

The Role of Early Literacy in Early Learning and Child Care: A Survey of Early Childhood Educators

As of February 25, 2022



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Introduction

In September 2021, the Canadian Children's Literacy Foundation (CCLF) and the Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCF) partnered on a national survey of early childhood educators (ECEs) to better understand the current role of early literacy and learning in child care settings in Canada, and to identify gaps and opportunities that may exist.

The survey was shared with all of CCCF's approximately 8,500 members. Of those, 1,108 responded to the survey and shared their professional experiences working in the field of early learning and child care. The respondents were well-distributed across Canada and generally reflective of the ECE workforce, hailing from a variety of settings including child care, kindergarten classrooms, and community centres that offer programming that children and families attend together.

As this report will discuss, ECEs need and want more training on the *why* and *how* of developing children's early literacy skills. And the survey results offer valuable insights into what steps Canada and its provincial and territorial partners can collectively take to build high-quality, accessible, and affordable early learning and child care systems, with well-trained ECEs at their core.

The survey collected data from ECEs regarding:

- Their understanding of the impact of early literacy skills on early childhood development
- Supports they are providing to enable early literacy skills development in children
- Frequency of conversations with families about building early literacy skills at home
- Feelings of preparedness and confidence in supporting the early literacy development of young children, both directly and indirectly through interactions with families
- Experience with and interest in early literacy professional development

A number of factors make this the right time for this survey of ECEs across Canada:

- Historic commitments by the Government of Canada, provincial and territorial governments, and Indigenous communities to developing a high-quality, affordable, and accessible Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system and an Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework where all Indigenous children have the opportunity to access high-quality, culturally-rooted early learning and child care programming
- Clear and compelling evidence that well-trained ECEs are integral to developing high-quality early learning and child care systems, and that children in high-quality programs are more likely to have stronger literacy skills when they reach 15 than those who had been in lower-quality

programs, particularly for children in lower income families¹

- Over one million children in Canada do not have the literacy skills they need to reach their full potential² — many of these children are starting their reading journey behind and staying behind,³ with pandemic-related disruptions making the situation worse⁴
- Throughout the turmoil of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of literacy skills has become irrefutable as literacy is at the root of resilience⁵ — including emotional, social and economic.⁶

Together we have a tremendous, historic opportunity to develop and deliver a world-class early learning and child care system that enables Canada's children to have the best possible start and become the most literate in the world. Children with well-developed and nurtured literacy skills can more readily access their huge potential, which has a direct benefit to Canada's future. Core to achieving this important aim is providing ECEs with the training they want and need to better support children's development of early literacy skills.

¹ OECD. (2018). *Early Learning Matters*. <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/Early-Learning-Matters-Project-Brochure.pdf>

² Deloitte LLP. (2020, November). *An Economic Overview of Children's Literacy in Canada*. <https://childrensliteracy.ca/cclf/media/PDFs/Deloitte-Report-An-Economic-Overview-of-Children-s-Literacy-in-Canada.pdf>

³ Ibid.

⁴ B.C. Centre for Disease Control. (2021, November 23). BC COVID-19 Survey on Population Experiences, Action and Knowledge: SPEAK Survey Round 2 Results. <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/bccdc/viz/BCCOVID-19SPEAKSurveyRound2/BCCOVID-19SPEAKresults>

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Pandemic putting young readers behind the learning curve, says education expert. (2020, November 19). University of Alberta: Folio. Retrieved February 15, 2021, from <https://www.ualberta.ca/folio/2020/11/pandemic-putting-young-readers-behind-the-learning-curve-says-education-expert.html>

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Statistics Canada. (2020, July 9). *Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadian families and children*. Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/daily-quotidien/200709/dq200709a-eng.pdf?st=CxdsVAyK>

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⁵ Christina Clark and Anne Teravainen-Goff. (2018, September). *Mental wellbeing, reading and writing*. https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Mental_wellbeing_reading_and_writing_2017-18_-_final.pdf

⁶ Frontier College. (2021). *Literacy and the economy: The road to recovery*.

<https://www.frontiercollege.ca/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=b45522d5-16a7-49e8-9afb-7bb001d1deba>

Key findings and insights

Early childhood educators of all ages and in all settings need and want additional support in developing the early literacy and language skills of the children under their care.

Many ECEs self-report limits in their understanding of early literacy milestones and their confidence in supporting young children’s literacy and language development.

- Only 25 per cent report having an excellent understanding of early language and literacy milestones for children under five
- Only 28 per cent report an excellent understanding of why reading, talking and singing support early literacy skills
- Only 38 per cent report feeling confident that their professional training prepared them well to engage children in early literacy activities
- Only 38 per cent report feeling confident in supporting the early literacy development of the children they work with
- Only 35 per cent report feeling confident in identifying a concern with a child’s language development
- More than 40 per cent report that they think early literacy exposure is only “moderately important” or “slightly important” to achieving developmental milestones around language and social-emotional development, whereas research shows it’s crucial⁷

Most ECEs surveyed are not able to fully support the early literacy development of the children in their care because of gaps in training and resources.

- Fewer than 50 per cent of respondents engage the children they work with in early literacy activities every day, while over 35 per cent do so once a month or less frequently
- Though nearly 72 per cent of ECEs talk to families about ways to support their child’s early literacy at home at least once a week, only about 36 per cent feel confident sharing advice about ways to support early literacy development

There is a huge gap between the early literacy professional development ECEs have received and what they want.

- Only 10 per cent of respondents report have participated in any professional development around early literacy, compared to over 99 per cent of respondents who would like to
- Importantly, 86 per cent of respondents feel they most need additional professional development around the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s early literacy and language development

⁷ The Reading Agency. (2015, June). *Literature review: The impact of reading for pleasure and empowerment*. BOP Consulting.

Context and methodology

The survey was distributed electronically throughout the Canadian Child Care Federation’s (CCCCF) network to approximately 8,500 of its members by email and on social media platforms. The survey ran from September 1 to 20, 2021, with both English and French language versions available. The 29 questions took, on average, fewer than five minutes to complete. In the end, 1,108 responses were collected, a completion rate of approximately 13 per cent.

The title of “early childhood educator” (ECE) was not expressly defined in the questionnaire but the survey and related communications indicated that it is inclusive of all early years professionals, not just those individuals with a formal designation. The self-reported professional roles of respondents include early childhood educator (35 percent), early childhood educator assistant (31 percent), child care centre manager/director (31 percent), and other professionals working in ELCC settings (3 per cent).

Please see Appendix A for a detailed breakdown of the sample, including the jurisdictions in which respondents work, workplace setting, educational background, age, and tenure in early childhood education. The survey respondents were, on average, younger than the ECE workforce as a whole, and less likely to have formal training in early childhood education than the national average. The respondents were disproportionately working in jurisdictions with smaller populations (e.g., Northwest Territories and New Brunswick) than jurisdictions with larger populations (e.g., Quebec, Ontario and Alberta). However, the responses of ECEs in this survey generally didn’t vary substantially based on the type of training they had or the jurisdiction in which they work.

While there was no definition of “early literacy” used in the survey, the survey and related communications indicated that the term pertains to the continuum of linguistic, physical, and emotional skills that children develop from birth on their journey to becoming readers. Examples of children developing these skills include building awareness of words and sounds, enjoying stories, and learning how to hold and turn pages of a board book.⁸

For context, in the early learning environments in which the respondents are working, activities to build a child’s early literacy skills may include the following:

- Reading and writing with kids⁹

⁸ Shaw, A., Canadian Paediatric Society, & Early Years Task Force. (2021, January 27). *Read, Speak, Sing: Promoting early literacy in the health care setting*. Canadian Paediatric Society. Retrieved February 17, 2022, from <https://cps.ca/en/documents/position/read-speak-sing-promoting-literacy>

⁹ Shaw, A., Canadian Paediatric Society, & Early Years Task Force. (2021, January 27). *Read, Speak, Sing: Promoting early literacy in the health care setting*.

Government of New Brunswick, Department of Social Development. (2019). *Communication and Literacies: Professional Support Document*. <https://www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Departments/ed/pdf/ELCC/ECHDPE/communication-and-literacies.pdf>

Government of New Brunswick, Department of Social Development. (2008, March 31). *New Brunswick Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care*.

<https://www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Departments/ed/pdf/ELCC/ECHDPE/nb-curriculum-framework.pdf>

- Storytelling, dancing and playing¹⁰
- Talking about pictures seen in a book or via digital technology¹¹
- Holding and turning the pages of a book¹²
- Singing rhymes and songs¹³
- Engaging children in conversations during routines and events¹⁴
- Talking with children about what they see in their surroundings, the outdoors or their local communities¹⁵
- Surrounding children with words from their home languages¹⁶
- Providing children with the opportunity to socialize and engage with intergenerational community members¹⁷

Each child has their own developmental journey with many influences, including the other children and adults in their lives, and their communities' cultural and linguistic traditions.¹⁸ To fully support children and families, ECEs need culturally appropriate professional development opportunities, which include building an understanding of the nature and role of developmental milestones to the child's family and communities.¹⁹ Such training should also draw upon the lived experiences of ECEs, to better support them in bringing all their knowledge to their teaching.²⁰ By working with partners across sectors, we can ensure ECEs have the tools and training they need to build a strong foundation of skills for the children in their care.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health. (2013). *Messages from the Heart: Caring for our children. A National Showcase on Aboriginal Child Rearing*. <https://www.nccih.ca/docs/health/RPT-MessageHeartCaringChildren-EN.pdf>
Shaw, A., Canadian Paediatric Society, & Early Years Task Force. (2021, January 27). *Read, Speak, Sing: Promoting early literacy in the health care setting*.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health. (2013). *Messages from the Heart: Caring for our children. A National Showcase on Aboriginal Child Rearing*.

Lindstrom, G., Choate, P., Bastien, L., Weasel Traveller, A., Breaker, S., Breaker, C., Good Striker, W., and Good Striker, E. (2016). *Nistawatsimin: Exploring First Nations parenting: A literature review and expert consultation with Blackfoot Elders*.

