québec, there are no provincial programs. Parents must either pay for childcare privately or arrange for relatives to care for their children. They can only qualify for subsidized childcare if they earn a very low-income. But these spots are limited and not always of good quality.<sup>5</sup> Canada spends only half the OECD average on early childhood education and care<sup>6</sup>, and childcare costs are almost 40 percent of a Canadian average worker's salary (see Box 1).

High-quality early childhood education and care programs benefit children of all income groups but, low-income children benefit the most. Low-quality programs do not provide these benefits.<sup>7</sup>

High quality early childhood education and care spaces are limited and expensive. With the exception of Québec, which has a provincial program offered to all families for \$7.30/day plus an income-tested contribution<sup>8</sup>, there are no controls on the costs of early childcare education and care for Canadian families. Toronto has the highest costs with median monthly infant care fees of \$1676 and toddler care at \$1324. In most cities toddler care still costs between \$800 and \$1000 with preschool care at least \$800.<sup>9</sup> Across Canada, the cost of early childhood education and care is usually over 25 percent of women’s income, and is over 34 percent in Toronto, London, Windsor, Surrey and Brampton.<sup>10</sup>

The only early childhood education and care-related supports for Canadian families are the Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB) and the Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB). The UCCB offers \$160 per month per child under 6, and \$60 per month per child aged 6-17, and the CCTB offers \$122 per child under 18, and is adjusted on a sliding scale for families with incomes over \$44,701 to decrease with increasing income. Even together these benefits do not come close to covering the costs that most families face. The costs both limit parents’ ability to participate in the workforce, and also the quality and accessibility of early childhood care and education programs are able to access. These limitations prevent all children from the best possible start in life, and exacerbate health disparities through the duration of their lives.

**A health-enhancing early childhood education and care program in Canada would address issues of affordability and ensure Canadians have equal access to high quality early child education and care programs.**



## Health Impacts of Early Childhood Education and Care

Access to early childhood education and care is an important social determinant of health. Because the first six years of life are a critical time for cognitive development, early childhood learning and care has a large impact on children's health and well-being, as well as their later development. High quality early childhood education and care programs are well-documented to have positive impacts which last throughout the life course: low-income children in high-quality infant and preschool care are found to have lower juvenile crime rates, lower drop out rates, and higher adult earnings.<sup>11</sup> And, beyond low-income children, the benefits of universal high quality early childhood education and care centres have been found for children of all income groups, with higher grade-school performance outcomes: Research evaluating school performance of 8 and 13 year olds found that school performance was significantly higher for those who started child care before the age of 1 (11% and 7%, respectively), and at age 13 school performance was lowest among those who never attended out of home care.<sup>12</sup>

Further, affordable and available early childhood education and care for all families ensures both better employment and higher incomes for families with children. Access to affordable early childhood education and care ensures that parents are able to make the decision to work and/or pursue education and training opportunities that will improve the family's income potential: Available and affordable early childhood education and care has been shown in Quebec to increase women's labour force participation by 3.8%.<sup>13,14</sup> These increases in employment and income are important for ensuring a high quality of life and health for families.

## Health Equity Impacts of Early Childhood Education and Care

Under our current system only the richest families are able to consistently access high quality early childhood education and care. When only the rich are able to afford quality education and care for their children it leads to further inequality. Without access to a stimulating learning and social environment children in families unable to afford quality early childhood education and care are put at a developmental disadvantage which makes it hard for them to catch up. They will face more challenges accessing future opportunities for prosperity and good physical and mental health.<sup>15</sup>

Affordable early childhood education and care is essential for all parents, but is particularly important for single-parent families. Female-headed single parent families in particular are most likely to live in poverty, with 40 percent falling below the poverty line today.<sup>16</sup> Without support, it can be more affordable for single parents to go on social assistance to care for their children. Or, if the parent chooses to work, it takes up a significant portion of their income (see Box 1). This impacts families' health both by decreasing household income – an important determinant of health – and also by decreasing single parents' ability to work and participate in their community.<sup>17</sup>

