

National First Nations Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Policy Framework

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1. Preamble

First Nations have an inherent and sacred responsibility for their children and families.

We have entered a new political climate—one which brings unprecedented opportunity for transformative, systemic change for First Nations peoples. These opportunities are situated in a broad social political climate of reconciliation, healing, and relationship-building between the Government of Canada and First Nations peoples. This climate has been over two decades in the making, with the release of the final report of Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2016, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007 and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) launched in 2008 released its final report in 2015, including 94 Calls to Action aimed at reconciliation.

Many of the TRC Calls to Action focus on the well-being of Indigenous children, recognizing their importance to the health and healing of Indigenous communities. The TRC called on the Government of Canada to reduce the numbers of Indigenous children in care, to eliminate discrepancies in educational funding and to develop culturally appropriate curricula, and to close the gaps in maternal and child health between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The creation of a First Nations-specific system of early learning and child care (ELCC) is one step toward addressing TRC Calls to Action and toward realizing First Nations inherent responsibilities within the framework of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.¹

In realizing First Nations inherent rights to self-determination and governance, a national First Nations ELCC framework builds upon the work and achievements of the last two decades by enhancing, expanding, and supporting innovation within existing programs. Equally important is supporting communities or regions where there are no programs and services, or where they are severely underfunded. This includes children who are primarily cared for at home, either on or off reserve, and families who might not otherwise receive the supports they need to thrive. This First Nations ELCC framework should be seen as a transformative and systemic way forward, one that ensures ELCC policies, programs, and services are working towards ensuring that all First Nations children and families receive the supports they need, where, when and how they need them. The framework can and should support a diverse suite of programs and services that comprise a First Nations ELCC system. This system will provide choices for families and communities and ensure the optimal health and well-being of First Nations children and families, as the foundation of culturally-strong communities and First Nations governance and self-determination.

This framework should be seen not as prescriptive. Informed by regional First Nations ELCC engagements and the lessons of twenty years of experience with Indigenous ELCC, it instead provides a vision, principles, and strategic actions that will come together to create a comprehensive national First Nations

¹ In committing to the TRC Calls to Action, Canada commits to full adoption and implementation of the UN Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples (TRC calls to action 43 & 44). The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples requires the development of Indigenous capacities in the free pursuit of self-determination (Article 3), of Indigenous autonomy and self-government (Article 4) where ELCC is a distinct Indigenous social and cultural institution (Article 5).

ELCC system, one implemented and coordinated by regions and communities. Strategic actions are offered as a series of well-informed considerations for development and implementation of the system.

The goal of this framework is to provide a way forward together in the creation of structures that will best support First Nations families, as well as the autonomy and self-determination of First Nations. It is founded on recognition of inherent rights and title in developing and emerging contexts of First Nations governance. It will therefore necessitate cross-sectoral coordination and partnership—for example with health and education sectors—to best realize the direction of First Nations leadership and respond to the needs and hopes of First Nations communities for their children.

A First Nations ELCC framework must begin and end with children and their families, in the languages and cultures passed down through the generations, and through authorities governed by First Nations themselves for their own peoples, and for their own futures. It is important to critically and historically reflect on programs and services that are created for young Indigenous children especially those that are interfacing with or attending formalized programs.

We believe that ...

- Children are a gift to us from the Creator
- Parents, families and communities have a sacred and shared responsibility to care for their children
- Children are considered the highest priority of parents, of family and of community
- Children embody the past, live the present and promise the future
- Each child is born with a gift(s) to be realized and nurtured
- First Nations children and families have been, and continue to be, impacted by colonization

2. Scope

Includes programs and services designed for First Nations children and their families, birth to 6 years of age; while the emphasis is on the early years, regions will have the flexibility to determine when children are ready to transition to formal schooling.

This policy framework focuses first on federally funded authorities, systems, programs and services providing direct ELCC² supports, but it anticipates facilitating new regional partnerships among First Nations and with provincial and territorial governments and other stakeholders—where appropriate and desired by First Nations.

² Early Learning and Child Care is meant to be an encompassing term that covers the span of a young child's life from birth until they enter into a formal education system. There is great variability in attributing age to this part of the lifespan, however 0-6 years is quite common in most parts of the country. These age differences are evident in programs such as the First Nations Inuit Child Care Initiative where the scope of the program is for children 0-12 years of age while the focus of many Head Start programs is children aged 3-5 years. And in some First Nations regions a specific age is not stated but rather describes a developmental readiness, for example, "at such time as the child is ready to enter the formal education system". Early learning in this case refers to all the learning the child undertakes from the time they are born and or may also indicate programs and services that have learning as readiness for school focus. Child care identifies a type care where the care of children by a care provider—either outside of the home or in the home—takes place while the primary caregiver or parent(s) are away from home for education or employment. Day care or child care centres usually provide care in a group setting, and are staffed by early childhood educators. This form of care is philosophically oriented to developmentally and culturally appropriate practice that focuses on the growth and development of the whole child in-context and is not bound by a formal curriculum beyond the stages of children's growth and development.