¹⁸ Cameron-Faulkner, T., Malik, N., Streele, C., Coretta, S., Serratrice, L., & Lieven, E. (2021). A cross-cultural analysis of early prelinguistic gesture development and its relationship to language development. *Child Development*, 92(1), 273-290. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13406>

Huang, Ching-Yu. (2018, July 19). *How culture influences children's development*. The Conversation. Retrieved February 17, 2022, from <https://theconversation.com/how-culture-influences-childrens-development-99791>

¹⁹ College of Early Childhood Educators. (2020, October). *Practice Guideline: Diversity and Culture*. https://www.college-ecce.ca/en/Documents/Practice_Guideline_Diversity_Culture.pdf

Academy of Pediatric Physical Therapy. (2018). *Motor development variations across cultures: Implications for culturally competent and family-centred pediatric care* [Resource/Fact Sheet]. <https://pediatricapta.org/includes/fact-sheets/pdfs/18%20Motor%20Dev%20Variations%20Across%20Cultures%20FS.pdf>

²⁰ College of Early Childhood Educators. (2020, July). *Practice Guideline: Pedagogical Practice*. https://www.college-ecce.ca/en/Documents/Practice_Guideline_Pedagogical_Practice.pdf

Early Childhood Community Development Centre. (2020, May). Esteem: Customized Professional Learning Opportunities. https://eccdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/esteem_customized_apr2020_web.pdf

Section 1: ECEs' confidence and knowledge in supporting early literacy and development

About 40 per cent of respondents think early literacy is only moderately or slightly important to achieving developmental milestones around language and social-emotional.²¹ This demonstrates a training opportunity, as research shows that early literacy is indeed crucial to these forms of development. And while over 60 per cent of ECEs recognize the importance of exposure to literacy for children's development, 64 per cent of ECEs do *not* feel confident identifying a concern with a child's language development or sharing advice with families on how to support their child's literacy development. Perhaps some of these findings are a product of the fact that only 25 per cent of respondents feel that they have excellent knowledge of early literacy and language milestones.

The questions asked in this section of the survey spanned a range of topics:

1. How confident are you that your professional training prepared you well for engaging children in early literacy activities?
2. How confident are you in supporting the early literacy development of the children you work with?
3. How would you rate your knowledge of early language and literacy milestones for children under five years old?
4. How would you rate your knowledge of WHY talking, reading and singing support a child's early literacy skills?
5. How important do you think early literacy exposure in the early years is in a child's language development?
6. How important do you think early literacy exposure in the early years is in a child's socio-emotional development?
7. How important do you think early literacy exposure in the early years is in a child's brain development in the early years?
8. How confident do you feel identifying a concern with a child's (under five years old) language development?

²¹ The Reading Agency. (2015, June). *Literature review: The impact of reading for pleasure and empowerment*. BOP Consulting.

Question 1: How confident are you that your professional training prepared you well for engaging children in early literacy activities?

Survey results indicate that 62 per cent of respondents do not feel confident that their professional training effectively prepared them to engage children in early literacy activities, with 30 per cent reporting no confidence and 32 per cent reporting feeling mildly confident with doing so (see Figure 1). Only 38 per cent of ECEs report feeling confident that the professional training they received prepared them well for engaging in early literacy activities (see Figure 2).

How confident are you that your professional training prepared you well for engaging children in early literacy activities?

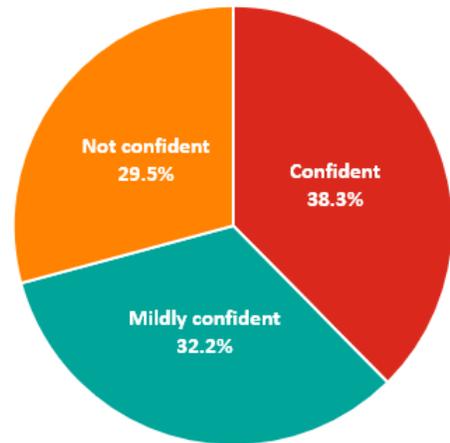


Figure 1: ECE confidence as a result of professional training

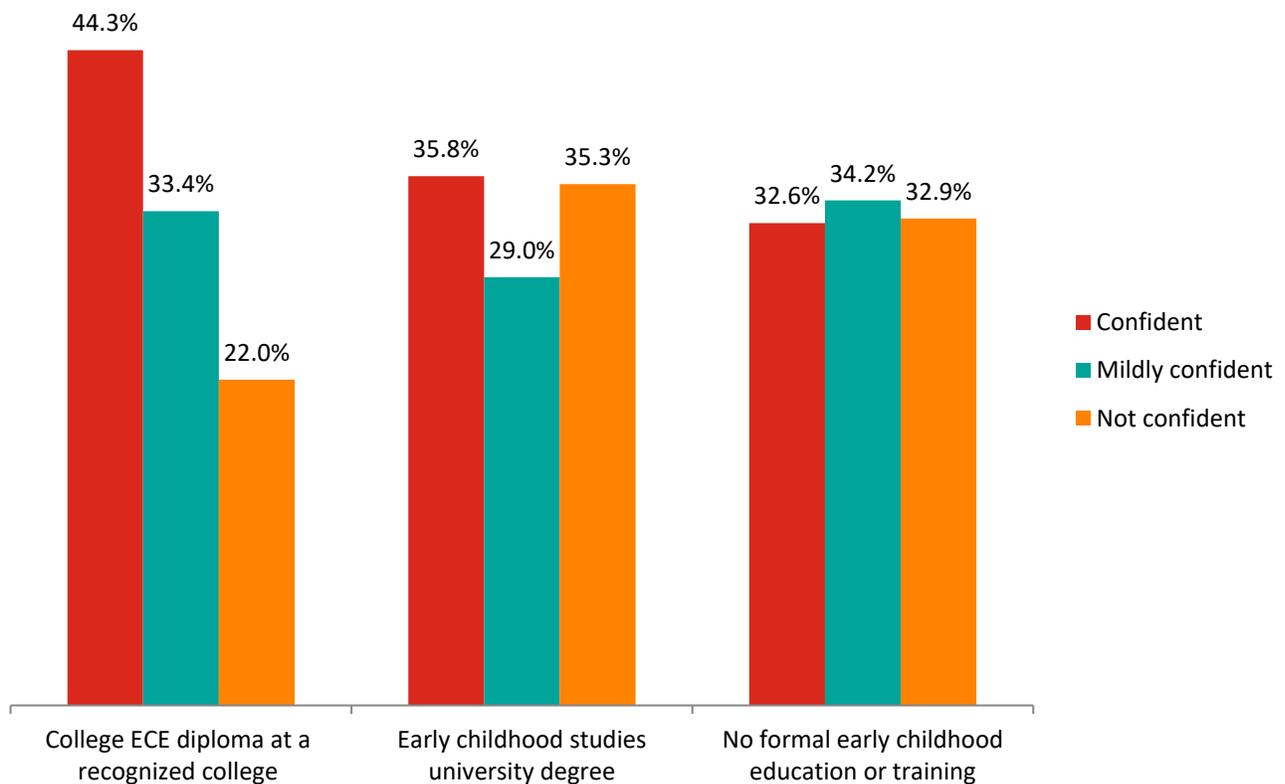


Figure 2: ECE confidence by education level

Question 2: How confident are you in supporting the early literacy development of the children you work with?

Only 38 per cent of ECEs feel confident in supporting early literacy development of children they work with. The survey found 33 per cent report feeling mildly confident and 29 per cent not feeling confident: at least 62 per cent of ECEs do not feel fully prepared to support early literacy development of the children they work with (see Figure 3).

How confident are you in supporting the early literacy development of the children you work with?

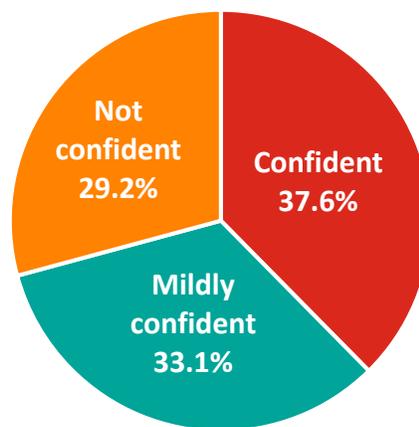


Figure 3: ECE confidence in supporting early literacy development

Type of educational training is a factor in professional confidence as well. More respondents who earned an early childhood education diploma from a college reported feeling confident in supporting early literacy development (42 per cent) than their counterparts with a university degree in early childhood studies (35 per cent) or those with no formal ECE education or training (33 per cent) (see Figure 4).

Lacking that confidence can have a negative effect on the ECEs and the care they provide. “Having professional confidence connects many things: joy, success, reward and the desire to learn more. Most importantly, it creates a professional spirit for the early educator to embrace.”²² Confidence is also a key component in educator retention, a key consideration for the health of the sector as a whole.²³ The evidence for investing in building up that confidence is clear, for the benefit of both ECEs and the children they work with.

²² Penn State Extension. (n.d.). *Professional confidence*. Better Kid Care. Retrieved November 16, 2021, from <https://extension.psu.edu/programs/betterkidcare/early-care/tip-pages/all/professional-confidence>.

²³ Anderson, E.M. (2013) Preparing the Next Generation of Early Childhood Teachers: The Emerging Role of Interprofessional Education and Collaboration in Teacher Education, *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 34:1, 23-35, DOI: 10.1080/10901027.2013.758535 as cited in Ingriselli, J. and Schempp, K. (2019, Fall). *The Importance of Early Childhood Educator Mental Health & Well-Being: A guide to supporting educators* [PowerPoint presentation]. <https://educatingtogether.wordpress.com>

How confident are you in supporting the early literacy development of the children you work with?

