



Alliance nationale pour les enfants

National Children's Alliance

School-Age Child Care

**Policy Brief prepared for the Middle Childhood Initiative of
the National Children's Alliance**

By: Canadian Child Care Federation



POLICY BRIEF ON SCHOOL-AGE CHILD CARE

Submitted to the National Children's Alliance

by the Canadian Child Care Federation

September 11, 2006

Contact:

Lana Crossman
Publications Manager
Canadian Child Care Federation
lcrossman@cccf-fcsge.ca
(613) 729-5289 ext. 221

POLICY BRIEF ON SCHOOL-AGE CHILD CARE FOR THE NATIONAL CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

Executive Summary

“Why does society value children from 9 am-12 noon and 1pm-3:30pm when they are in school and then ignore them before school, at lunch and after school?”

It has become widely accepted that quality child care in the early years is a key factor in healthy child development. Neurological research on the importance of the early years and the positive role of quality child care during this period has become popularized in recent years, leading to some improvements to the policy supports to quality child care. However, serious problems remain across the country – a wide range of standards of child care, a severe shortage of spaces, lack of affordability, and difficulties attracting and keeping trained child care practitioners in the field.

These problems are exacerbated in school-age child care (defined in this document as kindergarten to age 12). While, generally, the importance of child care programs for very young children is appreciated, there is a lack of understanding of the role that school-age child care plays in the healthy development of middle-years children.

School-age child care is a major foundational element in a middle years framework, as outlined in *Middle Childhood Matters – A framework to promote healthy development of children 6 to 12*, developed by Child and Youth Health Network for Eastern Ontario, the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario and United Way/Centraide Ottawa:

- Strong public policy in terms of school-age care can help families meet the fundamental needs of their children. If affordable accessible care is available, parents can take part in the workforce and be able to provide nutritious meals, safe and stable housing, and health services.
- Children can develop stable and nurturing relationships with peers and with caring adults in a quality school-age program. If well integrated with school and community services, it encourages a sense of belonging to the school and neighbourhood.



CANADIAN
CHILD CARE
FEDERATION

FÉDÉRATION
CANADIENNE DES
SERVICES DE GARDE
À L'ENFANCE

- A well-developed curriculum in a school-age program provides children opportunities to develop competencies during this critical period as they begin to define their identities. Often school-age child care includes physical and arts activities that aren't covered in the school day or that parents cannot afford to provide otherwise.
- Quality school age programs also provide another safe and caring environment where adults have the best interests of the child at heart, where family/parent participation is encouraged, and where high standards of cleanliness and are met. In this environment, children have the opportunity to make friendships and be themselves, without worries of bullying.

“School age child care often seems like the forgotten cousin of preschool.”

Unfortunately, most children in their middle years do not have access to quality school age programs. There are scattered services offered across the country, with only Québec offering a school-age strategy as part of its overall family policy.

Ironically, it's just at the stage that children need quality child care the most – when parent participation in the labour force surges (in 2003, of the 3,051,900 children with mothers in the paid labour force, 1,828,800 were in the 6 to 12 age range¹) – that the minimal community and policy supports to child care collapse.

Canadian Child Care Federation

CCCF is Canada's largest early learning and child care organization – a vibrant partnership of 21 provincial/territorial child care organizations representing over 11,500 members, primarily practitioners/operators working in centres and family child care settings. CCCF has representation from all 13 jurisdictions at its Member Council table, including rural and Aboriginal child care perspectives. Several representatives on its Member Council work in school-age child care programs.

CCCF is committed to excellence in early learning and child care through best and promising practice, capacity building, and collaborations, networks and partnerships.

¹ Jane Beach & Martha Friendly. (2005). *Early Childhood Education and Care 2004*. Toronto: Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

Most of the project work of the CCCF has been focused on preschool children. However a significant proportion of its membership works in school-age child care and the accompanying issues have always been an underlying theme of all of its work.

Recently, CCCF expanded on a series of books on physical activity, *Moving and Growing*, to include ages 7-8, in response to an identified need for evidence-based physical activity tools for this age group.

School age child care has been explored in-depth in the CCCF's quarterly journal, *Interaction* magazine. In recent issues there has been much interest in models of school/child care integration and how the two "systems" can work together for the best interests of the child.

