

# EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

## What this brief is about?

We are presenting the results of a literature review of academic research on public policy developed to support, develop, implement, and maintain early learning and child-care “programs and opportunities” for children with disabilities in different countries.

## The context

The Canadian government plans to invest \$30 billion over five years in a Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan. The Bill C-35 is part of the broader plan that aims to establish a national early learning and childcare system in Canada, with the goal of making high-quality childcare more accessible and affordable for families. The Bill would provide funding and establish an advisory council to support the development and implementation of the national system.

## The issue

Children with disabilities across the world are disproportionately represented among the children out of school [1]. Early childhood development programs vary in coordination and quality, with inadequate and inequitable access, especially for children younger than three years. While all of the Canadian provinces assert they have inclusive education policies [2], many children with disabilities still experience barriers to education, and approximately 4,000 are excluded from the school system because they cannot get the support they require [3]. These barriers begin before school age when the childcare system presents with significant barriers to inclusion of children with different disabilities. The lack of early support systems may be continued through a child’s life, with important impacts on their development, socialization, and overall well-being. The complexity of service delivery and the insufficient level of existing services are recognized within the school system and by parents of children with disabilities, as evidenced by national surveys in Canada [4].

## What we did?

We searched for academic research published in English from January 2013 to August 2023 including children with any type of disability. We selected publications from countries that have similar political structure, demography, gross domestic product (GDP) as Canada, including USA, Australia, UK and Nordic countries. We present here the summary of six research studies that were most relevant to inform Canadian policy initiatives.

## Key findings

Among the studies selected we identified 4 key topics addressing the significance of early learning and child-care for children with disabilities.

### **1. Community and intense programs in daycares can improve child developmental outcomes.**

Participation in a relatively intensive community implementation of behaviourally-based early intervention programs is beneficial for preschoolers (2.5 to 6 years old) with ASD. This program was implemented in the context of a long-day care community service by interdisciplinary team with a child-staff ratio of 1:3. Preschoolers made significant gains in cognitive skills, adaptive functioning, social communication, developmental rate and receptive language [5,6]. Another program designed to support children with disabilities, aged 0-8 years, attending mainstream early learning environments showed to be highly effective and innovative model for supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities.

Using a key worker transdisciplinary team approach, key workers are supported by colleagues from allied health and educational professional backgrounds, working with children with disabilities within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres, at home and in the community. Most children enrolled in the program had reached or exceeded their individual goals. Parents/carers indicated that they built knowledge and skills to support their children over the course of the year. ECEC centre staff members reported that the program led to better ways of working with children who have disabilities [7].

## **2. Establishing multisectoral early childhood committees at the community level helps support the successful implementation of early childhood policies.**

Studies have shown that when participatory policy-planning processes include community and provincial stakeholders alongside national decision-makers, policy instruments have a greater likelihood of being implemented effectively. To achieve strong policy ownership at provincial and community levels, their representatives must participate actively in assessing the policy environment; child and family needs; human, organizational, and financial resources; and gaps and quality improvement in local services. Furthermore, participatory processes often lead to the expansion and improvement of early childhood programs and the development of new initiatives to meet evolving needs [8].

## **3. Capacity building for early childhood educators have the potential to increase awareness about disabilities and inclusive education in addition to improve professional practice towards students with disabilities.**

A professional development program was implemented in preschools aiming to provide the professionals with new skills and strategies for improving the learning context, thereby creating a more inclusive preschool, for children with neurodevelopmental disabilities (NDD)/autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The program consisted of three seminars that used an iterative process, spread over a period of 6 weeks. During the seminars, participants watched video-recorded lectures, which were part of a professional development program initiated by a governmental agency. The agency's web-based professional development program has five themes: perspectives of parents and students with NDD/ASD, cognition and perception in NDD/ASD, strategies for use in learning contexts, preventing challenging situations, and accessibility. The results indicated an increase about inclusive education, suggesting that professionals changed their practice as a result of the program [9].

## **4. Policy efforts should target access to childcare subsidies among most vulnerable groups of children with disabilities and their families.**

A study showed that children with special needs were significantly less likely than their same-aged peers without disabilities to receive subsidized childcare throughout early childhood [10]. Rates of subsidy usage decreased between ages two and four years, with children with special needs showing particularly depressed usage rates. Several child and family characteristics were significant predictors of subsidy use among eligible children with special needs. Throughout early childhood, children with special needs whose parents were not married were significantly more likely to utilize childcare subsidies. Other predictors of subsidy use included the child's race, maternal age, number of siblings in the home, maternal employment status, and maternal level of education. Policy initiatives should be customized to boost access to subsidized care for children who are less likely to access it, especially those from smaller families led by young mothers and mothers with lower levels of education.

## Key messages



**Coordination, monitoring, and evaluation are needed across sectors to ensure that high-quality early childhood development services are available to children with disabilities throughout early childhood and primary school up to the age of 8 years.**



**Action at global, national, and local levels is needed to increase political commitment to and investment in early development of children with disabilities.**



**Leverage universal population-based interventions for children with disabilities (especially younger than age 3 years) in areas where the prevalence of disadvantaged children is high.**



**Increase access to evidence-based programs for children with disabilities and policies that are scalable and sustainable.**

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