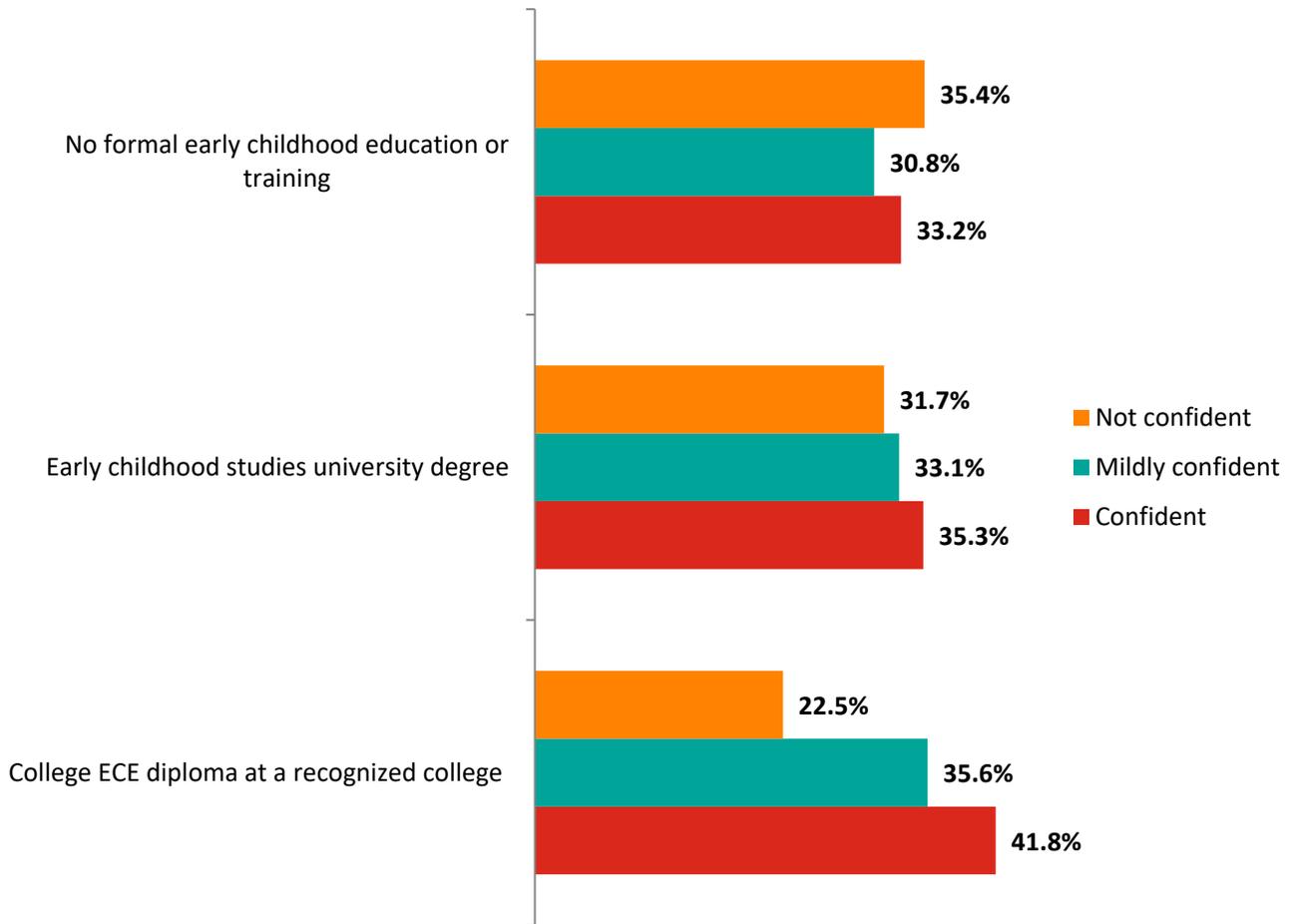


Figure 4: ECE confidence in early literacy development by level of education

“I believe in exposing children to literacy in multiple ways throughout the day in a more fluid way, and through play and experiences rather than through work sheets, flash cards and a structured manner. It needs to be developmentally appropriate and through the interest of the child.”

— Early childhood educator, Licensed child care centre, Alberta

Question 3: How would you rate your knowledge of early language and literacy milestones for children under five years old?

Almost 55 per cent of respondents rated their knowledge of early language and literacy milestones for children under five as good or excellent. However, 22 per cent of respondents indicated a poor knowledge level of early language and literacy milestones, a significant group who would benefit from additional training (see Figure 5).

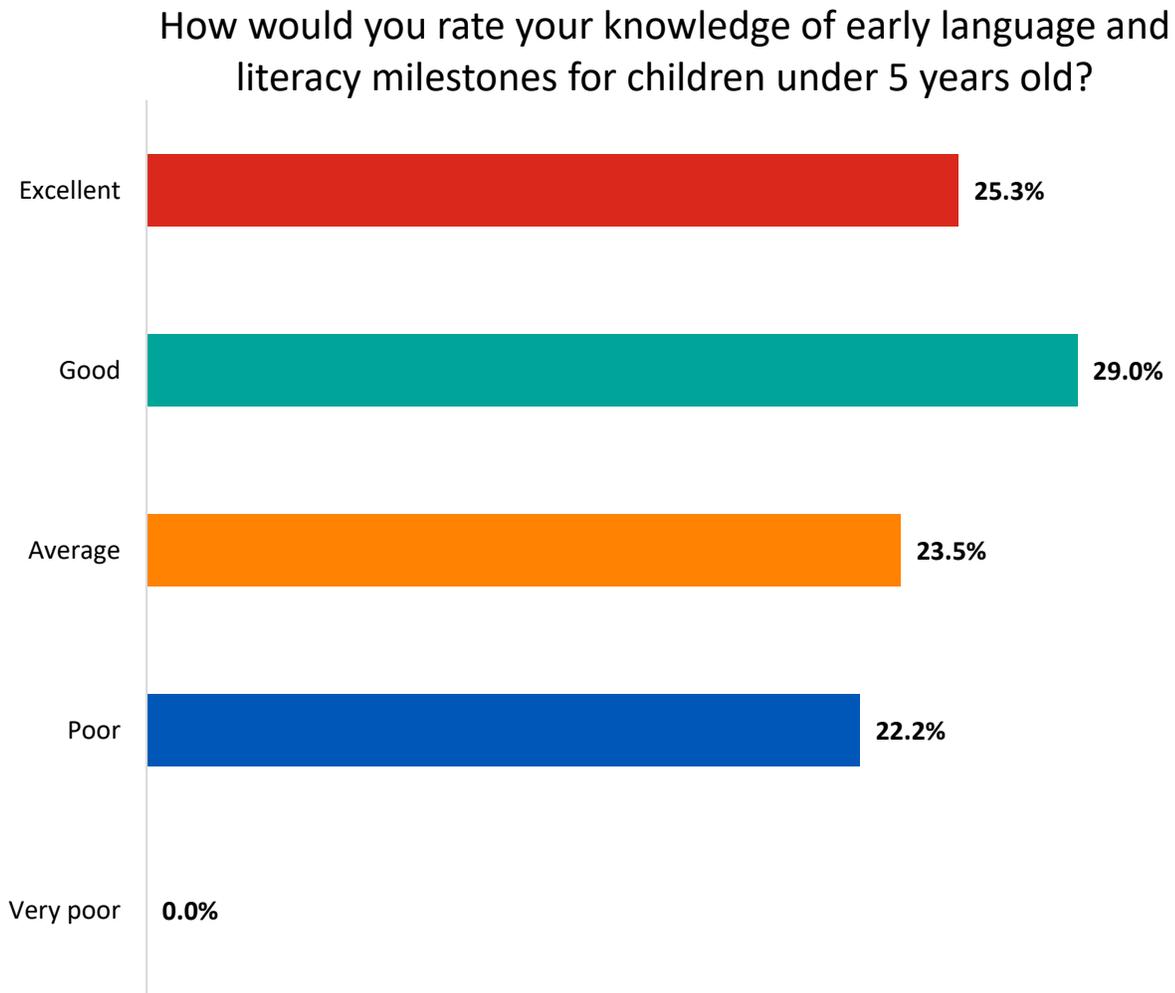


Figure 5: ECE knowledge of early language and literacy milestones for children under 5 years old

Question 4: How would you rate your knowledge of *why* talking, reading and singing support a child’s early literacy skills?

Talking, reading and singing to children nurtures healthy brain development and provides babies and young children with the early skills they need to learn to read.²⁴ Almost 55 per cent of ECEs self-report having a good or excellent understanding of why these activities support a child’s early literacy skills. However, 23 per cent of ECEs describing their knowledge in this area as poor (see Figure 6).

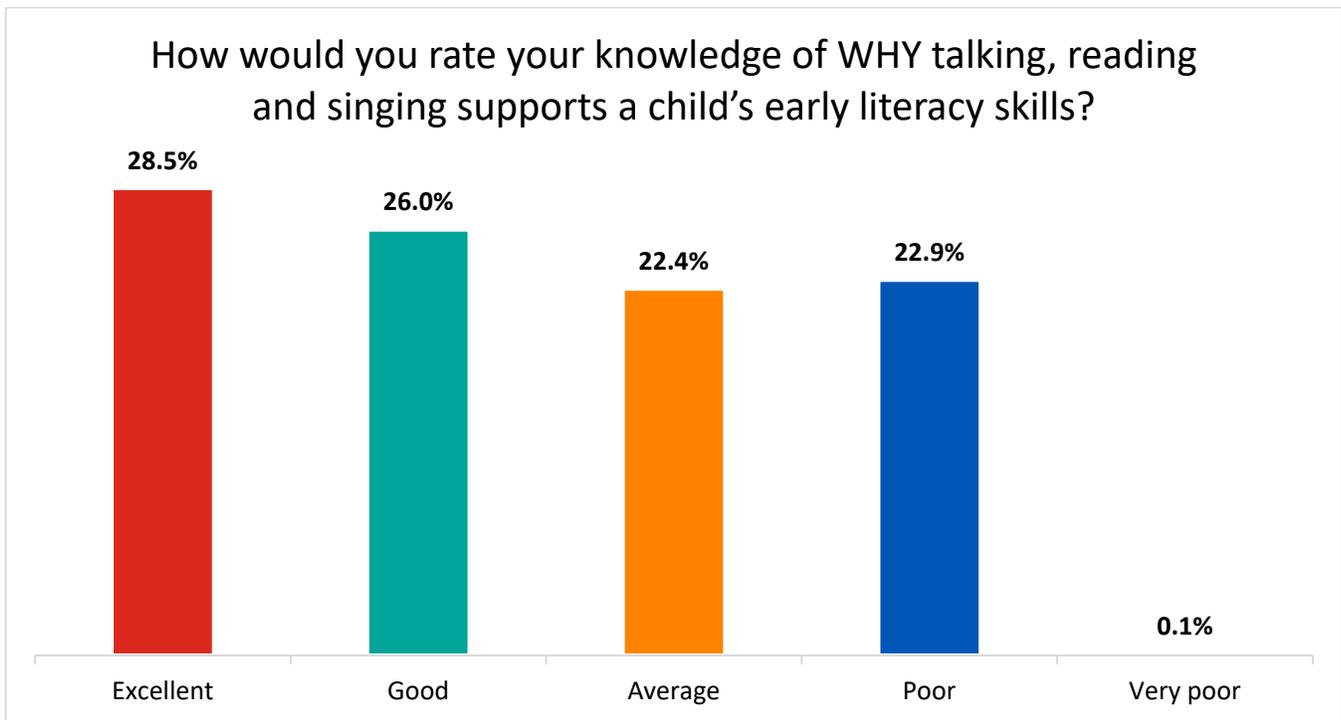


Figure 6: ECE knowledge of why talking, reading and singing support early literacy

²⁴ Canadian Paediatric Society. (2021, March). *Read, speak, sing to your baby: How parents can promote literacy from birth*. Caring for Kids. Retrieved February 10, 2022, from https://caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/pregnancy-and-babies/read_speak_sing_to_your_baby

Questions 5-7: How important do you think early literacy exposure in the early years is in a child's:

- **language development?**
- **social-emotional development?**
- **brain development?**

Surrounding young children with words — by talking, reading and singing — supports brain development and builds the foundation for children to become avid readers.²⁵ The important social, cognitive and self-regulation skills children develop in those crucial early years affect not only their languages skills, school readiness, and learning outcomes but also their resilience and social-emotional health.²⁶ Early literacy interactions help children learn how to understand the world around them, form connections with others and thrive.²⁷

Over 55 per cent of respondents rated early literacy exposure in children younger than five years of age as important or very important in all three developmental domains covered: language development (56 per cent), social-emotional development (56 per cent), and brain development (69 per cent) (see Figure 7).

This means, however, that nearly 45 per cent of respondents believe early literacy exposure is only slightly or moderately important to language and social-emotional development and 30 per cent of respondents believe early literacy is only slightly or moderately important to brain development. These results clearly show that, although most ECEs are aware of the link between literacy and development, there is still a large group for whom it could be better elucidated. Understanding that relationship could help contribute to building professional confidence among ECEs across Canada.

“I feel that early literacy is extremely important in my work with children and families. I often get asked how parents can help their child with literacy and language.”

– Early childhood educator, Licensed child care centre, Alberta

²⁵ The Reading Agency. (2015, June). *Literature review: The impact of reading for pleasure and empowerment*. BOP Consulting.

²⁶ The Reading Agency. (2015, June). *Literature review: The impact of reading for pleasure and empowerment*. <https://readingagency.org.uk/news/The%20Impact%20of%20Reading%20for%20Pleasure%20and%20Empowerment.pdf>; Figure 6. Parental reading help foster child socio-emotional development. (2020, August 11). *In Combatting COVID-19's effect on children*. OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/combating-covid-19-s-effect-on-children-2e1f3b2f/#section-d1e1572>

²⁷ Canadian Paediatric Society. (2021). *Promoting early literacy: A guide for clinicians*. https://cps.ca/uploads/strategic-priorities/2021_CPS-EarlyLiteracy-EN.pdf

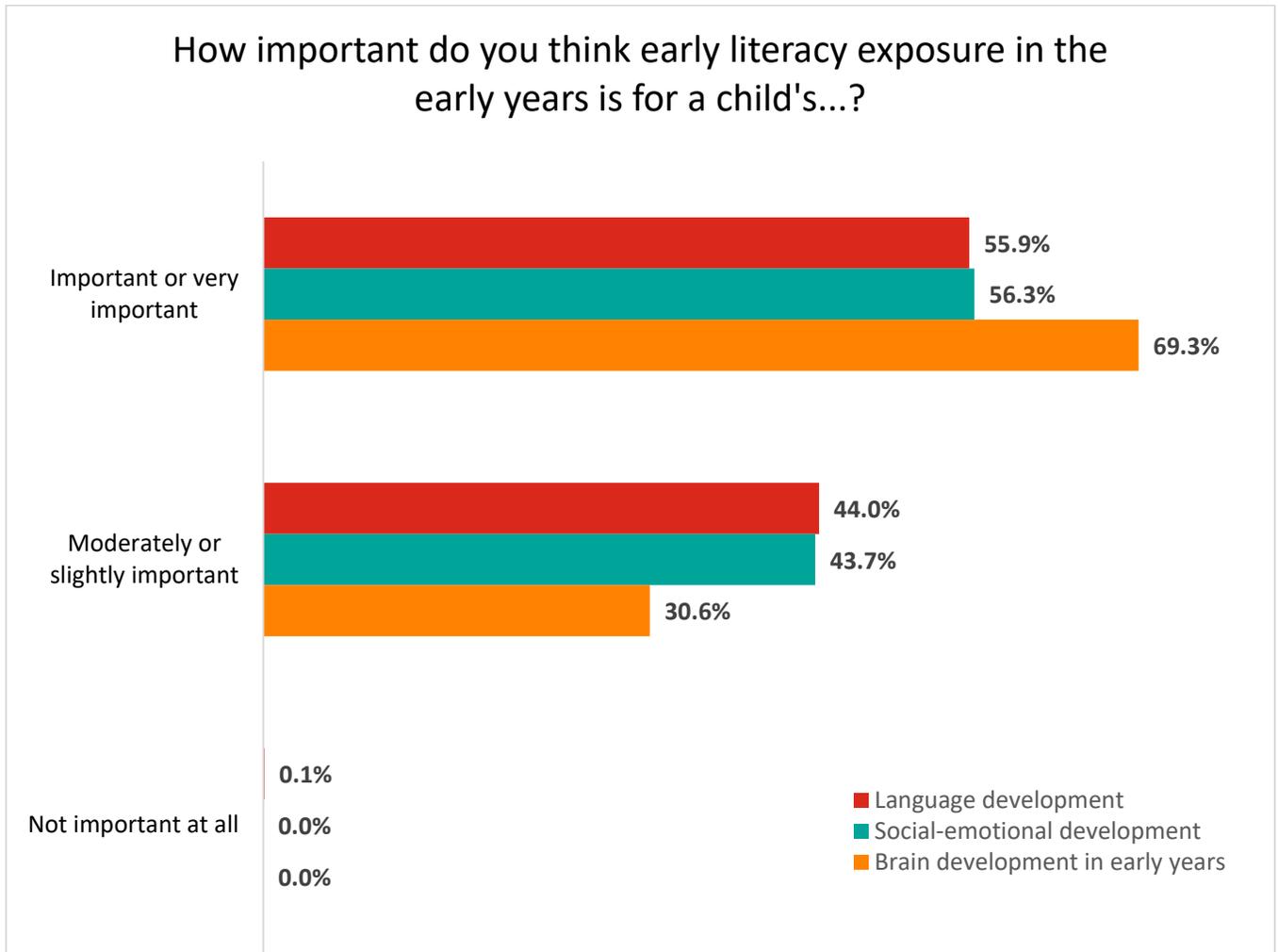


Figure 7: Importance of literacy exposure to development

“I feel like the school gets a lot of credit and what we do in the centre – singing, labelling and modeling – is overlooked by the general public.”

*– Child care centre manager/director, Licensed child care setting,
Saskatchewan*

Question 8: How confident do you feel identifying a concern with a child’s language development?

Just over 35 per cent of ECEs report that they can confidently identify a concern with the language development of a child under the age of five (see Figure 8). Speech and language delay in children can be associated with increased difficulty with reading, writing, attention, and socialization.²⁸ Early identification by early childhood educators, family members and medical professionals can enable children to get necessary support in a timely manner, and generally leads to greater educational and social-emotional outcomes for children than when there are delays in identification and care.²⁹

How confident do you feel identifying a concern with the language development of children younger than five years old?

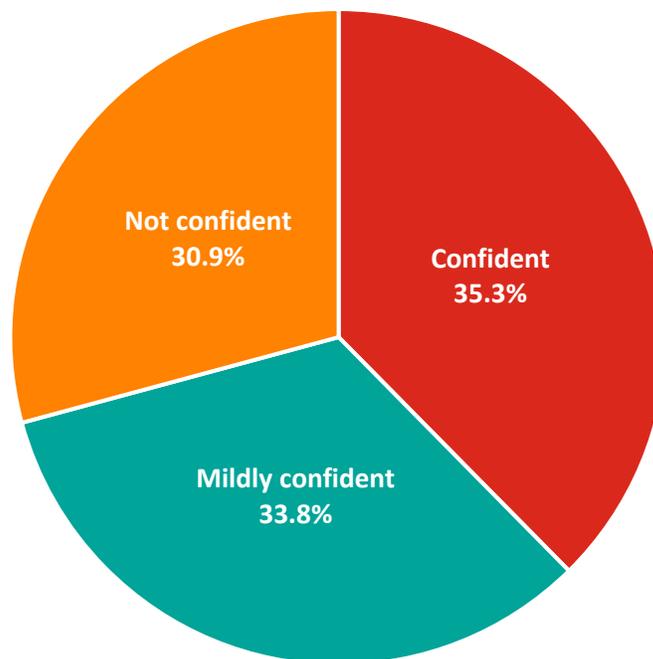


Figure 8: ECE confidence in identifying concerns with children’s language development

²⁸ Philip S. Dale, PhD, Janet L. Patterson, PhD Department of Speech & Hearing Sciences. (2017, February). Speech and Language delay in Children.

<https://www.aafp.org/afp/2011/0515/p1183.html>

Pamela C. Snow. (2020, August 4). *SOLAR: The Science of Language and Reading*.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0265659020947817>

²⁹ Pamela C. Snow. (2020, August 4). *SOLAR: The Science of Language and Reading*.

