

Putting science into action for Canada's children—and the country's future

Background:

Health, literacy and behaviour - the primary tools of learning depend on early childhood development.

Putting Science in Action: Equity from the Start through Early Child Development convened in Sackville, New Brunswick, May 13-16 bringing together scientists, activists and policy makers to discuss ways that governments can help lay the groundwork for early learning.

“The science underlying early learning is expanding all the time. The debate surrounding it and the conclusions to be drawn from it are too important for any reasonable person to ignore.”

— Hon. Paul Martin

Elected officials and parents concur that there is a pressing need for effective education to help children participate in the information revolution, to escape generational poverty and to succeed in a changing economy.

Hosted by the Council for Early Child Development, the conference opened with former Prime Minister, Paul Martin, calling on all levels of government to invest in early childhood development initiatives, even in these times of economic turmoil.

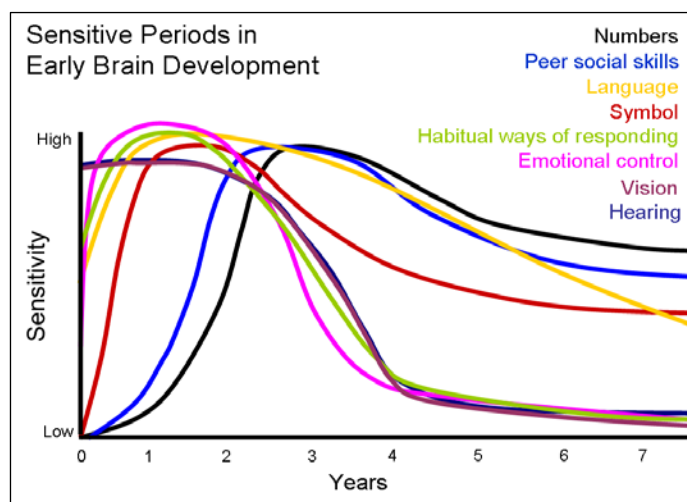


Figure 1 Graph developed by Council for Early Child Development.
References: Nash, (1997); Early Years Study (1999); Shonkoff (2000).

“Early child development should be an essential part of any economic stimulus package,” he said. “Because more than anything else, it’s the gift that keeps on giving.”

Martin, a long-time former finance minister, said Canada will need to ensure it has an educated populace to keep up with the emerging economies of China, India and Brazil that are “graduating more engineers than Canada has children”.

“The world is about to get a heck of a lot more competitive,” he said. “Without a comparable population to these other countries, Canadians will need to ensure they can compete based on their skills and innovation.”

“Governments need to take action now, he said. “We cannot afford to waste the talent of even one young Canadian.”

Martin was joined at the conference by New Brunswick Premier Shawn Graham, former Nova Scotia Premier John Hamm, former

N.B. lieutenant governors Marilyn Trenholme Counsell and Margaret McCain (who also served as co-chairs for the conference), Fort Folly First Nations Chief Joe Knockwood, medical expert Dr. Fraser Mustard and Dr. Robin Williams, the medical officer of health for the Niagara Region and conference co-chairperson, along with early child development experts from around the world. The goal of the conference was to offer ideas for governments to use in tackling the issue of early child development.

Federal leadership essential

The economic crisis is an opportunity to revisit the imperative of investing in the first stages of human development. Investment means financial resources but it is about so much more than money. Attention to human development requires the best thinking for innovation and action on public policy, systems and service delivery design, family and community engagement, and public accountability, retired business executive Charles Coffey told the 320 delegates. This new environment demands that early human development not be seen in competition with other public priorities but deeply integrated into them.

“In other countries, such as Cuba, Sweden and Australia, the national government takes a very strong interest in early child care. That’s what we’re asking our federal overnment to do – to take an interest and to be a champion.”

— Hon. Marilyn Trenholme-Counsell

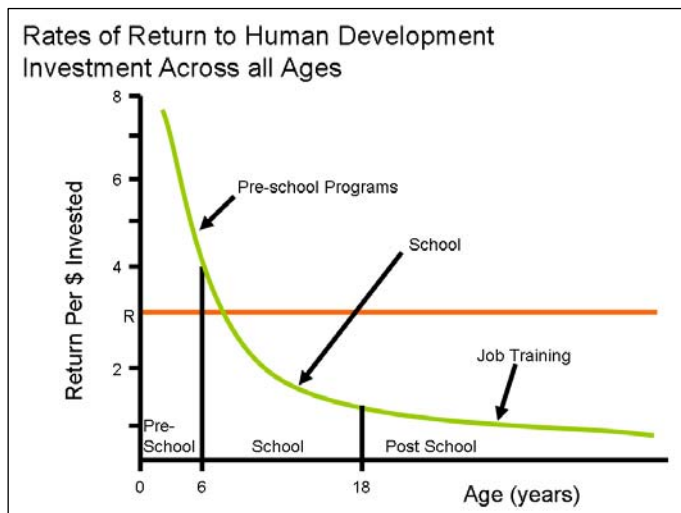


Figure 2. Reference: Carneiro & Heckman, Human Capital Policy (2003).