Because most Canadian households have two income-earners, access to early childhood education is essential to enable parents to make a choice between staying home to take care of their children, and pursuing

employment while ensuring that their children are receiving high-quality care. On top of that, because women are more likely to give up employment opportunities to raise children than men<sup>18</sup>, access to early childhood education and care is essential for women's equality and health equity. When it is affordable and reliable it ensures that women are just as likely as men to be able to maintain employment. If parents lack access to childcare, then they are unable to work in full time jobs, and more often work in part time, often precarious employment, rely on social assistance, or are placed in a vulnerable position in their household without control of income, all factors which have been shown to impact their physical and mental health.<sup>19,20</sup>

## How do the federal parties measure up for equity in Early Childhood Education and Care?

	 <b>Conservative<sup>21</sup></b>	 <b>Green<sup>22</sup></b>	 <b>Liberal<sup>23</sup></b>	 <b>NDP<sup>24,25</sup></b>
<b>Childcare availability/ spots available</b>	Not addressed	<p>Work with the provinces, territories and Indigenous communities to establish accessible, convenient, enriched and affordable child care spaces for any Canadian family that seeks it.</p> <p>Tax breaks to employers for the creation of child care spaces.</p> <p>Negotiate with the provinces and territories to ensure that Canada collectively provides regulated child care spaces for 70% of children age 6 or younger with working parents, up from the current level of 22.5%.</p>	<p>Work with provinces, territories and Indigenous communities to develop a new National Early Learning and Child Care Framework to deliver affordable, high-quality and fully inclusive child care.</p>	<p>Create a million child care spaces and cap fees at \$15 per day</p>
<b>Individual Family Tax Benefits</b>	Maintain UCCB	<p>Phasing out of UCCB (funds, estimated \$6.7 billion by 2017-18) used to create more affordable child care spaces.</p>	<p>Introduction of the Canada Child Benefit, an income-tested benefit to replace Universal Child Care Benefit. Phases out benefits at higher income levels (families making over \$200,000) and targets low and middle-income families, up to \$533 per month per child for low income families.</p>	Maintain the UCCB

## Childcare for a Healthier Canada

High quality early childhood education and care is essential for parents' and children's health, and to ensure that all children have equal access to good opportunities throughout their lives. All parties have addressed the issue of access to early childhood education and care using tax benefit programs, service delivery programs, or a combination of the two. The Conservative Party has not addressed equity in access in their proposal, while the Liberals, NDP and the Green Party's proposals may have positive impacts for health and health equity.

The Green Party has committed to address the lack of affordable childcare spaces creating more spaces using funds repurposed from the UCCB which they plan to phase out. They would also work with provinces and territories to ensure Canada provides regulated childcare spaces for 70 percent of children under age six with working parents, and provide tax breaks to employers to create early childhood education and care spaces. The Liberal Party has committed to developing a national early learning child care framework to offer high quality care with the provinces and territories. This framework would enable provinces and territories the flexibility to use the available federal funds as needed. Neither the Green Party nor the Liberal Party would require matching funds from the provinces. The NDP have committed more funds than any other party to create affordable, high-quality child care spaces. They have pledged to create a million spaces, and cap their fees at \$15 per day. Their proposal will allow for the largest expansion of child care in Canada, and requires support from the provinces. The NDP, Green Party, and Liberal Party commitments to increasing the supply of affordable early childhood education and care in Canada are important and may contribute to improved health for many Canadians. The Conservative Party has not addressed the number, affordability or quality of childcare spots in Canada.

The Conservatives' sole program to address the issue of early childhood education and care is the Universal Child Care Benefit which offers \$160 per month. This is insufficient to meet any working Canadian's early childhood education and care costs, and will continue to increase health inequities in Canada. The Liberal Party would introduce a new income-tested tax benefit to replace the current universal UCCB. It will offer up to \$533 per month per child for low-income families. This income-tested tax benefit would move toward addressing the current health inequities that result from the lack of affordable high quality early childhood education and care in Canada and paired with their proposed child care framework, this may enable low-income families to afford child care. The NDP plans to continue the UCCB in addition to developing its national child care plan over the next eight years. The Green Party would phase out the UCCB and use funds toward creating more child care spaces.

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### ENDNOTES

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