

THE FAMILIES AGENDA FOR BRITISH COLUMBIA: Building a sustainable quality early years strategy to support BC families



**BC'S FAMILY
AGENDA**



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In June 2012, our government released the Families First Agenda for British Columbia. The Agenda is our government's plan to better support vulnerable families, to make communities safer and to make life more affordable for families. It is designed to help B.C. families continue to progress and thrive, and it includes opportunities for B.C. families to bring their ideas forward at www.FamiliesFirstBC.ca

Since launching the Families First Agenda, our government has had the opportunity to engage with British Columbians from across the province. Through the website, face-to-face meetings and by using social media, we have received thoughtful comments and practical, useful advice on how to improve our programs, refocus our planning, and better orient government so that our significant yearly investments of taxpayer money make a positive difference in the lives of British Columbians. In the Families First Agenda, we were clear that work to support British Columbia's children is an essential part of our plan to support families.

Key findings from public engagement efforts to date on early years services include:

- » The need for enhanced integration, coordination, and development of existing early years policies and programs to address fragmentation and service gaps to better meet the needs of families across B.C., and
- » Taking steps to further improve the affordability, accessibility and quality of child care programs to better meet the needs of families while supporting a broad range of child care choices, including the option of staying at home.

Research shows that quality practical information, support and early interventions are the best ways to ensure kids get the best possible start in life. Early experiences shape brain development and are a critical foundation for all future learning, behaviour, and health. Secure and stable social relationships with caring adults are critical to development. Helping children achieve their full potential by investing in the early years not only helps develop individuals that can fully contribute to society and the economy throughout their life time, but also saves the cost of later, inevitably more expensive interventions. Early years programs and services benefit communities, society and the economy as a whole.



Building on a Foundation of Early Years Services

In 2012, there were an estimated 592,649 children aged 0 – 12 in British Columbia and 274,424 of these children were under the age of 6. An increase in the number of BC children is projected for the coming years. By 2020/21 the population of children aged 0 - 12 will rise to approximately 671,154 and the under 6 population to 311,765. Our government helps to support these children with a wide range of programs that are tailored to their needs and the needs of their parents. These programs and services have been developed to help ensure British Columbia's children thrive and are given every possible opportunity to pursue fulfilling lives. Our government invests more than \$1 billion annually on early learning and childhood development initiatives through a range of investments in early childhood development, child care and early learning. This includes cross ministry special needs supports.

Early childhood and early learning programs across the province include:

- » Approximately \$28 million annually in a range of cross-ministry programs designed to support healthy pregnancy, birth and infancy, including early childhood immunizations, the midwifery program and shaken baby syndrome prevention;
- » Approximately \$35 million annually in parental and family supports, including adoption support services, the BC Healthy Kids Program, Family Resource Programs and the Building Blocks regional initiative;
- » Approximately \$89 million annually early childhood development (ECD), care and learning program investments, including public health nursing, Ready, Set, Learn programs, StrongStart BC early learning programs, and Roots/Seeds of Empathy; and
- » Approximately \$24 million annually in a range of cross-ministry community supports including the Aboriginal Early Childhood Development Initiative which supports Aboriginal communities to deliver culturally appropriate services, Success By 6, Children First and ECD research initiatives.

What We Are Changing

Our government will take a flexible and responsive approach to the changing needs of families guided by three goals:

- » Access – Helping ensure early years programs and services including child care are available for children who need them.
- » Quality – Ensuring programs and services are high quality and evidence based.
- » Affordability – Enabling parent choice through strategic and sustainable financial supports.

As we have engaged with British Columbians on our Families Agenda, and are informed by current research into effective early years interventions, several initiatives have emerged that will advance the government's goals of improving access, quality and affordability.

Like governments around the world, we are restricted by the fiscal reality that surrounds us. We cannot spend beyond our means, nor can we saddle future generations with the debt of our spending. Our programs must be sustainable, so that we can be sure that our children and their children will equally have the ability to provide social supports. Our goal is take a number of meaningful, evidence-based steps to better help families with child care and support early childhood development. We are committed to continual improvement in our pursuit of excellence for children's programs and services, building from a solid foundation of programs administered through the Ministries of Health, Education, and Children and Family Development in collaboration with the community services sector across the province.