Canada's challenges are not unique:

- A changing economic base
- De-population of regions reliant on resource-based extraction
- Rapid population growth in other regions, threatening environmental sustainability
- A large and rapidly aging population reliant on shrinking birth cohorts that need to be more resilient and more productive than ever before
- School test scores flat lining and early childhood outcome measures in negative decline despite substantive new investments in education
- Structural child and family poverty

To every one of these challenges effective early childhood programs provide a part of the answer because child development is so closely tied to equitable opportunities for all. Extensive work by Senator

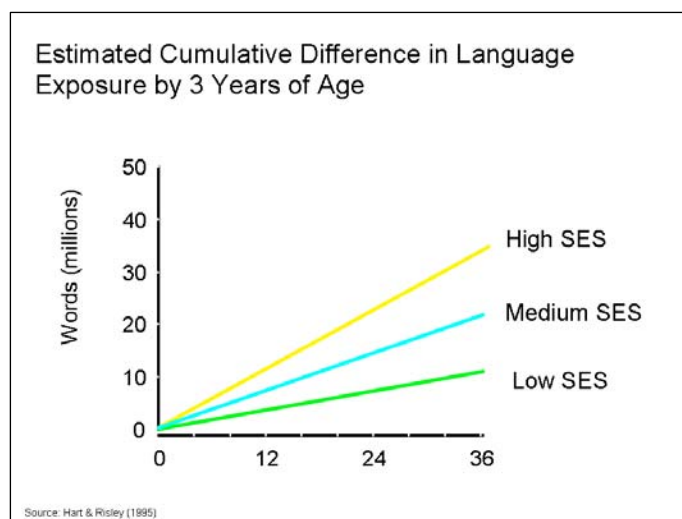


Figure 3. Hart & Risley (1995) .

Wilbert Keon identifies equity as a key social, health and economic driver. Regardless of GDP, nations with smaller gaps between the wealthiest and the poorest enjoy substantial benefits, including: higher rates of adult literacy; longer, healthier lives lived; reduced social stressors, such as crime; and greater social cohesion.

Equity is born in the earliest years of human development. Promoting equity of opportunity is a responsibility the federal government owes to all citizens. While all

governments must take an active role, only the federal government has the necessary resources to support equitable access to quality early childhood programming for all Canada's children, wherever they live.

Early learning and child care as a public good

Evidence presented by Dr. Clyde Hertzman shows that over one in four children begin school behind their peers. Many never entirely close the gap and go on to be disruptive in school, fail to graduate and are never able to fully participate in and contribute to society. As Hertzman established, Canada cannot adequately address the challenges of the new millennium while leaving a quarter of children behind.

Despite a growing understanding of the importance of the earliest stages of human development, policy and practice in early childhood lacks focus. It is the divide between what we know about early child development and what we do about it that impedes progress.

Victoria, B.C. researcher Jane Beach outlined how the divide between knowledge and practice is rooted in centuries-old policies and jurisdictional divisions.

Kindergarten remains firmly in education, a provincial/territorial responsibility, the province of educators, with a developed infrastructure, a higher proportion of qualified teachers and a clear focus on curriculum and pedagogy. Meanwhile, child care remains the subject of ongoing debate about its relative risks and benefits. Delivered by a poorly-supported and regulated market, it is more frequently portrayed as the problem, rather than a solution.

In Canada, there have been some heated political battles over where early childhood education should take place and who should be delivering it. Parents confront great difficulties negotiating the split between ‘education’ and ‘care,’ while advocates know that good education ‘cares’ and good child care ‘educates’. We need to learn from both, Beach emphasized.