At the June 2006 annual conference, hosted by CCCF and its Alberta affiliates in Calgary, a national discussion on school age child care took place where participants identified strengths, challenges and next steps for school-age child care. This policy brief draws on the report from this discussion as well as consultation with representatives on CCCF's Member Council who work in school-age child care. Their comments are reflected throughout the brief in general, and through specific quotes.

The brief puts forward ideas for consideration on a number of ways to build a strong policy framework, supporting and expanding on existing commitments to quality child care to better meet the needs of school-age children and their families.

Overview of Existing Policy and Legislation

Currently there are several types of school-age child care services offered across the country. There are child care centres that serve both infants and preschoolers, as well as school-age programs. Family child care providers are the most common form of child care both in the early years and in school age years (in a multi-age home setting). Across the country, different provincial departments are responsible for school-age care – in some provinces it's education, in others it's social services.

Quebec has integrated school-age child care into its overall family policy up to age 12. It is funded under the \$7/day program and the administration falls under the auspices of the department of



CANADIAN
CHILD CARE
FEDERATION

FÉDÉRATION
CANADIENNE DES
SERVICES DE GARDE
À L'ENFANCE

education. In other provinces there have been some efforts to bridge the silos that currently exist between the education and child care systems. Manitoba has developed a policy to support partnerships between the school system and child care centres. Ontario, through its new Best Start initiative is working towards a “seamless day,” using schools as community hubs where children attend preschools and after-school programs in neighbourhood school settings, and benefit from close collaboration between teachers and child care practitioners.²

While each province/territory has some legislation pertaining to child care overall, it is uneven across the country. Further, regulations pertaining to school-age child care are often less strict – for example staff may not need training, or programs operating for less than 10 weeks (i.e. summer programs) don't need licenses in some provinces. Most legislation fails to address the specific developmental needs of this age group in terms of staff qualifications, regulations and physical environment.

While most provinces/territories offer some level of fee subsidies to parents below a minimum income level, this funding is often not extended into the school years.

There is currently no federal role in school-age child care. The limited role that the federal government does play in child care is strictly focused on the early years. For example, the 2003 *Multilateral Framework Agreement on Early Learning and Child Care* commits the federal, provincial and territorial ministers to make investments in the specific area of early learning and child care. The Universal Child Care Benefit launched in July 2006 – a direct payment of \$100 monthly (taxable) to parents – is limited to children under six.

Currently the federal government is consulting on how to implement a promise to create new spaces through its Child Care Spaces Initiative. It's still unclear if or how many of these spaces would be allocated to school-age. Also, the plan to create these spaces through tax-credits to businesses may not answer the needs of school-age families to have the care located in their communities near school buildings.

² Toronto First Duty is a model that is showing considerable success in integrating the education and child care systems. For more details: www.city.toronto.on.ca/firstduty.

Most municipalities do not currently play a role in child care policy, with the exception of cities in Ontario and British Columbia.



CANADIAN
CHILD CARE
FEDERATION

FÉDÉRATION
CANADIENNE DES
SERVICES DE GARDE
À L'ENFANCE

“Committed child care professionals can help support school-age children through the challenging times of peer pressure, bullying, and other social issues that this age group faces or will potentially face as they transition into their youth years.”

Evidence for the need for a stronger policy on school-age child care

There is minimal Canadian research on the developmental importance of the middle years. However we do know that there is an increasing number of “vulnerable” children in the middle years from families representing the full range of income levels.³

Research also shows that the early school years are critical points in learning when children move from learning to read to reading to learn. At this point their success in reading plays a role in how well they will learn in the later years of childhood.⁴

Quality child care can meet the evolving learning needs of children during these important years as they develop their language skills, cognitive skills and peer social skills. Quality child care meets the developmental needs of this age group and is inclusive of all abilities. It provides developmentally-appropriate care which is lacking in some recreational programs. It supports successful transition from child care to school through the “learning to read” phase of early childhood to “reading to learn” phase of middle childhood.

By identifying learning problems and opportunities that may be missed in school classroom, quality child care plays a role in early intervention. This valuable role can benefit other areas of concern in middle childhood. For example, we also know that there is an increase in mental health problems in children in the middle years.⁵ School-age child care programs are ideally placed to deliver programs to help children deal with adversity (for example, resiliency programs or anti-bullying programs), or to identify serious mental health problems so that they can be treated effectively.