Section 2: ECEs' engagement in early literacy practices

In this section, we asked survey participants to tell us about the frequency with which they engaged in activities that promote early literacy. Specifically, the question was: “How often do you engage in early literacy activities with the children you work with?”

Research has shown that positive staff-child interactions and more exposure to language-rich environments enhance a child's well-being, language and cognitive development, and school readiness.³⁰ These meaningful and sustained staff-child interactions lead to children having higher levels of emerging literacy and numeracy skills in ECE settings, as well as better behavioural and social outcomes.³¹

The foundations of quality in early learning and care are the everyday interactions between ECEs, children and families. Interactions that are regular, sustained, and shared can support children's development, while those that are more limited, intermittent, adult-directed, and brief do not as effectively contribute to positive skill development.³²

It's important to note that ECEs are working hard to ensure that the children they work with have access to early literacy activities. Approximately 45 per cent of the ECEs who responded to the survey engage in early literacy activities every day, while more than a quarter do so several times per day (see Figure 9). An additional 16 per cent do so at least once a week.

According to our findings, having a college diploma or university degree in early childhood studies does not significantly increase the frequency by which ECEs report engaging in early literacy activities over those who don't have formal qualification (see Figure 10). Virtually the same number of ECEs with a college diploma in early childhood studies (47 per cent) engage daily in early literacy activities as those with a university degree in early childhood studies (46 per cent), and those with no formal early childhood education training (43 per cent).

Educators who work in child care centres report engaging children in early literacy activities with somewhat greater frequency than educators in home and kindergarten classroom (see Figure 11). More specifically, 49 per cent of ECEs in centre-based settings report engaging daily in early literacy activities, compared to 42 per cent working in home-based care and 44 per cent of ECEs in kindergarten classrooms.

There is room for increased engagement in early literacy activities across the sector. Almost 40 per cent of ECEs surveyed report engaging in early literacy activities less than once a week. Half of that number (19 per cent) report engaging in early literacy activities only once a year or never.

³⁰ Government of Canada. (2021, May 25). *Defining and measuring the quality of Early Learning and Child Care: A literature review*.

³¹ OECD. (2018) *Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264085145-en>.

³² Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care. (2021). *Recommended Actions for Alberta Children's Services in Support of Early Learning and Care*. <http://eclc.ca>.

With increased awareness around the impact of literacy education on children’s development and increased access to training on supporting early literacy, ECEs are likely to engage children in early literacy activities more frequently.³³ The consistent and excellent work already being done by ECEs could be improved upon through further investment in professional development so that ECEs are better supported as they do this important work.

Its also important to note that, based on interviews with ECEs and those who work closely with them, it’s likely ECEs are engaging in early literacy activities more frequently than the numbers indicate.³⁴ Part of the opportunity around professional development is identifying and reinforcing the positive early literacy activities that are already taking place and building a more robust understanding of the positive impact it has on children.

How often do you engage in early literacy activities with the children you work with?

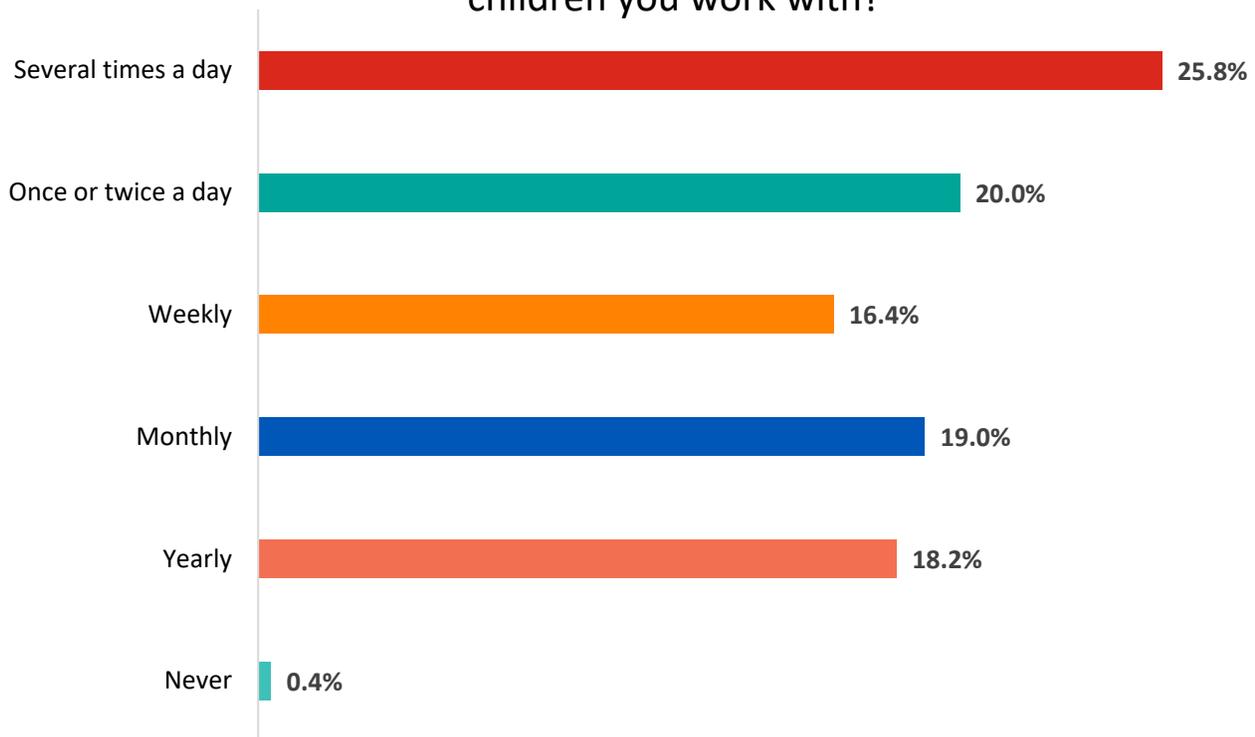


Figure 9: Frequency of engagement in early literacy activities

³³ Government of New Brunswick, Department of Social Development. (2019). *Communication and Literacies: Professional Support Document*. <https://www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Departments/ed/pdf/ELCC/ECHDPE/communication-and-literacies.pdf>

Government of New Brunswick, Department of Social Development. (2008, March 31). *New Brunswick Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care*.

³⁴ Ibid.

How often do you engage in early literacy activities with the children you work with?

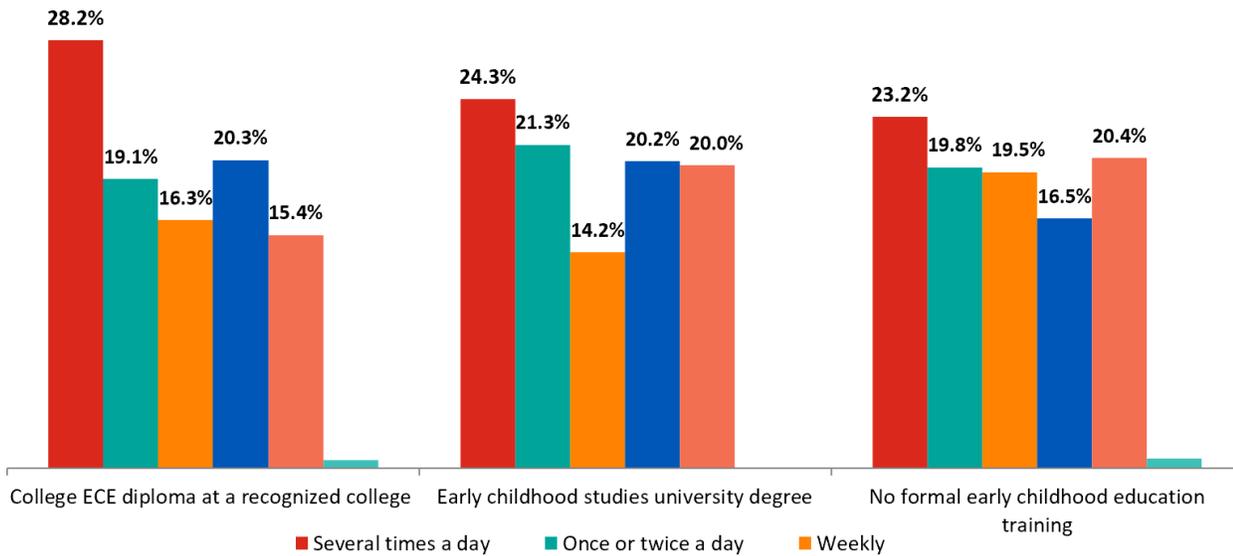


Figure 10: Frequency of engagement in early literacy activities by education level

How often do you engage in early literacy activities with the children you work with?

