



## **Parents' Views About the Quality of Early Learning and Child Care in Alberta**

**Report 2 on the *Alberta Parent Survey on  
Early Learning and Child Care***

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*Federal and provincial governments have embarked on a major initiative to build systems of early learning and child care across Canada that meet high standards for quality, affordability, accessibility, inclusion, and flexibility. The success of this initiative will depend partly on whether changes to early learning and child care meet the needs and expectations of parents.*

*To learn about parents' views, the Alberta Parent Survey on Early Learning and Child Care was conducted in 2022 with over 1400 parents in Alberta who had children younger than six years of age. Parents responded to a wide range of questions about early learning and child care. The present report, one in a series based on this survey, is focused on quality.*

*Parents in Alberta identified quality as important for making choices about early learning and child care for their children. Quality was cited more often by parents from families with higher incomes than those with lower incomes, and more frequently by parents in more densely populated areas than in rural areas. In all cases, however, a substantial percentage of parents thought of quality as important. Issues about low quality were cited by many parents as a source of difficulty in finding early learning and child care. Parents also identified low quality as a concern about early learning and child care in their communities.*

*The report concludes with recommendations about clearly articulating a vision of what high quality should look like in early learning and child care, developing a plan for implementing that vision, and a making a commitment to not compromise high quality while increasing affordability and accessibility.*

*A summary of this report is available at <https://www.ecelc.ca/publications>.*



## Parents' Views About the Quality of Early Learning and Child Care in Alberta

The availability of high-quality, affordable early learning and child care (ELCC) is widely recognized as a key component in reducing and eliminating poverty,<sup>1</sup> in enabling parents, especially women, to advance their education and seek employment outside the home,<sup>2</sup> and in promoting well-being and positive developmental outcomes in children.<sup>3</sup> High quality is critical if ELCC is to yield important benefits to children, parents, and communities.<sup>4</sup> A window of opportunity has emerged in recent years to transform ELCC throughout Canada, including Alberta. An important question is whether, and how, Alberta will take advantage of this opportunity to improve the *quality* of ELCC in the coming years. Given that parents are important stakeholders in the evolving ELCC system, another important question is about the role parents' views on quality will play in the forthcoming changes.

In 2017, federal, provincial, and territorial ministers in Canada agreed "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 potential."<sup>5</sup> The ministers recognized that the "development of early learning and child care systems is one of the best investments that governments can make to strengthen the social and economic fabric of our country," and they emphasized the importance of ELCC for supporting the development of children, families, and communities. The ministers agreed on a framework for building systems of ELCC that are based on five principles: quality, affordability, accessibility, inclusion, and flexibility. The framework was followed by a substantial, five-year financial commitment by the federal government to a Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) initiative.<sup>6</sup> Bilateral agreements between the federal government and individual provinces and territories soon followed.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the country, progress is being made on commitments toward improving ELCC, although headway has been uneven.<sup>8</sup>

All federal-provincial agreements include prominent commitments to high quality. In Alberta, the federal-provincial agreements to date include some targets about reducing child care costs and increasing child care spaces by 2025-2026,<sup>9</sup> but virtually no information is provided about how to ensure that Alberta's children will be served by high-

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Canada, 2021c; EndPovertyEdmonton, 2016, 2017; Raphael, 2020, Chapter 12; Thévenon, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Alexander, Beckman, Macdonald, Renner, & Stewart, 2017; Fortin, 2018

<sup>3</sup> Melhuish et al. 2015; van Huizen & Plantenga, 2018; White et al., 2015

<sup>4</sup> Peters et al. 2010; Schweinhart, 2013; Ulferts, Wolf, & Aders, 2019; van Huizen & Plantenga, 2018; Vandell, Belsky, Burchinal, Steinberg, Vandergrift, & NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2010; White, Prentice, & Perlman, 2015

<sup>5</sup> Government of Canada, 2017, p. 1

<sup>6</sup> Government of Canada, 2021b

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-agreement/agreements-provinces-territories.html>

<sup>8</sup> Macdonald & Friendly, 2023

<sup>9</sup> Government of Alberta, 2023; Government of Canada, 2021a



quality ELCC.<sup>10</sup> That is, the commitment to high quality is not yet matched with plans to support high quality.

Certainly the success of the CWELCC initiative will depend in part on what parents in Alberta think about the quality of ELCC their children receive. Do parents use high quality as a criterion when they choose child care arrangements? Do they have difficulty finding high-quality care?