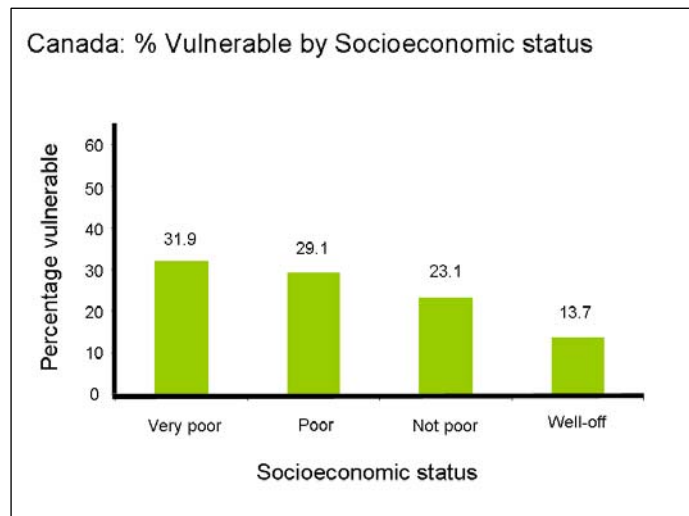
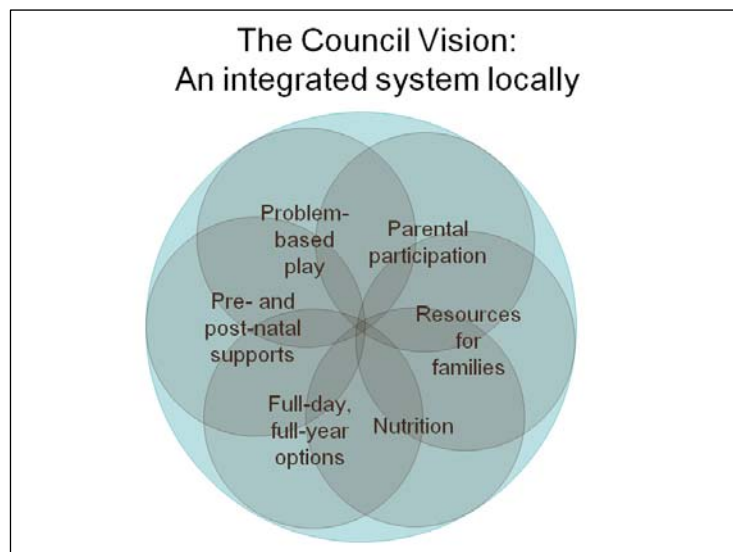


Figure 4. Reference: NLSCY/UEY (1999-2000); EDI (1999-2000) .

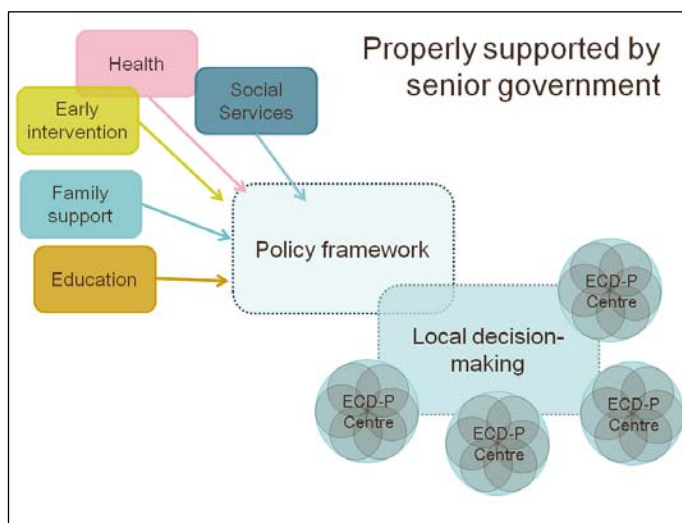


From a policy perspective, linking early childhood policy and delivery to education moves it forward as part of the public good—a resource that brings benefits to users and non users alike and is therefore deserving of public resources. As long as early learning remains a market service it will be difficult to make real progress. This is an important lesson out of the examination of early childhood systems undertaken by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation

and Development (OECD).¹ There is less accountability, more uneven supply and less access for more vulnerable populations when delivery is left to market. As the Honourable Margaret Norrie McCain told the conference: “the goal is a publicly funded, publicly driven early child development system for the public good.”

Moving Forward

In 2004 the OECD called Canada’s early childhood system a ‘dysfunctional patchwork’.² In 2006, the same year a fledging pan-Canadian early learning and child care program was abandoned, analysis exposed Canada’s investments in early childhood as the lowest among OECD nations. The 2008 Report Card by UNICEF held Canada up to the world spotlight and again found us wanting. The recently-released *Early Childhood*



Education and Care: Next Steps Senate report led by Senator Trenholme Counsell documents the journey. It recommends the appointment of a minister of state for children and youth who would set in place a framework of policies and programs to support kids and families. Also among the recommendations is the establishment of a national advisory council on children, and setting up a series of federal and provincial meetings to discuss plans for integrated child development programs.

There is an urgent need to move forward. Dr. Fraser Mustard urged officials to leap beyond the care and education divide to create a paradigm shift that turns policy chaos into coherence; to create a system of effective early childhood programs that simultaneously supports children, their families and their communities. This approach is central to children’s development, health and well-being, and to safeguarding the collective investments we make in education, health and social and economic development.

More information

For more information about the Putting Science Into Action conference, including conference presentations, go to: http://www.councilecd.ca/cecd/home.nsf/pages/sackville_home.html

¹ Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*.

² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Directorate for Education (2004). *Early Childhood Care and Education Policy: Canada Country Note*. Paris: OECD Secretariat.