3. Vision

Healthy, happy, First Nations children and their families are supported by a regionally-driven early learning and child care systems—rooted in Indigenous languages and cultures, and governed by First Nations.

4. Mission

To establish a First Nations specific early learning and child care system of programs, services, and supports controlled by First Nations through ongoing community engagement, collaborations, partnerships, and coordinated approaches to planning, implementation, and governance.

5. Guiding Principles and Goals

5.1 Indigenous knowledges, languages and cultures

Early learning and child care programs, services and supports are anchored in distinct First Nations knowledges. Languages and cultures and expressions of First Nations knowledge systems are inextricably linked to children’s individual and collective identity formation. It is imperative that the loss of First Nations language and cultural ways is address and the opportunity for language and cultural enhancements are considered with equal importance.

Goals

- Programs and services reflect First Nations cultures, values, traditions, protocols and practices
- Capacity and funding for language programs is adequately resourced

5.2 First Nations governance

First Nations have direct influence in decision-making at all levels of policy development and governance with respect to early learning and child care and other related programs and services that support the well-being of children and their families.

Goals

- Transfer of authority for ELCC to First Nations is achieved
- Increased capacity for First Nations to develop, implement, evaluate and support ELCC systems, programs and services at all levels (local, regional and national) is realized
- Accountability measures are developed by First Nations at all levels of ELCC service delivery
- Evaluation framework is designed and implemented by First Nations

5.3 Quality programs and services

Early learning and child care programs, services and supports are diverse and of high quality. They emulate the distinct languages and cultures in which they are situated and are evident children’s learning and physical environments, education and remuneration of early childhood educators, inclusion of Elders, and family and community engagement.

Goals

- There is sufficient, appropriate and sustainable funding to support quality programs and services
- Enhanced quality of ELCC programs, services and supports is achieved
- Funding for language programming is fully resourced

- Human resources strategies are developed and implemented and focused on valuing ECE staff, their education and remuneration

5.4 Inclusive, accessible and flexible

Early learning and child care programs and services are available and are of high quality and affordable for all First Nations children and families. At the programmatic level, early learning and child care programs and services are flexible and responsive to the unique and diverse needs of First Nations children and their families. Children and families with diverse and exceptional needs are well supported.

Goals

- Increased availability and participation in ELCC programs, services and supports by First Nations children and families
- Access to high quality service will be enhanced and gaps in services addressed
- Funding is flexible and responsive to regional needs and community diversity
- Improved availability of supports for children with diverse and exceptional needs

5.5 Transparent and accountable

Programs and services will be transparent and accountable to the children, families, and communities they serve. Funders, external agencies, stakeholders, and ELCC programs and services will share information in transparent and ethical ways using OCAP principles. Accountability at all levels is reciprocal; partners work together collaboratively and transparently to achieve shared goals.

Goals

- Reciprocal accountability measures and processes are in place
- Capacity for First Nations evaluation processes, methods and supports is in place

5.6 Collaborations and partnerships

Collaborations support the establishment of a coordinated, integrated First Nations early learning and child care system of programs, services and supports. National and regional partnerships create opportunities to address the needs of First Nations children and their families in comprehensive, holistic, effective and efficient ways.

Goals

- National and regional linkages between relevant federal departments and First Nations exists as a part of the First Nations ELCC system
- Inter-ministerial ELCC program and service coordination congruent with regional First Nations efforts is effective and responsive to regional direction
- Collaborative relationships with other similar and related programs and services are in place, recognizing and supporting the integrity of families and communities over that of programs and services

5.7 Capacity development

The success of a First Nations ELCC system is dependent on First Nations capacities at national, regional and community levels. Capacity development support at all levels is essential to the establishment and implementation of an effective and legitimate First Nations ELCC framework.

Goals

- National First Nations support structures are established and operationalized
- Regional coordinating structures are created and operational
- Community capacity, including planning engagement and staff development is ongoing

Funding for these structures and activities will come from federal sources associated with but separate from program and service funding, ideally linked to progress on new fiscal arrangements among the First Nations and the federal government—as well as with provincial and territorial governments. Because First Nations ELCC is currently supported by multiple levels of government, provincial and territorial governments may also become key partners in ELCC governance transformation, where appropriate and desired.

Through the framework, regional First Nations ELCC governance will have expression nationally. The National First Nations ELCC Experts Working Group of the Assembly of First Nations in partnership with the federal government will support regional structures in the implementation of the First Nations ELCC framework.