To explore parents' views and preferences about quality, we report findings from the Alberta Parent Survey on Early Learning and Child Care, a province-wide survey of parents and guardians with young children. We also consider how well current plans for implementing ELCC in Alberta align with parents' views, and we provide several recommendations.

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## Method

A survey of 1479 adults in Alberta was conducted by Advanis,<sup>11</sup> an independent market and social research firm commissioned by the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care<sup>12</sup> and the Muttart Foundation.<sup>13</sup> Survey questions were designed by researchers at the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families.<sup>14</sup> Included were some questions from the Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements conducted by Statistics Canada.<sup>15</sup> Participants were parents or guardians of children 0 through 5 years of age who lived with them at least 50% of the time. Participants were recruited randomly from a panel of approximately 110,000 Albertans. The panel itself was randomly recruited and maintained by Advanis. Data were collected from May 30 through July 11, 2022. The survey contained a range of questions about ELCC. For this report we focused on questions related to quality. Throughout the report, *parents* refer to both parents and guardians.

For purposes of comparison, we categorized parents into four locations: the City of Edmonton; the City of Calgary; mid-sized and metropolitan municipalities; and rural areas. Mid-sized and metropolitan municipalities include (a) eight cities or service areas within the metropolitan regions of Edmonton and Calgary<sup>16</sup> and (b) five cities or service areas that lie outside the metropolitan regions of Edmonton or Calgary and have populations greater than 60,000.<sup>17</sup> Rural areas are those not in the other categories.

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<sup>10</sup> Bisanz, 2023

<sup>11</sup> <https://advanis.net/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ecelc.ca/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://muttart.org/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.ualberta.ca/community-university-partnership/index.html>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210407/dq210407b-eng.htm?CMP=mstatcan>

<sup>16</sup> Airdrie, Beaumont, Chestermere, Fort Saskatchewan, Leduc, Sherwood Park and Strathcona County, Spruce Grove, and St. Albert.

<sup>17</sup> Fort McMurray and Wood Buffalo, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, and Red Deer



Data were weighted to align with population proportions in the 2021 Canadian census<sup>18</sup> based on annual household income, location in Alberta, and number of parents in the family (one or two). Throughout this report, percentages are based on weighted data.

In describing findings from the survey, we sought to identify response patterns that varied in relation to household income, location in Alberta, number of parents, and whether parents reported receiving child care subsidies.<sup>19</sup> We omit reference to these demographic variables when no patterns were evident or when sample sizes were too small to make inferences with reasonable confidence. Nonparametric statistical tests were used to guide inferences.

Two important considerations should be noted. First, data were sampled during one period of time, and so we cannot make inferences about variations over time. Questions about changes over time could be addressed if our survey questions were to be used in subsequent studies. Second, some groups of parents were not sampled in sufficient numbers to allow for useful inferences. Although our data were weighted to closely resemble certain population characteristics as described above, weighting cannot entirely compensate for small numbers in some categories. For example, the responses of parents with very low incomes would be particularly helpful for understanding how these parents, who likely were experiencing poverty, view ELCC. The lowest category of household income in the survey was less than \$25,000 per year. But the number of respondents in this category is too small to allow, with reasonable confidence, inferences about the views of parents who are in this income category. Different approaches are needed to address this problem, such as surveys or qualitative studies with purposive sampling targeted at specific groups.

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## Findings

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Parents' views about the quality of ELCC were explored in several ways.

### **Is the quality of early learning and child care important to parents?**

Parents were asked to rank the top three factors they would consider if they were able to access any type of child care arrangement. In the survey, "child care arrangement" referred to any type of regular care provided by someone other than a parent or guardian, not including occasional babysitting or time spent in school.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/census/census-engagement/about/2021-census>

<sup>19</sup> In Alberta at the time of data collection, full subsidies (\$266/month) were available for children in licensed, full-time care for families with incomes less than \$120,000 per year. Partial subsidies, from \$106 to \$253 based on in family income, were available for children in families with incomes from \$120,000 to under \$180,000 per year. Children attending licensed, part-time preschools were subsidized at a rate of \$125/month, regardless of family income. These subsidy rates came into effect in January 2022.



- The majority of parents (58%) ranked quality as one of the three most important factors they would consider. The other factors most often ranked were cost (56%) and location (48%).
- Quality was cited more often by parents from families with higher incomes. For example, quality was ranked among the three most important factors by 47% of parents with annual household incomes less than \$75,000, by 54% with incomes from \$75,000 to \$119,999, and by 67% with incomes of \$120,000 or greater.
- Parents in rural areas were somewhat less likely to rate quality among their top three factors (48%) than parents in the other three locations (60-63%). Percentages did not vary notably based on the number of parents in the family or subsidy status.