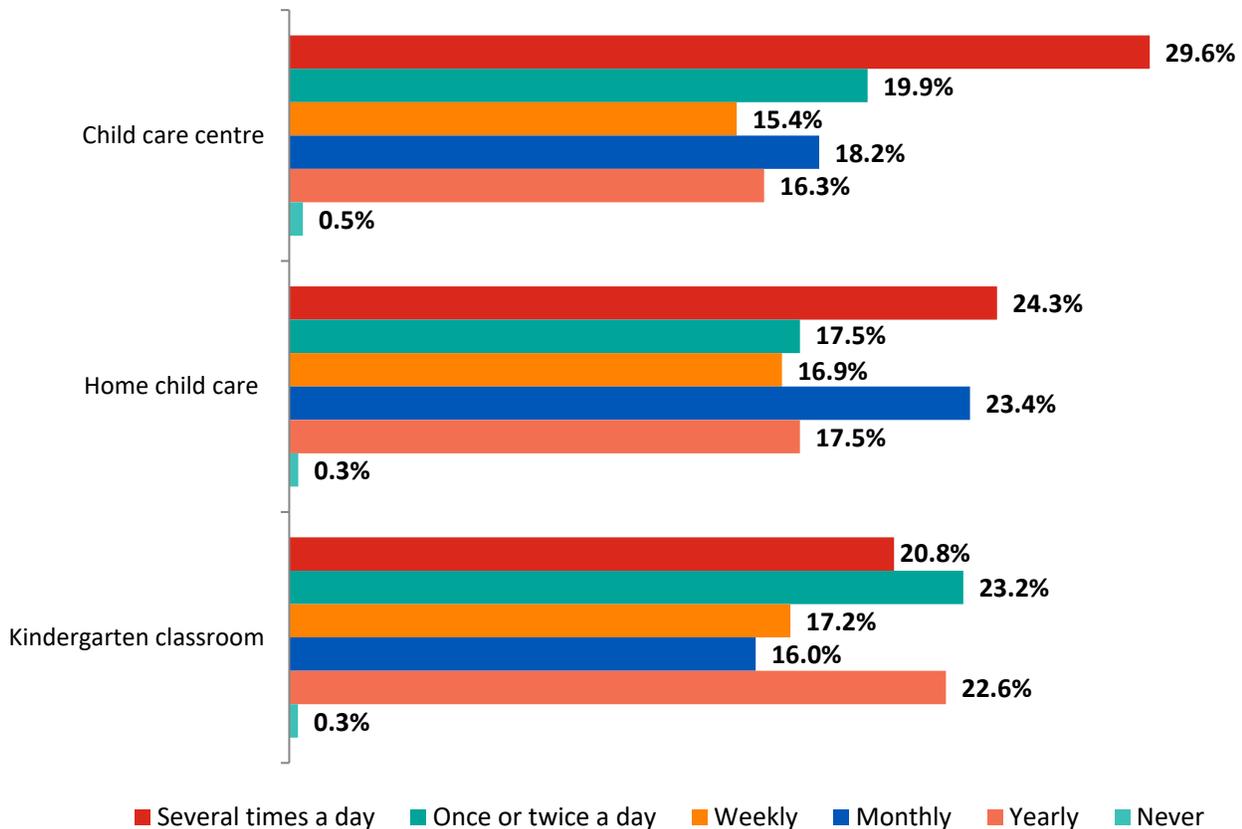


Figure 11: Frequency of engagement in early literacy activities by workplace setting

Section 3: ECE support for early literacy in the home and in the community

We asked ECEs about how often they speak with families in support of early literacy development in the home. We also inquired about how confident ECEs feel about imparting advice to families about activities that foster early literacy learning in the home. Most educators agree that families play a key role in developing children’s early literacy skills, and recent studies by the OECD have added to this body of research.

- A 2020 OECD study of five year old children found that those who have books at home and whose families are involved in their ECE centre or school score higher in a number of skills.³⁵ For many years, policymakers and the broader ECE community have acknowledged that supporting strong relationships between families and ECE services is a powerful way to improve child wellbeing and social disadvantage factors, as well as health, educational and behavioural outcomes for children.³⁶
- The OECD’s 2018 report *Engaging Young Children* identified “interactions among children, among staff, and with parents as paramount in the environment for learning and wellbeing that children experience.”³⁷ Furthermore, recognizing that “parental involvement in children’s learning and development begins at birth, children with involved parents tend to do better in reading and numeracy, have positive social and emotional social skills, and be more motivated to learn.”³⁸
- The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and many other studies show that children whose families engage in activities such as reading, writing words, telling stories and singing songs not only tend to achieve better reading and numeracy skills, but are also more motivated to learn.³⁹

³⁵ OECD. (2020, March 19). *Early Learning and Child Well-being: A Study of Five-year-Olds in England, Estonia, and the United States*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/3990407f-en>.

³⁶ Petrovic, Z., Clayton, O., Matthews, J., Wade, C., Tan, L., Meyer, D., Gates, A., Almendingen, A., & Cann, W. (2019). Building the skills and confidence of early childhood educators to work with parents: study protocol for the *Partnering with Parents* cluster randomised controlled trial. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 19 (197). <https://bmcmmedresmethodol.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12874-019-0846-1>

³⁷ OECD. (2018, March 27). *Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264085145-en>.

³⁸ OECD. (2017, June 21). *Starting Strong V: Transitions from early childhood education and care to primary education*. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/starting-strong-v_9789264276253-en

³⁹ OECD. (2018, March 27). *Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264085145-en>

For these reasons and more, it is essential that early years professionals engage with families regularly and feel confident and supported in doing so. Regular family and ECE engagement is associated with kindergarten academic readiness and higher frequencies of familial engagement in home learning activities, compared with those families who do not regularly engage with their children’s ECEs.⁴⁰

More generally, children learn most in their early years from their families, but they also learn a lot from the other adults they interact with often.⁴¹ Adults’ positive engagement with children promote their sense of belonging, cultural and conceptual understandings, and language and communication.⁴² Early childhood educators are uniquely positioned to work in partnership with families in their communities to build links between the home and other social settings that children attend.

Though nearly 72 per cent of ECEs talk to families about ways to support their child’s early literacy at home at least once a week, only about 36 per cent feel confident in sharing advice about ways to support early literacy development. This suggests an important opportunity to build confidence among ECEs to make this aspect of early literacy work even more effective and enjoyable for everyone involved.

The questions we asked were as follows:

1. How often do you talk to parents and caregivers about ways to support their child’s early literacy development at home?
2. How confident do you feel sharing advice with parents about ways to support their children's literacy development at home?
3. How confident do you feel sharing advice with parents about the community supports available if they have concerns about their child’s language and literacy skills?
4. How confident do you feel sharing advice with parents about the best practices for learning more than one language from a young age?
5. How confident do you feel sharing advice with parents about screen time recommendations for children under five years old?

⁴⁰ Melissa A. Barnett, Katherine W. Paschall, Ann M. Mastergeorge, Christina A. Cutshaw, Shannon M. Warren. (2020). Influences of Parent Engagement in Early Childhood Education Centers and the Home on Kindergarten School Readiness. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 53, pp. 206-273.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0885200620300454>

⁴¹ Government of Australia, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2016). *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework: For children from birth to eight years.*

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/providers/edcare/veyldframework.pdf>

⁴² Ibid.

Question 1: How often do you talk to parents and caregivers about ways to support their child’s early literacy development at home?

The survey found that 72 per cent of ECEs surveyed talk to families about ways to support their child’s literacy development at home on a weekly basis or more frequently. About 28 per cent have these conversations once per month or less (see Figure 12).

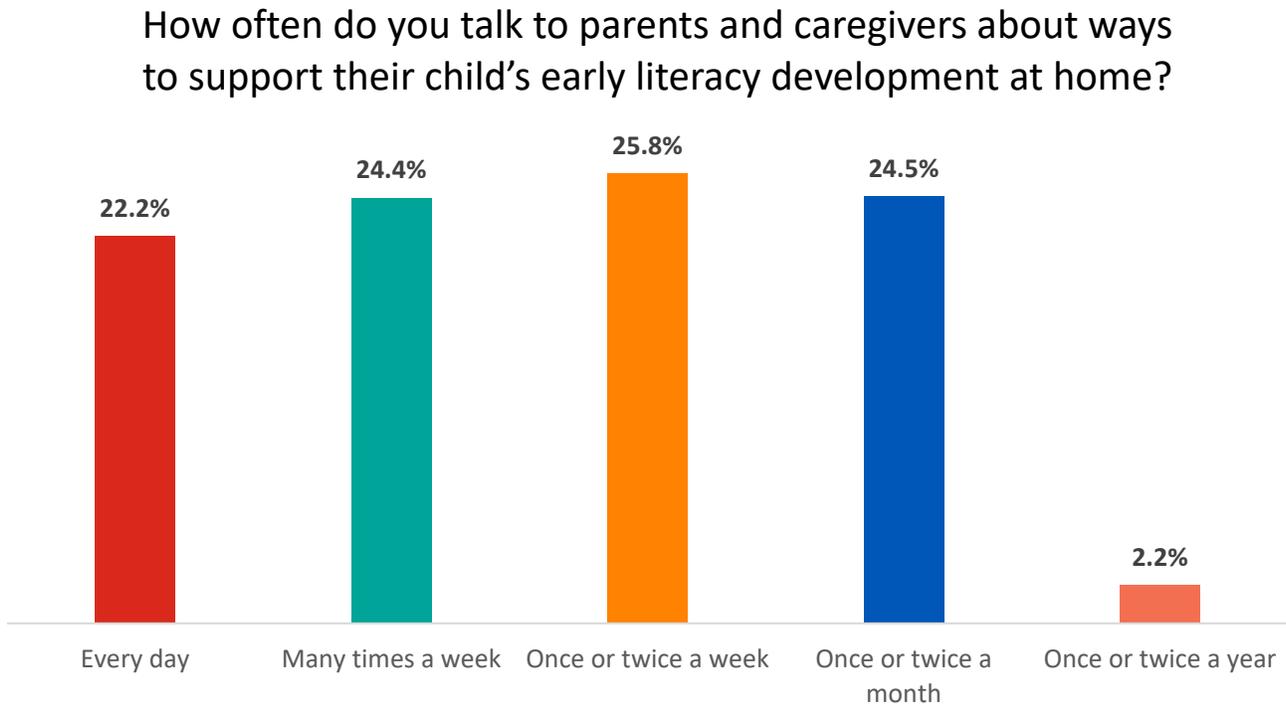


Figure 12: Frequency of communication about early literacy development with families at home

“I would like to learn more about accessing services that can provide educators and parents more information on early literacy.”

– Child care centre manager/director, Licensed child care, preschool, before and after school program, Saskatchewan

Questions 2-5: How confident do you feel sharing advice with parents about:

- ways to support their children’s literacy development at home?
- the community supports available if they have concerns about their child’s language and literacy skills?
- best practices for learning more than one language from a young age?
- screen time recommendations for children under 5 years old?

While question 1 above indicates that many ECEs are talking with families regularly about how best to support early literacy at home, only about a third of ECEs surveyed (36 per cent) feel confident doing so (see Figure 13). Meanwhile, about 64 per cent of ECEs do not feel confident or, at best, feel mildly confident, in sharing early literacy advice with families. This identifies an important opportunity to collectively improve supports for ECEs by providing training and mentorship to help grow their skills and confidence around parental engagement. In this way, an existing practice could become more effective.

How confident do you feel sharing advice with parents about...?