A sense of belonging is critically important to this age group, as their world begins to extend beyond family to their school and community. Yet, many children in their middle years feel excluded due to physical and learning disabilities or, in the case of new Canadians, due to cultural differences. In quality child care, best practice is inclusive practice. A strong school-age child care

³ Willms JD. (Ed.) (2002). *Vulnerable Children*. Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press and Human Resources Development Canada.

⁴ reference to Doug Willms research

⁵ Canadian Institute of Child Health. (2000). *The Health of Canada’s Children: A CICH Profile*. 3rd Edition. Ottawa: Canadian Institute of Child Health.

program can support a child in feeling that they are active participants, along with their peers.

There is also American research that indicates that summer learning is an important factor in school success.⁶ It is also an area where children from low-income families who cannot access quality programming during the summer become disadvantaged when compared to children from high and middle income families. Quality school-age child care supports children's outcomes in school by providing a continuity of learning over the vacation period. Affordable quality child care would enable families of all income levels to benefit from quality programming over the summer months.

Families are experiencing increased levels of stress and difficulty in managing work-family balance. According to a 2001 national survey of more than 31,000 employees of medium and large organizations, over half said that work had a negative impact on the time they spent with their children; 42% said it had a negative impact on their relationships with their children. Difficulties in balancing work-family issues affects the workforce. In 2003, mothers employed full-time lost an average of 4.5 days due to family responsibilities.⁷ High quality school age care can alleviate this stress; when parents know that their children are in quality child care, they can cope more easily with work-life balance issues and avoid family-related absenteeism.

It can address the care needs of families in rural, remote and northern areas of Canada where self-care can be particularly dangerous. Canadian children of all ages are hospitalized as a result of agricultural machinery injuries. According to a study of machinery-related injuries from 1990-2001, injuries of boys increased with increasing age. During this period there were 632 injuries of children between the ages of 5 and 14.⁸ Injuries tended to be more frequent during the summer months when parents are busy in the fields and are less able to supervise children.

⁶ Barbara Heyns. (1978). *Summer Learning and the Effects of Schooling*. New York : Academic Press.

⁷ Linda Duxbury and Chris Higgins. (2003) *Work-Life Conflict in Canada in the New Millennium: A Status Report*. Ottawa: Health Canada.

⁸ Canadian Agricultural Injury Surveillance Program. (2003). *Agricultural Injuries in Canada for 1990-2000*. Kingston, Ontario: CAISP.



CANADIAN
CHILD CARE
FEDERATION

FÉDÉRATION
CANADIENNE DES
SERVICES DE GARDE
À L'ENFANCE

The rise of obesity and type 2 diabetes in Canada is well documented. Quality school-age child care programs have a strong emphasis on physical activity and nutrition, can help to address these health concerns.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence for a stronger policy framework for school-age child care is simply the huge demand for it. Given the sheer numbers of children needing care (80 per cent of mothers with children under 12 are participating in the paid workforce) it's imperative that there be supports to ensure that children have access to quality programming in a safe and caring environment.

Issues in School-Age Child Care and Policy Directions

“While a good program is about child development, it needs to address the fact that children need down time after school, not more rules and expectations of sitting still and being quiet.”

Lack of understanding of developmental needs of children in middle years

An over-arching concern of school-age child care practitioners is that policy makers fail to acknowledge the specific developmental needs of this age group and how they differ from younger children in child care. This may stem from a lack of research on middle childhood and the role of school-age child care in child development during this period.

This lack of understanding extends from the federal government that fails to address child care for this age group at all, to provincial/territorial governments that lump school age child care under the same (or less stringent) regulations as care for infants, toddlers and preschoolers. It continues with school boards who are careful to ensure children are given learning opportunities during school hours, but don't collaborate with child care programs in terms of offering gymnasium, library, art-room facilities to these same children during out-of-school hours. Even parents often have an expectation that school-age care should take the form of a “homework” club, which is at odds with the aim of many school-age care programs to provide children with time away from their desks, and opportunities to pursue less academic interests.

Policy ideas for consideration:

- Establish national standards to ensure programming meets developmental needs of all children at this age.
- Address specific needs developmental stages of middle childhood in provincial/territorial legislation pertaining to school-age child care.
- Initiate and share broadly more Canadian research on school; age care and its benefits to the community. Research could also include pilots of various service delivery models, which are evaluated and the results shared



CANADIAN
CHILD CARE
FEDERATION

FÉDÉRATION
CANADIENNE DES
SERVICES DE GARDE
À L'ENFANCE

nationally. It should also include surveys of parents to determine what families want/need, and what will work well in different communities.