### **When parents have difficulty finding child care, is quality a problem?**

Approximately one-quarter of all parents in our sample indicated that they had difficulty finding child care in the past three months.

- These parents indicated numerous reasons for their difficulty, including trouble “finding the quality of child care I wanted” (41%), “finding a qualified child care provider” (20%), and “finding licensed child care” (17%).”
- A majority (53%) of the parents who reported difficulties cited at least one of these quality-related problems. This percentage did not vary appreciably as a function of household income, location, number of parents in the family, or subsidy status.

### **What was the impact of these quality-related difficulties?**

Parents who noted that they had quality-related difficulties in finding child care in the past three months were asked to describe the impact of these difficulties.

- Many parents reported significant disruptions to their work as a result: 52% changed their work schedules; 47% worked fewer hours; and 31% postponed or discontinued work.
- Nearly one-third of these parents (31%) simply quit looking for child care.

### **Are parents concerned with the quality of child care in their communities?**

Parents were asked whether they had concerns about child care in their community, neighbourhood, or area. About one-third responded affirmatively.

- Of the parents who reported concerns, 40% (14% of all parents) cited poor quality, which is somewhat lower than the frequency of concern about high cost (59%) and availability of spaces (53%) but higher than inconvenient hours (28%) and location (16%).
- Concerns about quality did not vary based on household income, location, number of parents in the family, or subsidy status.



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## Discussion and Recommendations

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### What do Alberta's parents think about quality?

Quality is an essential component in building a system of ELCC. Based on the survey findings, Alberta parents clearly value quality in ELCC.<sup>20</sup>

1. Most parents in this survey identified quality as a key factor in selecting a child care arrangement; in fact, quality was cited about as frequently as affordability and even more frequently than location. Quality was cited more often by parents from families with higher incomes than with lower incomes, and more frequently by parents from more densely populated areas than less populated areas. These findings may reflect the choices available to families: Parents with lower incomes may be more likely to consider other factors, such as cost, ahead of quality, whereas parents in rural areas may have fewer nearby choices and therefore may be more likely to prioritize other factors, such as accessibility, ahead of quality. Regardless of income or location, however, a substantial percentage of parents thought quality was important.
2. Over a quarter of the parents in this survey reported having difficulty finding child care in recent months. Of the group that had difficulties, over half cited quality-related issues as the source of their difficulty. Experiencing these difficulties resulted in significant disruptions to their employment and, for many, abandoning the search for ELCC.
3. Among the parents who expressed concerns about child care in their community, neighbourhood, and area, many cited low quality as one of their concerns.

If a system of ELCC in Alberta is to be successful from the point of view of parents, then a plan must be in place to ensure high quality.

### What is quality?

Quality is often considered in terms of different but related components. *Process* components typically include the kinds of interactions that occur among children, early childhood educators, and parents, such as socio-emotional and/or instructional interactions during play and other learning activities. *Structural* components include features that can be directly measured and, in principle, regulated, such as child-to-caregiver ratios, spatial requirements, required qualifications for early childhood educators, use of an evidence-based curriculum framework, and safety measures. *Systemic* components include system-wide practices such as monitoring, evaluation, provision of professional support for caregivers, planning, and funding. High-quality processes in ELCC

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<sup>20</sup> Parents' concern for quality is shown in other research using much different methods (Gordon, Herbst, & Tekin, 2021; Herbst et al., 2020).



settings enhance children’s well-being and developmental outcomes, and the structural and systemic components are essential for supporting high-quality processes.<sup>21</sup>

The concept of quality is subject to ongoing discussion and evaluation, as is to be expected given that ELCC affects the lives of families with diverse needs and aspirations. For example, parents of Indigenous children and parents of refugee and immigrant children seek certain elements in ELCC, such as culturally relevant activities, that may be less important to other parents.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, what parents view as high quality might not overlap entirely with the views of early childhood educators and researchers.<sup>23</sup> Because the topic of quality in ELCC is both a public policy issue and of considerable interest to parents, ongoing discussions about quality should involve the views of parents, early childhood educators, researchers, and policymakers.<sup>24</sup>

Despite some differences in views about quality ELCC, there is widespread agreement that early childhood educators must be well informed about and skilled in the practice and principles of ELCC. Highly skilled and well-supported early childhood educators are prepared to make good use of an evidence-based curriculum framework, new evidence, and emerging practices as they strive to create the kinds of interactions that contribute to children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development.<sup>25</sup>

### **How is quality implemented in Alberta?**

The importance of quality is emphasized heavily in all the foundational documents of the CWELCC initiative and in bilateral agreements between the federal government and provincial and territorial governments. Despite this recognition by governments and the importance of quality to parents, little has been done to implement or improve standards for quality in Alberta.