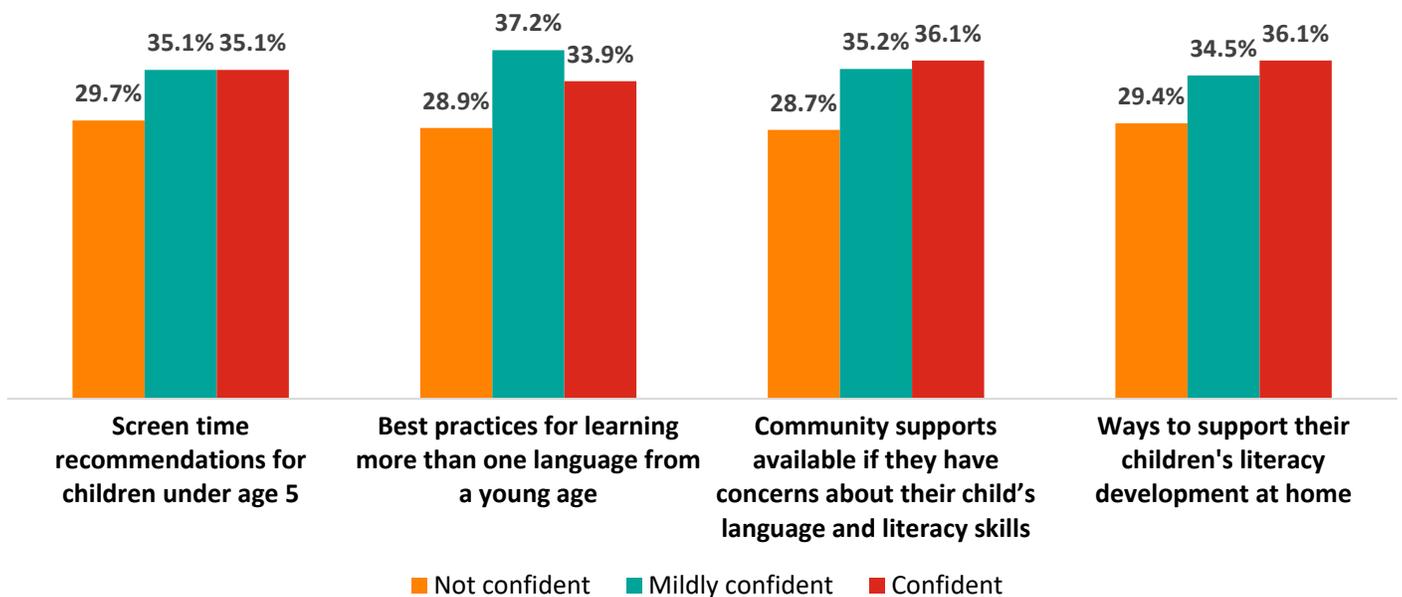


Figure 13: ECE confidence in conversations with families

Section 4: ECE professional development in support of early literacy

In this section, we asked respondents to provide information about their past professional development in early literacy and their interest in receiving more training moving forward. Respondents indicated they accessed professional development through workshops, staff meetings and webinars.

When it comes to early literacy, the survey responses indicate virtually all ECEs would like to participate in professional development. An overwhelming 99 per cent of those surveyed expressed a desire for additional early literacy training, revealing tremendous interest in nurturing children's early literacy and in their own professional development.

It's possible that survey respondents who self-selected to participate in this survey are more likely than the broader ECE workforce to be interested in training. However, given the robust sample of over 1,100 ECEs (13 per cent of CCCF's membership), this is a significant finding even if it's not fully representative of the overall field. Also, given the respondents' level of interest in early literacy, it's particularly concerning that only 10 per cent reported having ever participated in professional development relating to early literacy.

The questions we asked were as follows:

1. Have you participated in any professional development on the topic of early literacy (e.g., attended a webinar or conference, had discussions at staff meetings)?
2. Would you be interested in participating in continuing professional development in early literacy?
3. In which format would you like to receive professional development?
4. Which early literacy topics would you be interested in getting professional development on?

Question 1: Have you participated in any professional development on the topic of early literacy (e.g., attended a webinar or conference, had discussions at staff meetings)?

Only 10 per cent of respondents reported having attended any professional development on early literacy throughout their career (see Figure 14). We note the wording of the question implied that professional development pertained primarily to in-service training, so respondents likely excluded any pre-service training from their responses.

Question 2: Would you be interested in participating in continuing professional development in early literacy?

Nearly every survey respondent (99 per cent) expressed an interest in participating in continuing professional development in early literacy. Only one in ten respondents reported attending any professional development on early literacy throughout their career (defined as “webinars, conference workshops, discussions at staff meetings” on the questionnaire). The gap between these two responses highlights a need to provide more professional development, training and resources to every ECE who expressed interest in early literacy — and an appetite among ECEs to participate in that training.

Previous participation in early literacy PD vs Interest

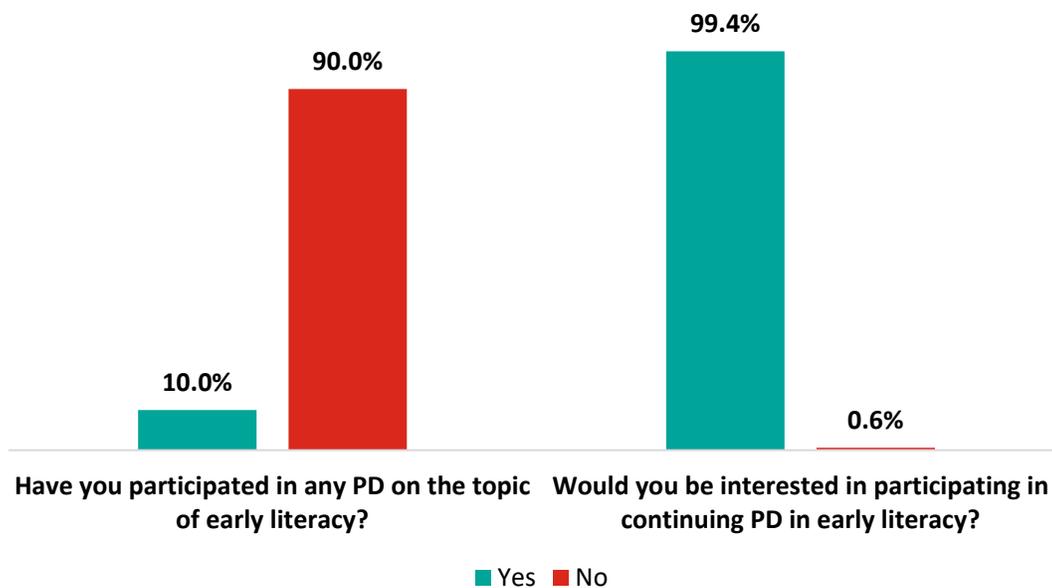


Figure 14: ECE participation and interest in professional development

Question 3: How would you like to receive professional development?

When asked to select the most preferred format for professional development, in-person workshops are by far the most preferred format for professional development (86 per cent), suggesting that the COVID-19 pandemic has not tempered enthusiasm for face-to-face learning among the ECE workforce (see Figure 15). Meanwhile, 12 per cent of respondents preferred online learning opportunities.

How would you like to receive professional development?

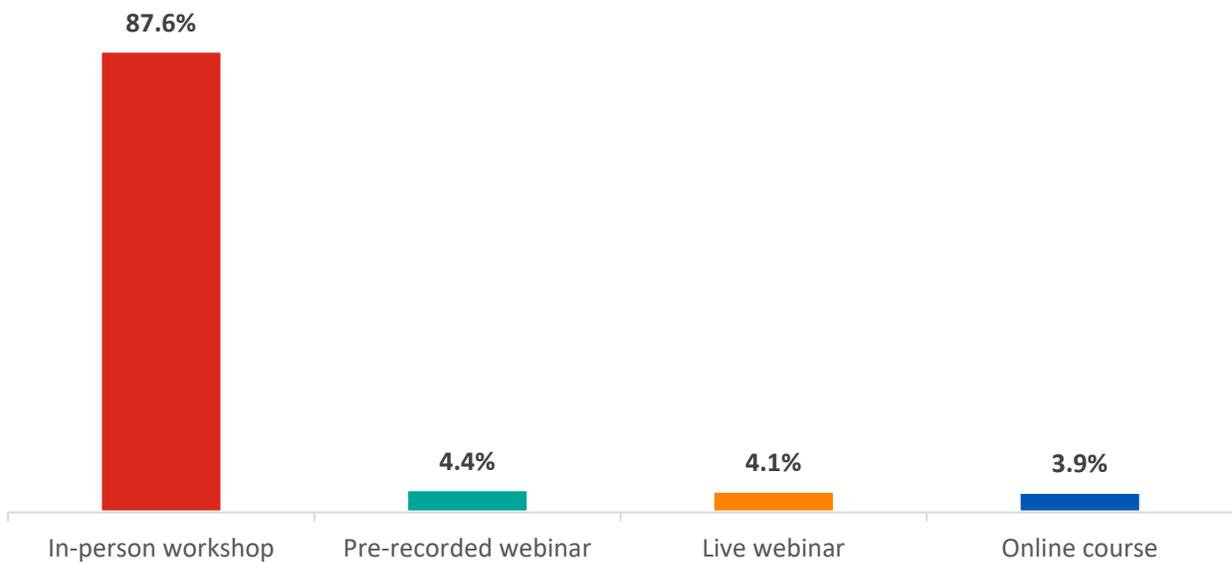


Figure 15: Preferred format of professional development training

“Early literacy is an important part of my work with children. COVID-19 has had a detrimental impact on my ability to support literacy to the maximum.”

—Child care centre manager/director, Licensed child care setting, Northwest Territories

Question 4: Which early literacy topics would you be interested in getting professional development on?

Over 85 per cent of ECEs identified learning about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s early language and literacy development as their number one professional development priority (see Figure 16). ECEs, children and families have faced the harsh effects of the pandemic’s impacts for over two years. When working with children five years of age and younger, two years of lost learning and development opportunities for children and ECEs are difficult to redress. As such, supporting and upskilling the ECE workforce is more critical than ever.