A One-Government Approach

To ensure we remain focused on evidence-based options and outcomes, and to ensure the many activities carried out by a number of ministries across government are well-coordinated and targeted, we are establishing a Provincial Office for the Early Years. The office will be established in June 2013 and begin its work by mapping and reviewing the current range of early years services, then developing an action plan to put in place an integrated system of early childhood services across the province that provides practical and quality information and support services to better meet the needs of busy parents through convenient opening times and services. The action plan will build on the existing community networks, re-profile and better link expenditures where required to better meet the needs of children and families and be informed through ongoing public engagement and focus groups. A fall forum is planned to obtain stakeholder feedback and suggestions. Implementation of the action plan will begin early next year.



Child care support is an important focus:

- » The Child Care budget of the Ministry of Children and Family Development was \$296 million in 2012/13 – a 40 per cent increase since 2000/01.
 - Over 100,000 licensed child care spaces are funded in communities around the province through the Child Care Operating Funding Program’s annual budget of approximately \$74 million which supports approximately 5,000 licensed childcare facilities;
 - Low income families are helped with the cost of child care through the Child Care Subsidy Program. Through its annual budget of approximately \$142 million this program supports an average of 50,000 children each year with subsidies ranging up to \$750 per month. Children with special needs may be eligible for a Special Needs Supplement. Families receiving subsidy may apply for an additional \$150 per month up to the cost of care.
 - In Sept. 2011, the ministry increased the maximum monthly subsidy rate for parents requiring care before and after school, on non-instructional days and during school closures. Subsidy rates for four hours of care or less per day increased to \$175 per month and rates for more than four hours per day increased to \$210 per month
 - Supported Child Development is a community-based program that helps families of children with extra support needs to access inclusive child care. The program provides training, support and consultation to children, families and child care staff. The annual Supported Child Development budget is \$57 million.
- » More than \$35 million in capital funding – including nearly \$7 million for Aboriginal communities – has created more than 6,500 licensed child care spaces in over 400 projects since 2001.
- » The Minor Capital Funding Program helps non-profit child care providers with the costs of repairs and upgrades in order to meet licensing requirements. The program has provided funding assistance to over 1,100 child care facilities in the last six years.
- » The Child Care Resource and Referral program helps parents find child care and make informed choices. This program also provides training, resources and other support services to local child care providers.

This office solidifies our “one-government” approach to coordinate cross-ministry service system development in partnerships with communities and citizens across the province. It will lead the implementation of a provincially-branded network of early years development centres that will provide up-to-date information and core services to parents, including advice, assessment and referral services that will then be linked to a system of early childhood development and child care services across the community and ministries. Working closely with community networks and municipalities, the office will facilitate improved integration, coordination, and a range of accessible quality programs and services while maintaining and, where necessary, developing a stronger focus on reaching out to higher-risk children and their families. The Ministry of Children and Family Development will link in a range of its family support services, children and youth mental health services and services to parents of children with special needs to create one-stop convenient access to a range of practical advice, supports and services. The centres will become up-to-date information sources for parents, provide opportunities for complementary services to co-locate and support and build community early years planning efforts. Over \$4.5 million will be added to existing expenditures to implement the early years development centres over the coming three years, increasing to an annual net new expenditure of nearly \$6 million a year by year five.

Access

Our government strives for the right balance between regulation and access. We work hard to ensure that safety standards are maintained. Through our Families First Agenda we’ve also committed to make life as convenient as possible for families across the Province.

To supplement the number of spaces available and to improve convenience, the Ministry of Education is proceeding with legislative changes that will facilitate better use of school facilities for before and after school care and support a seamless day of school and child care.

