stories of best practice

collected from the national research project

Full-Day Head Start:
Early Intervention in Centre-Based Child Care

This research study was funded by Child Care Visions, Human Resources Development Canada
summary of the research
Full-Day Head Start:  
Early Intervention in Centre-Based Child Care

The focus of this research study is the role of quality, centre-based child care and its potential as an early-intervention strategy within the Canadian early childhood development system.

Recent discoveries in neuroscience have identified the importance of a child’s early experience and the impact that early experience has on overall population health and economic productivity. This has led to increased public interest in the importance of investing in the health and education of very young children, ages 0-6. The focus of this investment has been on children and families at risk of poor developmental outcomes, with poverty being a leading indicator of the potential for developmental delay. High Scope, Head Start, and Early Head Start are examples of early-intervention programs that combine strategies to facilitate children's development with home visits and family support services.

There is also compelling research on the preventive social and cognitive benefits of high-quality child care. Many child care programs already serve a significant population of low-income, single-parent, working-poor families headed by women, whose children are presenting with health and mental health issues, challenging behaviour, and developmental delays. There appears to be an emerging parallel system of publicly funded, early-intervention programs along side quality, child care programs. These programs are beginning to compete with each other for limited funding and qualified staff. These conditions are leading to the fragmentation of early childhood programs and poor working relationships between child care and these targeted, early-intervention programs.

As the need for targeted, full-day intervention programs becomes increasingly clear, it is important for decision-makers to fully appreciate the educational potential of quality child care. Building early-intervention supports into existing child care programs will help avoid duplication of services and will ensure that future investment in the Canadian early childhood development system is well placed.

The purpose of this research was to answer the questions: Can quality, centre-based child care achieve the same developmental outcomes for children at risk for developmental delays as other targeted early-intervention programs? If so, what are the most effective approaches, and what additional resources and supports are required by centre-based child care to provide effective, early-intervention services for children and families?
The research identified, documented, and compared the early-intervention practices in developmental programming in quality, centre-based child care with those of Head Start. The examination included the perspective of experts, front-line workers, and families. The research also identified best practices in high-quality child care, and how it addresses the educational needs of young children from families at risk, how it provides family support, and how it monitors and assesses developmental progress.

This research study included a local, multisectoral advisory committee with representatives from local Head Start programs, child care programs, family day homes, education and training institutions, the school board, the regional children’s authority, the regional health authority, child development researchers, and local foundations with an interest in the well being of children and families. The committee served an interpretive function in the research, providing multidisciplinary expertise and commenting at key points in the development of the research about the meaning and implications of emerging findings.

Key findings

1. **Selective literature and program review** compared the practice and outcomes of quality child care with those of targeted early-intervention programs:

   - The researchers identified ten components of effective early intervention. They found these components documented in the literature for both early-intervention (Head Start) programs and for quality child care programs, which suggests a significant overlap between the two types of programs.

   - Quality child care programs include a significant practice in early-intervention. This practice is not well documented and not well resourced. All of the child care programs reviewed had a social worker or family outreach worker added to their complement of full time staff. These programs found it necessary to access additional resources and support to meet the needs of children and families in their care, thereby making their program components similar to those in Head Start programs.
2. **Delphi review** engaged 30 key informants across Canada, bringing expertise in policy development and front-line workers from quality child care programs and Head Start programs. This review:

- Confirmed what was discovered in the program review. It was difficult to draw a clear distinction between child care programs and early-intervention programs. Child care programs that are serving a population of children and families at risk had to seek additional funding to meet the needs of this population.

- Identified that front-line practice and philosophy among child care and early-intervention programs are more similar than different. Both are clearly rooted in early childhood education and care. This led to two key insights: there is an educational significance to care routines that is an integral component of early childhood practice; and the child care worker or care provider is also an early childhood educator.

- The importance of establishing a relationship of mutual respect and trust with both the child and the family was identified as the foundation upon which sustained change could be achieved. Delphi respondents identified that front-line staff were not solely responsible for developing this relationship, and that in fact, it was often the program outreach or family support workers who took the lead.

- Rather than a difference in practice between settings, the Delphi identified a range of approaches in three key areas of practice across settings:
  - **Curriculum**: whether the approach should be child-directed or teacher-directed.
  - **Parental involvement**: whether this involvement was voluntary or required.
  - **Assessment**: whether the process was based on a strengths-based analysis or a deficit analysis.

While the dominant and preferred approach to supporting learning in all settings was child-directed, the underlying factors influencing the use of these different approaches appeared to be related to the nature and extent of funding, the funding requirements for formal assessment (both for program evaluation and individual developmental assessment), and the amount of time program staff were able to spend with each child and family.
3. **Eight case studies** included four centre-based child care sites with an identified early-intervention component, and four sites that offered half-day Head Start programs. Each set of four sites included one infant, one toddler, and two preschool programs. The case studies included on-site observations, interviews with parents and staff, and a review of documentation processes. This phase of the research confirmed through observation what the Delphi panel reported, and enabled researchers to include the perspective of families. Five key themes emerged from the case studies:

- The importance of a trusting, respectful relationship between program staff and families to ensure that children feel safe and secure, and parents feel confident the needs of their children are being attended to.

- The importance of a strengths-based, capacity building approach that focuses on assessing what the children are learning and how they are improving, rather than on assessing deficits and how they are failing.

- Cultural diversity is not being well supported in either child care programs or early-intervention programs. Although programs did include some materials that acknowledged diversity, these materials were not being well integrated into programming.

- A multidisciplinary team of professionals is needed to support early childhood program staff. Key to this team is a front-line family support person, who works alongside the director and early childhood staff in partnership with parents.

- Child care settings face significant barriers when trying to implement early-intervention practices in their centres. Child care centres lack supportive social policy, adequate funding and resources, and qualified staff. As a result, child care workers have neither the time nor the resources to dedicate to the population of children and families at risk in their care.
4. Comparative analysis collected data from both the Delphi panel and the case studies to compare Head Start programs with quality, centre-based child care programs. The comparison revealed that front-line practice is fundamentally the same. There is remarkable agreement in the field across all settings about what constitutes best practice in working with children and families. However, the following differences were revealed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Head Start</th>
<th>Child Care</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length of Program</strong></td>
<td>Half day</td>
<td>Full day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Funding</strong></td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Parent fees; fundraising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Salaries</strong></td>
<td>Higher wages</td>
<td>Lower wages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Developmental</strong></td>
<td>Funded, Diagnostic tools, often focused on</td>
<td>Not funded. Strength-based tools focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessments</strong></td>
<td>developmental deficits</td>
<td>on competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Curriculum</strong></td>
<td>More formal; tends to be more teacher-directed</td>
<td>Less formal; tends to be more child-directed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Program Evaluation</strong></td>
<td>Funded. Required</td>
<td>Not funded. Not required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intake</strong></td>
<td>Developmental screening</td>
<td>Universal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multidisciplinary</strong></td>
<td>Built into staffing or available via consultation</td>
<td>Difficult to access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experts</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional</strong></td>
<td>Available</td>
<td>Generally unavailable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Development and Support</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parental Involvement</strong></td>
<td>Intentional involvement; generally a requirement</td>
<td>Voluntary; ad hoc</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. **Best Practices** are those that are commonly understood to be effective and/or promising in working with young children and their families. Practices identified through this research (across all settings) reflect a focus on the capacities of children, rather than their deficits. These practices represent an interpretation of the cumulative results of this research project, and are supported by multiple data sources. They were identified in three key areas:

- An early childhood curriculum to support children's learning and school readiness.
- Working with families to respond to their needs.
- Monitoring and assessing developmental progress.

An added benefit of this research study has been the translation of these best practices into a workbook, a practical guide for front-line child care workers, so they may begin integrating and implementing these practices into their current programs.
The role of centre-based child care in Canada's early childhood development system

Good early childhood practices benefit all children. Whether the programs are full- or half-day, whether they are targeted at children and families at risk or are universally available, the principles and best practices identified in this study will benefit all children in all child care settings. However, current public policy and funding frameworks that support child care and early-intervention programs tend to inhibit the universal application of best practices, rather than support them.

Centre-based child care programs have the potential to meet the needs of a diverse group of children and families, with a range of individual and family support needs. Most importantly, these programs have the potential to develop stable, long term, trusting relationships with families that are key to long-term developmental benefits for children.

Centre-based child care programs are also well positioned to provide the additional services and supports needed by children and families at risk. However, the following supports, which are found in Head Start programs, are not typically available in centre-based child care settings, yet these supports are essential to ensuring early-intervention is successful:

- Full time outreach/family liaison worker on staff.
- Timely access to formal assessment/developmental screening.
- Timely access to multidisciplinary support and expertise (social workers, mental health therapists, occupational and physiotherapists, speech and language pathologists, and community health professionals).
- Staff resources to support individual child developmental assessment and program evaluation and planning.
- Access to relevant, on-going, professional development and support for front-line child care workers.

The evidence supporting this research is qualitative, rather than quantitative. Much of the data is anecdotal and observational. Every effort was made to clearly articulate the methodology, to conduct the analysis systematically, and to validate the interpretations using multiple methods. The researchers believe these findings fairly represent the considered thoughts and collective wisdom of leaders in Canadian early childhood care and education. The findings are based on documentation of what people say they do and believe, which was confirmed by observation in the field. Thematic analysis, however, does remain a subjective endeavour. It is hoped that these findings will lead to intense scrutiny and energetic, engaged dialogue.
Recommendations arising from the research

**For decision makers:**
To build an effective and cost-efficient system of early childhood development services and supports in Canada, one that is equitable as well as responsive to a range of family needs and issues:

1. Rationalize public funding, evaluation and standards, and training requirements for all early childhood programming, regardless of setting:
   a) Add Head Start supports to existing child care settings to meet the needs of those families whose children require child care in addition to Head Start.
   
   b) Extend Head Start programming into existing child care settings to maximize and sustain the benefits of early intervention. Strengthen the linkages and working relationships between these agencies.
   
   c) Provide resources for systematic evaluation of all early childhood programs.
   
   d) Support initiatives that enhance training in early intervention and family support in the field of early childhood development.
   
   e) Standardize the training requirements for early childhood educators working in all early childhood settings.

2. Involve the expertise of early childhood educators and child care workers in policy decisions about public investment in young children to ensure that policy supports best practice at the front line.

**For the early childhood profession:**
1. Promote the value of a developmentally integrated approach to early learning, one that is predominantly child-directed (emergent curriculum) as opposed to a more traditional academic or cognitive approach.

2. In collaboration with the research and training community, develop formal curriculum resources to support an integrated, child-directed curriculum. Evaluate the outcomes of this approach with at-risk children, relative to school readiness as well as overall development.

**For the research and training community:**
1. Create developmentally appropriate, formal assessment tools that are capable of assessing competency as well as deficiency. Develop assessment frameworks that integrate information from a variety of sources, both formal and informal. Observation is a critical component of any assessment of young children. Ensure that this is properly resourced.

2. Further research the educational benefits of child care and its developmental benefits. Identify the elements of, and develop mechanisms to measure, the educational benefits of quality child care.

3. Research the impact of good child care on parenting practice and the link between the confident parent and the competent parent. Identify key elements of good parenting practices.