- Establish a mechanism for provincial/territorial governments to work with federal government on shared policy agendas pertaining to school-age child care – either under the auspices of “child care policy” or “middle-childhood policy,” or even a comprehensive “family policy.” Because the issue straddles education and social services departments, it may need to be addressed in a venue other than First Minister’s Meetings.

Lack of affordability, funding and spaces

Funding is a primary issue across child care services in general. However, it becomes more pronounced in school-age child care.

First, there is the affordability of quality programs for many families, particularly since most subsidies provided fall sharply in the school years. There is also the lack of funding to the infrastructure supporting school-age child care. Where existing federal-provincial agreements (such as the Multilateral Framework Agreement) dedicate some funding to enhance child care practitioner wages and programming, the funding is specifically dedicated to programs serving children in the early years (0-6).

“Family child care is an important option in school-age care. I’ve seen such value in the child staying in their own neighbourhood in a home setting, as opposed to staying in the school building.”

Second, there is the problem of availability of spaces. The severe shortage of spaces experienced broadly across child care is exacerbated in school age child care. Just when the parents of children in their middle years are returning to the workforce in greater numbers, there are less spaces available. Those that do exist often don’t meet the needs of working families as they don’t cover school holidays – such as professional development/parent-teacher interview days, Christmas, spring break and summer.

For some families and in some communities spaces in family child care (care provided by a qualified practitioner in her home) may be the best solution. There needs to be support for these spaces and initiatives to give family child care practitioners access to community facilities.

The shortage of spaces forces many families to rely on unregulated child care spaces – where the quality of care is uncertain.

Policy ideas for consideration:

- Provide infrastructure support and funding (from all levels of government) to improve programming, to increase parent subsidies and to create more spaces in both urban and rural settings.



CANADIAN
CHILD CARE
FEDERATION

FÉDÉRATION
CANADIENNE DES
SERVICES DE GARDE
À L'ENFANCE

“We work with travelling centres and often the program gets moved around from room to room to accommodate other users.”

Physical and environmental challenges

Often school-age child care takes place in a space that is shared with other school and/or community services. In some programs, the space is moved around from room to room to accommodate other users. Usually there is little storage space. Even if a school-age program is located in a school, it may not be permitted to have access to school materials and space. Regardless of the fact that a school is a community, taxpayer funded facility, children attending school-age programs may not be allowed to read library books, use school furniture or have access to computers or gym facilities.

Policy ideas for consideration:

- Develop and implement policies within provinces/territories that support collaboration amongst schools, child care and other community services. Provide supports and tools needed in communities to customize programs to meet the specific needs of school-age child care.

Training and professional development

School age child care suffers from the same recruitment and retention problems of the rest of the child care field. This can be attributed to poor wages and working conditions, but also to a lack of programming opportunities and professional development, and the draw of better pay in the education system. There needs to be additional training available for school-age care providers that addresses the specific developmental needs of school-age children.

Policy ideas for consideration:

- Provide continuing education/professional development of educators (many may be trained in ECE, not necessarily familiar with developmental needs of children in middle-years).
- Provide wage enhancements to encourage school age child care practitioners to remain in the field and provide stability to children in their care.

Conclusion

A comprehensive national policy on school-age child care could have extremely positive results on the outcomes of children in their middle years.

The principles of the already existing framework for child care – the *Multilateral Framework Agreement on Early Learning and Child Care* – are based on extensive research on quality child care and can be extended to school-age child care:

- available and accessible
- affordable
- quality
- inclusive
- based on parental choice

Anyone concerned with children's healthy development wants children to have access to safe stimulating environments (whether in a centre or family setting) where their learning is enhanced, opportunities for physical activity are available, and special needs are identified, met and linked back to the school. Families and workplaces benefit from mothers and fathers being able to focus on their work day confident that their children are in quality care. Communities benefit from greater involvement in local services. There's an opportunity here for the education and health systems to benefit from healthier children, better prepared for transition to and from school. Finally, because children's outcomes during the middle years have a significant impact on their ability to contribute to society as adults, governments can consider investments in school age child care as investments in Canada's future prosperity.