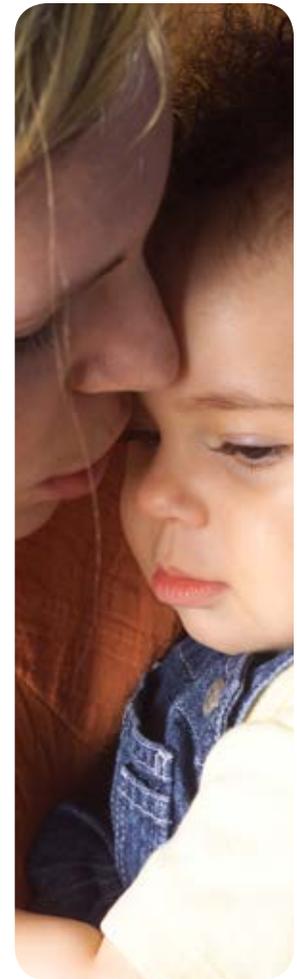
A careful review of our regulatory requirements will be undertaken to determine whether more can be done to increase spaces while maintaining safety and standards.

In addition, \$32 million of funding will be provided over three years to support the creation of up to 2,000 new licensed child care spaces, with the goal of opening 13,000 new spaces over the next eight years. Emphasis will be placed on creating spaces in areas currently underserved by child care and on school grounds. This will add to the more than 100,000 spaces currently funded by government.

Quality

Given the importance of early years experiences, it is essential to focus on continually improving the quality of the early years services, including child care.

Building from the consultation with families and service providers and the re-profiling and linking of the existing service structure into a more seamless,



- » The Ministry of Education's two-year implementation of full-day kindergarten was completed in September 2011, extending the benefits of the \$327 million program to approximately 38,000 kindergarten students across British Columbia (currently). To support this expansion, government increased annual funding by \$129 million and invested an additional \$144 million in capital funding for 713 new kindergarten classrooms. This is improving learning while reducing child-care pressure on families. To help support families taking advantage of full-day kindergarten, and ensure that more school-aged children can access child care, in 2010 the B.C. government increased the number of school-aged children providers could care for, with 1,100 facilities throughout the province eligible to increase spaces.

Note: Source of population numbers is P.E.O.P.L.E. Projection 36, BC Stats, Service BC, BC Ministry of Labour, Citizens' Services and Open Government



accessible and convenient system, additional strategies will be incrementally implemented over the next three years to make better information about child care spaces readily available to parents. We will work with the sector to further improve Early Childhood Educator and out-of-school care provider training, support richer child experiences in the many types of child care and further develop the range of early years services.

To support this direction government will invest an additional \$37 million over three years to enhance the overall quality of early years services, including child care.

Affordability

Our government currently invests significant taxpayer dollars every year in child care subsidies. But we can do more to improve the affordability of child care for parents.

Our Early Years Strategy includes a new British Columbia Early Childhood Tax Benefit available to parents of children under the age of six. Effective April 1, 2015, this new, refundable, tax credit will provide \$146 million annually to approximately 180,000 families with young children. These families include those currently receiving subsidy. Families will receive a maximum benefit of \$55 per month, or \$660 dollars annually, for each child under the age of six. The benefit will be administered through the Canada Child Tax Benefit system and families can apply for the monthly benefit by applying for the Canada Child Tax Benefit. To be eligible, individuals must file their personal income tax returns.

The maximum benefit will be available to all eligible families with family net incomes under \$100,000. The benefit will start to phase out at \$100,000 and will be fully phased out at \$150,000 of family net income. About 140,000 families will be eligible to receive the full benefit while an additional 40,000 families with family net incomes over \$100,000 will receive a partial benefit.

This new provincial benefit will supplement existing federal benefits including the Canada Child Tax Benefit, the National Child Benefit Supplement and the Universal Child Care Benefit.

Conclusion

The B.C. government is committed to giving young children a strong start in life. Building on a strong foundation of investment and effort from ministries and communities, the B.C. Families Early Years Strategy will improve the integration, accessibility, quality, and affordability of B.C.'s early years programs, including the current child care system. Under the leadership of a Provincial Office for the Early Years, ministries will work in an integrated, collaborative manner to deliver well-designed, linked, accessible and quality early years services across the province.



*For more information please visit our website.
www.gov.bc.ca*

