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## **Canada's Early Learning and Child Care system needs more than taking care of kids while parents work**

On the surface, daycare and early childhood education (ECE) may seem like the same thing. Both support parents in rejoining the workforce and both are targeted towards children 5 years old and younger. A child will get to interact with other kids their age in both cases and each provides safe, supervised care for children while their parents or caregivers are at work.

So, why is there such a big push towards early childhood education when daycare seems to suffice?

There is no doubt that Canada is desperately in need of good, supportive care for children and families. Many children have faced isolation and interrupted learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our economy has been hit hard and many working mothers have left the workforce to care for their children. In marginalized communities, the impact has been even greater.

Canadians are looking for innovative solutions to these challenges and daycare seems to provide a possible answer. But in reality, Canada needs more than just daycare to build back stronger in a post-pandemic world.

### **Understanding the differences between daycare and early childhood education**

Daycare refers primarily to the custodial care of children. Custodial care provides a safe environment for children that also keeps them nourished, however it does not boost critical language, thinking or interpersonal skills the way that ECE can.

With ECE, education is truly at the core of child care. We know that the first 2,000 days of a child's life set the foundation for learning and well-being that lasts a lifetime. ECE creates a space where young children can play and learn together, guided by qualified educators.

Early childhood education programs help complement family life by providing rich, play-based learning environments that support later reading, mathematics, and science. Instead of only providing custodial care, ECE offers a safe space to learn and develop crucial language, social, physical, emotional, and thinking skills that are essential to being an adult.

In short, ECE sets children up to be learners for life. Best of all, children learn to get along with each other.

## **Benefits of an early childhood education system**

An early childhood education system puts children first. While ECE's role in supporting parental workforce participation is critical, its primary purpose is promoting children's learning and well-being.

Providing quality early learning opportunities to preschool children gives them the best possible head start, launching them on positive learning trajectories that give them the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in later school years. Early learning is also a powerful equalizer, narrowing achievement gaps that emerge before children even start school. And the best part? ECE benefits **all** children, regardless of their parents' work status or income level.

An added powerful benefit of ECE is that it will stimulate our economy. ECE enables parents, particularly mothers, to enter or re-enter the workforce. When parents have good, well-paying jobs, they are more likely to contribute to the economy and pay taxes while also reducing their dependence on social benefit programs funded by the government.

It's clear that investing in early childhood education is a long-term investment in Canada's future.

## **It's time for a universal, publicly funded early childhood education system in Canada**

We've seen the Government of Canada announce its intention to collaborate with provincial and territorial governments to establish an early learning and child care (ELCC) system and expand before- and after-school programs across Canada. This is a welcome step forward, but this important goal cannot be met with daycare alone. Early childhood education must be central to an ELCC system in Canada. ELCC is early childhood education that can be organized to also support parents' work – just like elementary schools and before- and after-school programs do for older kids. It is the first tier of education – just as important as primary, secondary and post-secondary education.

The fact is that early childhood education is the smartest investment that we can make right now. With the federal budget now scheduled for April 19, it's time for us to work together to finally make ECE a reality for Canada.

You can learn more about ECE and how we can build a high-quality, universal, publicly funded and supported system at: <https://earlyyearsstudy.ca/>

Regards,



Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain