

What would it take...

...for every child in Canada to be learning
foundational literacy skills by the age of five?



Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ***What Would it Take*** report provides a comprehensive assessment of what is needed to ensure that all children in Canada can develop the pre-literacy skills they need to learn foundational literacy skills by the age of five. Guided by scientific evidence, the report describes the structures, resources, and stakeholders that will need to be engaged, and examines how governments can enhance the quality and capacity of Canada’s Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system to meet this goal.

Our report’s findings are clear. Effective pre-literacy programs must offer young children systematic instruction, provide universal access to ECEC, be guided by high-quality and evidenced-based curricula, and employ teaching approaches that abide by the principles of structured literacy. To learn the foundational literacy skills by the age of five, children’s social, emotional, physical, and economic well-being must be nurtured.

Implementing such a system across the country will require the engagement of all levels of governments to generate Canadian evidence of effective teaching strategies, to translate new evidence into practice, to increase the ECEC system’s capacity to deliver, and to revise provincial policies to ensure the provision of high-quality programming in the early years.

PRE-LITERACY SKILLS IN THE EARLY YEARS

Pre-literacy skills are the set of basic skills that enable young children to understand and express themselves through language. From 0 to 5 years of age, young children are learning how language works: how letters can represent sounds, how the sounds they hear can be linked together to make words, how the words they learn can be used to express their needs, and how

	(pre) Reading	(pre) Writing	Oral Language
Pre-literacy Skills <i>(Wright et al., 2022)</i>	Print navigation	Emergent writing	Oral language
	Letter-sound linking & alphabets		Listening & Comprehension
Foundational Literacy Skills <i>(National Reading Panel, 2000; Hudspith Heppner, 2017; Kim et al., 2012)</i>	Phonics	Handwriting	Phonemic awareness
	Fluency	Spelling	Vocabulary
	Reading Comprehension		

marks and images they draw can impart meaning. These early experiences with the use of language can be classified as pre-reading, pre-writing, or oral language skills.

As visualized above, pre-literacy skills are part of a continuum of literacy knowledge and skills. Although we can delineate distinct skills, pre-literacy—and literacy skills more broadly—are interconnected. Each skill builds and enhances the other: oral language will help children understand sounds and how they connect to letters; pre-reading and print navigation can help children understand how print works as they develop their emergent writing skills. Improvements in one skill enhance a child’s other literacy skills.

TEACHING LITERACY

Over the first five years of their life, it is essential that children be immersed in an environment that enables and encourages them to practise their pre-literacy skills and that provides meaningful oral language experiences. Doing so will ensure that children are ready to learn the foundational literacy skills taught in school.

There are different approaches toward literacy instruction, with varying degree of scientific evidence in support of their use. Our report contrasts balanced literacy and structured literacy. Canadian jurisdictions are increasingly moving away from balanced literacy toward structured literacy as a teaching approach in their K-12 curriculum, consistent with scientific evidence demonstrating that a “majority of students learn to read better with structured teaching of basic language skills” (International Dyslexia Association, 2020, p. 1).



Balanced literacy

Belief that children develop oral language and reading develops naturally when they are immersed in an environment that promotes language and literacy (Patzelt, 1995).

Approaches include learning through discovery and acquiring meaning through context and experience, such as the three-cueing method.

Proponents believe that children learn language by using language, and meaning is more important than grammar (Patzelt, 1995).



Structured literacy

SL holds that children learn best when they are taught literacy skills through structured instruction (International Dyslexia Association [IDA], 2020).

SL advocates for the integration of four teaching principles in literacy pedagogy (IDA, 2020):

- Literacy instruction that is explicit, guided, and routine
 - Language concepts are taught systematically and in sequence (from easy to difficult)
 - Interactive and multimodal learning is encouraged
 - Instruction is adjusted based on student responses and progress is monitored.
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THE BENEFITS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Evidence is unambiguous that high quality early education benefits all children and is capable of changing life outcomes (McCuaig, 2012). Attendance in ECEC is associated with enhanced literacy skills, with the greatest impact on vulnerable children—children with learning disabilities or living in challenging home environments—and those living in poverty (Akbari, 2020; Philpott, 2019).

Investments in early childhood education provide long-term economic benefits for individuals and for society. The Atkinson Centre estimates that investments in Canada’s ECEC sector have one of the highest returns to society, equivalent to between \$2 to \$7 for every dollar spent (Atkinson Centre, 2021, p. 9).

All children stand to benefit from a learning environment that offers high-quality programming, systematic instruction, positive interpersonal relationships with trusted adults, and an integrative learning environment that brings together educators, specialists, and children and their family (McCuaig, 2012).

KEY CHALLENGES IN THE CANADIAN ECEC SECTOR

Developing a child’s pre-literacy skills is crucial for their capacity to learn foundational literacy skills. But providing all children with equitable access to child care spaces, effective pedagogical resources, and required supports for learning remains a challenge in Canada. The report outlines several challenges that must be addressed to ensure all children in Canada will be learning the five foundational literacy skills by the age of five.

Not enough spaces in existing ECEC programs to meet demand

Nearly half of children in Canada not yet attending kindergarten live in a “child care desert,” a community in which there are more than three children for each licensed child care space (Macdonald & Friendly, 2023).

Recent legislation and budgetary provisions brought forward by the federal government have sought to increase access to high-quality child care, while reducing child care fees. The initiatives have contributed to an increased demand for regulated child care spaces, which may have further exacerbated the lack of child care spaces (Friendly et al., 2024).

Financial and systemic barriers prevent access to ECEC programs

Child care use in Canada is significantly associated with income (Findlay et al., 2021). In effect, low-income households are 12 per cent less likely to use child care than other households (Findlay et al., 2021). According to the OECD (2017), the prohibitive cost of ECEC is a key challenge for families in several provinces and territories and is particularly acute in rural and remote communities where the availability of ECEC programs is comparatively lower than in urban centres (Friendly et al., 2023).

Improving the conditions and the quality of ECEC programs without addressing the economic and structural barriers that prevent families from affording ECEC would risk leaving behind roughly half of the children in Canada.

Affordability of ECEC programs

The availability of spaces in ECEC centres and the affordability of the ECEC system are two sides of a scalability problem. On the one hand, out-of-pocket cost of attending ECEC programs must be low enough to allow universal participation, but high enough to cover its operating costs.

By lowering the cost of attending ECEC, governments are hoping to induce demand for services by making them more affordable. However, more demand for spaces has the downside of increasing the costs of the system: expanding demand for workers increases wages; larger spaces to occupy children increases the cost of rents; more supplies, toys, and resources increases operating budgets.

Increasing spaces without compromising quality calls not only for expansion of adequate physical spaces and equipment, but for greater investment to ensure centres can scale up their operations.

Recruitment and retention of qualified ECEs

Increasing demand for ECEC has highlighted the shortage of early childhood educators (ECEs) across the country. Recruitment and retention efforts have been compromised by structural factors such as low wages, patchy and often limited provision of employment benefits, limited opportunities for career advancement, and unfavourable working conditions.

Despite ongoing efforts at various levels of government to improve recruitment and retention of qualified ECEs, including significant investments aimed at increasing training opportunities and reducing the cost of training, the sector is struggling to retain qualified ECEs (Macdonald & Friendly, 2023; ESDC, 2019).

Inconsistent ECEC policies across the country

ECEC policy in Canada is a responsibility of the provinces, territories, and Indigenous communities. While the federal government has set broad targets for the expansion of accessible and affordable child care, the regulations, design, content, and delivery of ECEC programs remain at the subnational level (ESDC, 2017).

The result is a national patchwork of requirements that are similar but far from identical across jurisdictions (ESDC, 2019). Thus, setting common goals, including those set out by the *What Would it Take...* report, can be difficult to meet.

Lack of a high-quality early years' curriculum for pre-literacy skills

Canada lacks a high-quality, evidence-based pre-literacy curriculum for the early years. While Canada's federated structure can explain the absence of a common national curriculum, there are opportunities for Canada to adopt science-informed, developmentally appropriate principles and guidelines for literacy instruction, starting in the early years.

Subnational jurisdictions should coordinate and share evidence for new early learning frameworks that support effective literacy and pre-literacy instruction, and that provide clear learning objectives along a pathway from the early years to kindergarten.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many changes are needed to ensure that every child in Canada has acquired the pre-literacy skills they need to learn before they can start learning how to read. We propose several interconnected recommendations that aim to enhance and transform Canada's ECEC system.

Underlying these recommendations are some common threads: changes to the ECEC system should be evidence-based, adapted to a Canadian context, and comprehensive in scope. Selective or piecemeal implementation of proposed recommendations will fail to achieve the desired transformation.

Recommendation 1: Develop and Disseminate Canadian Evidence

Canada needs to invest in growing a national, representative body of evidence on effective pre-literacy strategies for young children from 0 to 5 years of age. To meet this aim, the federal government should consider the establishment of a dedicated Early Skills Centre to oversee, coordinate, and disseminate findings of early years' research projects. The establishment of such

a centre would create the mechanism for issuing funding for research projects covering a broad range of early learning topics, extending beyond pre-literacy.

Research should aim to develop and test curricula that are applicable to a Canadian context, with diverse researchers and developers. The inclusion of a clearinghouse of effective evidence within the Early Skills Centre will ensure that knowledge generated is accessible to stakeholders across the country.

Recommendation 2: Mobilize New Knowledge and Insights Into Action

Knowledge translation—from research to practise—takes time. *Access to and availability of* rigorous evidence is not sufficient to bring about the necessary transformations at the local level, at least not in the absence of intentional efforts. The mobilization and transformation of knowledge into practice are part of a long-term endeavour that includes relationship building, organizational capacity building, and leadership development.

In the short term, governments and ECEC organizations should start planning how knowledge can be mobilized, which includes the creation of a Plan of Action, a national information campaign, and a network of early literacy champions who can bring about bottom-up pressure on policy-makers to make necessary changes in early literacy.

The information campaign should never lose sight of its aim: to persuade caregivers, educators, and policy-makers that focusing on pre-literacy skills is essential to ensure a foundation of learning for all children.

Recommendation 3: Revise Subnational Early Learning Policy

Early Learning Frameworks are often used to inform, guide, and develop policies that support the ECEC system. Provinces, territories (PTs) and Indigenous communities should commit to making the necessary changes to their respective organizational and occupational policies governing their early learning systems.

Revision of ELFs need to incorporate more specific references to the instruction of pre-literacy skills and the expected learning outcomes at every developmental stage. In doing so, jurisdictions can clearly prioritize the skills children must acquire to be learning foundational literacy skills by the age of five.

PTs need a plan to address systemic recruitment, training, and retention challenges of ECE professionals currently affecting ECEC systems across Canada to ensure the successful expansion of the system.

Recommendation 4: Expand Early Learning to Reach all Children

Access to ECEC programs—from infancy to school age—should be recognized as a right for all children, one that can justifiably be supported by public policy and, to the extent necessary, receive public financing.

To make it easier for policy-makers and the public to recognize ECEC as a right, ECEC should be integrated within the primary school system and considered an integral step within the broader education system. Where full integration is not possible, the connections between ECEC and prekindergarten or kindergarten programs could be strengthened, especially with a view toward facilitating children’s transitions into the school system.

Policy-makers also need to support evidence-informed educational programming in all environments where children learn, which includes in the home with their caregiver or family members, in an ECEC centre, or in a facilitated caregiver-led drop-in program (e.g., Strong Start).

When it comes to needed reforms to early childhood systems, the policy priority list is long. All levels of government will need to commit to increase their investments in ECEC. An Early Skills Centre would be well positioned to provide a jurisdictional analysis of the economic and social benefits that society could expect to see following the transformational change proposed by this report.

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