- Alberta’s *Early Learning and Child Care Act* does not include quality as a principle and mentions only a role for parents in “accountability of child care program providers, monitoring of child care programs and maintenance of good quality child care programs.”<sup>26</sup>
- Alberta’s *Early Learning and Child Care Regulation* sets minimal standards for safety, physical space, staff-to-child ratios, group sizes, and qualifications for early childhood educators but contains nothing about process or systemic components of quality.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For a broad view of the many facets of quality in early learning and child care, see Friendly and Beach (2005), Friendly, Doherty, and Beach (2006), Connors (2016), Early Childhood Pedagogy Network (2021), McLean, McIsaac, Mooney, Morris, & Turner, (2023), Raikes et al. (2023), and Roy-Vallières, Charron, Bigras, and Lemay (2024). The Canadian Child Care Federation has a useful graphic summary at <https://cccfc-fcsge.ca/about-canadian-child-care-federation/values/quality-child-care/>.

<sup>22</sup> Freeborn, Mardhani-Bayne, & Soetaert, 2023; Kemble, 2019; Mardhani-Bayne, Freeborn, & Soetaert, 2021

<sup>23</sup> Bassok, Markowitz, Player, & Zagardo, 2018

<sup>24</sup> Peeters & Vandekerckhove, 2015

<sup>25</sup> In Alberta, an example of a curriculum framework that supports early childhood educators in their work is *Flight* (Makovichuk, Hewes, Lirette, & Thomas, 2014). <https://www.flightframework.ca/>

<sup>26</sup> Government of Alberta, 2022, p. 5

<sup>27</sup> Government of Alberta, 2021





- The *Cost Control Framework and For-Profit Expansion Plan* includes commitments to quality but nothing about what high quality ELCC in Alberta would look like or what will be done to ensure that high quality is a priority as costs are controlled and spaces expanded.<sup>28</sup>

These documents address some of the structural or regulable components of quality, which are important but not sufficient for supporting high-quality ELCC. They provide no guidance about process components, which are critical for enhancing relationships in child care settings. These documents also do not address systemic components—such as ongoing monitoring, data collection, funding, and support for early childhood educators—that are critical in a high-quality system of ELCC.<sup>29</sup> More generally, these documents provide neither a sense for what constitutes quality nor reason to believe that their provisions are sufficient for supporting high-quality ELCC.

In January 2024, the Alberta government released a new vision for ELCC that may signal increased attention to the issue of quality.<sup>30</sup> In this document, which is intended to articulate “Alberta’s path forward in the transformation of early learning and child care,” the importance of high-quality ELCC is clearly recognized and a commitment is made to “to strengthening the child care sector by encouraging recruitment and retention in the workforce and increasing certification of [early childhood educators].” No other aspects of quality are mentioned, unfortunately, but increasing support for a well educated and well supported workforce is an important step.

## Recommendations

Quality matters to many parents. If Alberta’s version of the CWELCC initiative is to match parents’ desire for high quality, the following recommendations merit consideration.

### **1. A commitment to high-quality early learning and child care must begin with a clearly articulated vision for what high quality should and will look like.**

Just as Alberta’s provincial government has begun to articulate a vision of ELCC, it must articulate a vision of high-quality ELCC.<sup>31</sup> Commitments to high quality, without a clear view of what constitutes high quality, are not sufficient. Principles and regulations must be defined that provide shared expectations for parents, early childhood educators, policymakers, and legislators. They must also address all three components of quality—process, structural, and systemic—as well as the well-being of young children and their families. These principles and regulations must be justified in terms of existing evidence, best practices, and community needs, and they must be designed primarily for the benefit of children and families. Regular consultation with parents, early childhood educators, and researchers is essential because the concept of quality and the methods that support high quality evolve continually.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Bisanz, 2023; Government of Alberta, 2023;

<sup>29</sup> See Friendly and Beach (2005) and Connors (2016) for system-level considerations.

<sup>30</sup> Government of Alberta, 2024

<sup>31</sup> As an example, see Section 1 of the *Roadmap to a Quality Early Learning and Child Care System in Alberta* (Canadian Child Care Federation, Child Care Now, YMCA of Northern Alberta, & Muttart Foundation, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> Peeters & Vandekerckhove, 2015; Vandebroek & Lazzarib, 2014



Alberta's provincial government has taken some initial steps recently to support high-quality ELCC by instituting measures to improve recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood educators,<sup>33</sup> but much more is necessary. Fortunately, numerous resources are available that can be used to guide the development of principles, legislation, regulation, and practices that better support high-quality ELCC.<sup>34</sup>

## **2. A plan is needed to implement the changes required to realize the new vision for high-quality early learning and child care.**

Without an implementation plan, a well-crafted vision for high quality would be difficult to realize. This plan must first identify what is necessary for achieving the vision, including options involving service delivery, funding mechanisms, regulatory requirements, and more. As has been demonstrated in other jurisdictions, progress toward building a high-quality system can be derailed or delayed when the vision for ELCC and the policies to implement that vision are inconsistent.<sup>35</sup> It would be unfortunate if the same preventable outcome were to befall Alberta.

A plan for implementation must also include a clear program for data collection, monitoring, and evaluation with respect to quality. These elements are critical for planning and system improvement,<sup>36</sup> for public accountability,<sup>37</sup> and for ensuring equity in service delivery.<sup>38</sup> They are also necessary for improving regulation, which is essential for high-quality ELCC.<sup>39</sup> The present practice of gathering information on a few structural variables, plus infrequent site visits, is not sufficient for assessing the many and diverse features that contribute to quality. Fortunately, a broad range of measures exist for assessing various aspects of quality in ELCC.<sup>40</sup>

## **3. Quality must not be sacrificed in the service of improving affordability and accessibility.**

The federal, provincial, and territorial governments have set explicit targets for affordability and accessibility, and progress is being made toward these targets.<sup>41</sup> The same cannot be said for quality. In education, health, firefighting, and other public services, it would be unacceptable and arguably unethical to ignore quality standards while increasing accessibility. The same should be true for ELCC. There is overwhelming evidence showing beneficial outcomes of high-quality ELCC for children, families,

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.alberta.ca/federal-provincial-child-care-agreement>

<sup>34</sup> For example, the Association of Early Childhood Educators has prepared materials on quality in ELCC (<https://aecea.ca/resources/quality-child-care>). See also Beach (2020), Canadian Child Care Federation et al. (2021), Early Childhood Pedagogy Network (2021), and Friendly and Beach (2005).

<sup>35</sup> For examples of this problem in Australia, Québec, and elsewhere, see Logan (2012) and White and Friendly (2012).

<sup>36</sup> Friendly & Beach, 2005

<sup>37</sup> Macdonald & Friendly, 2023

<sup>38</sup> Raikes et al., 2023; Vandebroeca & Lazzarib, 2014

<sup>39</sup> White & Friendly, 2012

<sup>40</sup> Garon-Carrier, 2019; Guèvremont, Findlay, & Kohen, 2019; Raikes et al., 2023

<sup>41</sup> Macdonald & Friendly, 2023



communities, and economies. There is also evidence from comparative research showing what can go wrong if quality is largely ignored in the early development of ELCC systems.<sup>42</sup> These well-documented findings have important policy implications. Policies that attend entirely to affordability and accessibility, while ignoring quality as well as the principles of inclusion and flexibility, may appear to be satisfactory in the short term. In the long term, however, they are likely to have unintended and potentially negative consequences.<sup>43</sup> A comprehensive approach to improving ELCC, such as that described in the *Roadmap to a Quality Early Learning and Child Care System in Alberta*,<sup>44</sup> is needed to ensure that a balanced approach is taken to developing an effective and equitable system of ELCC.

## Conclusion

Alberta is in a period of transition from a largely market-driven approach to an organized, publicly funded system of ELCC. Current policies and procedures are described as “interim” until a full implementation plan is developed, presumably by March 2025.<sup>45</sup> Commitments to high-quality ELCC have been, at best, aspirational and undefined. There is time to change course. What is needed now are policies and practices to ensure that whatever system emerges will provide high-quality ELCC services that generate short- and long-term benefits for Alberta’s children, families, and communities.

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<sup>42</sup> Logan, 2012; White & Friendly, 2012

<sup>43</sup> Bisanz, Ip, Martin, Ewan & Smith, 2024; van Huizen & Plantenga, 2018

<sup>44</sup> Canadian Child Care Federation, Child Care Now, YMCA of Northern Alberta, & Muttart Foundation, 2021

<sup>45</sup> Mansukhani, 2024



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