In Canada and internationally, all education, including professional development for ECEs, has been massively disrupted.⁴³ As we move forward, it is important that this learning loss is addressed in a timely manner. As the respondents of this survey indicate, there is significant support and desire for this kind of training.

On which early literacy topics are you interested in getting Professional Development?

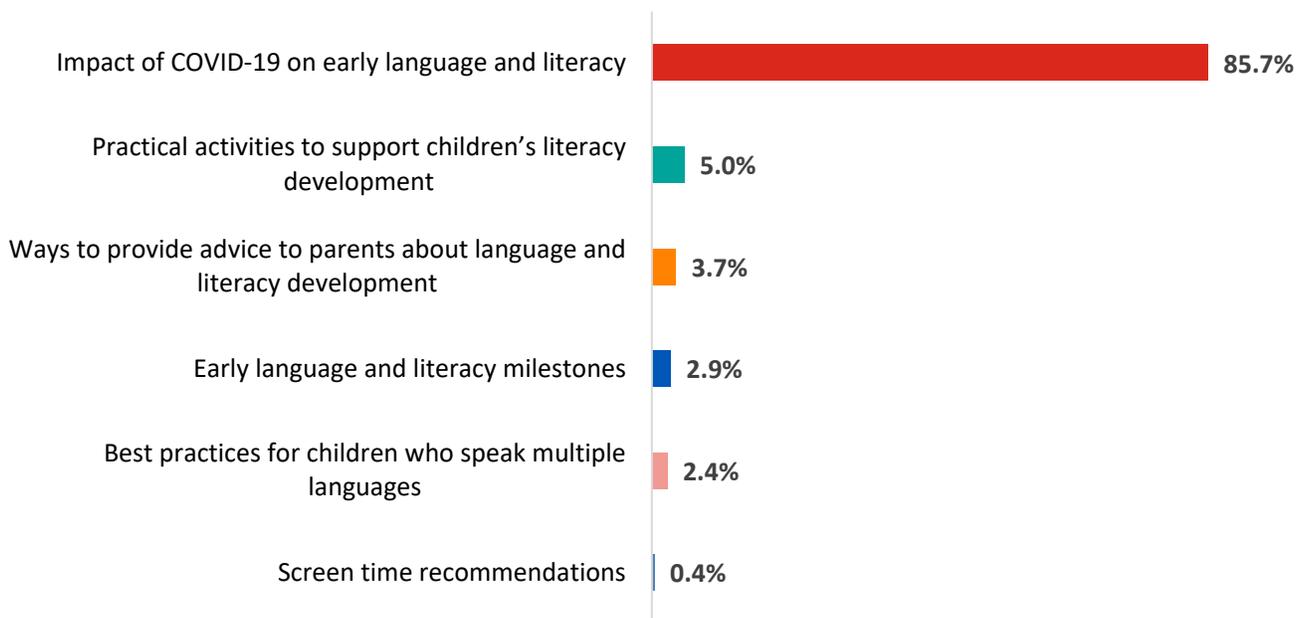


Figure 16: Preferred topics for professional development

⁴³ European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. (2021). *Early childhood education and care and the COVID-19 pandemic: understanding and managing the impact of the crisis on the sector.* <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/60724>

Conclusions

This survey, *The Role of Early Literacy in Early Learning and Child Care: A Survey of Early Childhood Educators*, provides an opportunity to learn directly from ECEs about the role early literacy plays in their work in early learning and child care more broadly. ECEs are uniquely positioned to both nurture the early learning and literacy development of children, as well as guide families in continuing this learning journey in their homes and communities. As such, providing ECEs with accessible early literacy professional development, training and mentorship is crucial to a recovery from learning losses. This is especially true as we continue to contend with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and families across Canada.

An opportunity to support the ECE workforce

The survey revealed the opportunities to more fully support the professionals who are providing valued early learning experiences and care to young children.

- **Early childhood educators told us that they don't feel fully equipped to help children develop early literacy skills.** Fewer than 40 per cent of ECEs feel confident in their ability to support children's early literacy skills.
- **While many ECEs regularly engage in early literacy activities with the children they care for, a majority of them report not knowing *why* and *how* to support children's development of early literacy skills.**
- **There is an opportunity for ECEs to engage children more frequently in early literacy activities and support families in building their children's literacy skill at home.** The foundations of quality in early learning and care are the everyday interactions between ECEs, children and families.⁴⁴
- **Most ECEs are not receiving ongoing professional development in early literacy, yet 99 per cent of them would like to participate in professional development to help them support children's early literacy development.** Empowering ECEs with the tools, training, and resources they want and need will in turn enhance the early learning of the children they serve.

“Early literacy is of great importance. It is a lost piece I find in many daycare settings. However, I find workshops are a needed reminder/refreshers.”

- Child care centre manager/director, Licensed child care centre, Manitoba

⁴⁴ Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care. (2021). *Recommended Actions for Alberta Children's Services in Support of Early Learning and Care*. <http://eclc.ca>.

To help address these gaps in knowledge, confidence and practice, it is essential that every ECE receive pre-service and in-service professional training. There is a range of topics that would be helpful to include in that training.

- Why early literacy practices are important to all domains of children’s development, including language, social-emotional and brain development
- Age-appropriate early literacy and language milestones and the basics of identifying when there might be a delay that requires additional expertise
- Best practices for implementing activities that support children’s early literacy development
- Strategies for talking to parents about how to support early literacy development at home, especially by reading, speaking and singing

This training should be developed and delivered in a manner that reflects and values the diverse linguistic and cultural contexts of the children and families who are part of the early learning and child care systems. Dedicated, accessible resources committed to knowledge mobilization of best practices for professional development and resource training must be at the core of that system.

Leveraging a generational opportunity

The confluence of the implementation of early learning and child care systems, alongside the global COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts, has made this an opportune time for changes to improve early learning and child care in Canada.

The pandemic has cast early learning and child care “in a new light: as a necessity, not a luxury, in a well-functioning 21st century society.”⁴⁵ There has also been “widespread public and political recognition that accessible, reliable ELCC services need to be an essential part of Canada’s post-pandemic recovery and reconstruction of the economy.”⁴⁶

Let’s not miss this tremendous opportunity to collectively develop and deliver world-class early learning and childcare systems that effectively support the ECE workforce and enable children in Canada to get the best possible start to learning and literacy.

“Literacy is important, I think we have gotten away from it.”

—Early childhood educator, Licensed child care centre, Manitoba

⁴⁵ Friendly, M., Forer, B., Vickerson, R. and Mohamed, S. (2020, June). *Canadian child care: Preliminary results from a national survey during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Toronto: Childcare Resource and Research Unit; Ottawa, Child Care Now; Ottawa: Canadian Child Care Federation. <https://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/Canadian-Child-Care-COVID19-Survey-Data-Report.pdf>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

APPENDIX A

Profile of respondents

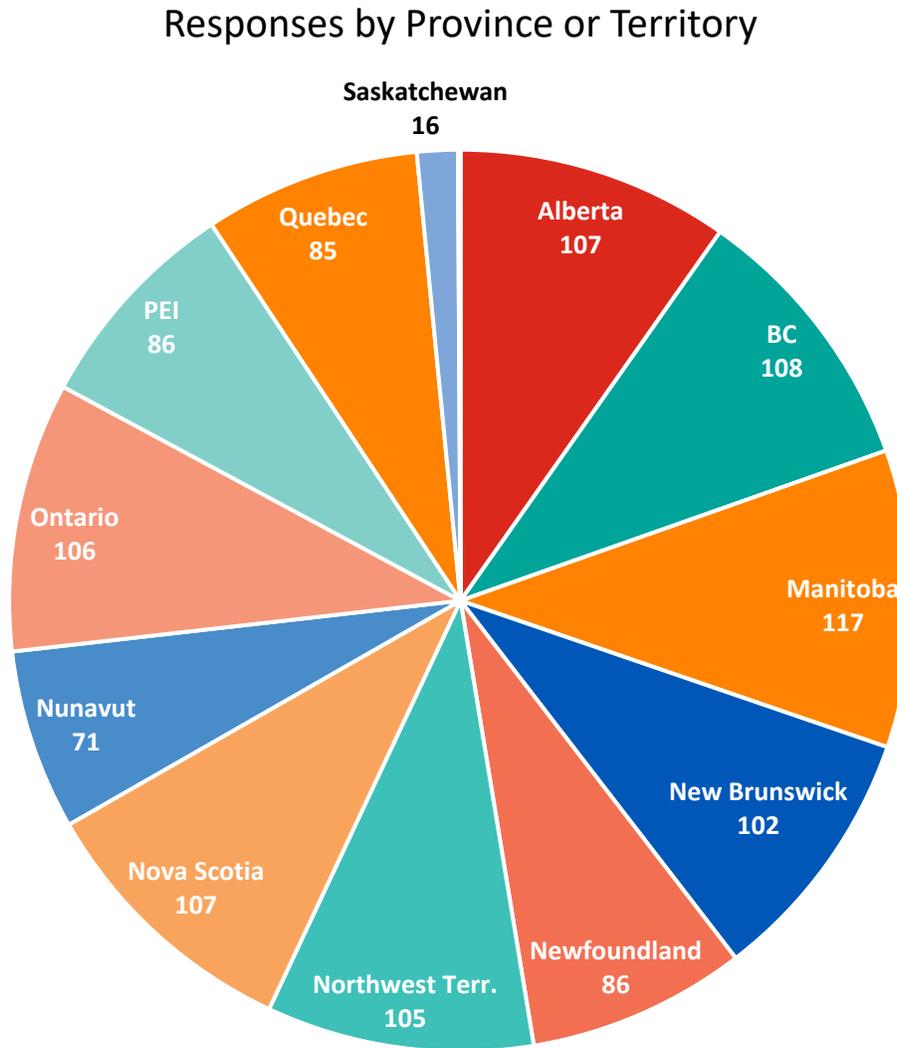


Figure 17: Profile of respondents by province or territory. Yukon is not shown on the chart, but provided 1 response.

As previously mentioned, our sample of 1,108 early childhood educators (ECEs) was well-distributed across the country with representation from most provinces and territories.

Most respondents were under 45 years old (92 per cent were aged 18-44, see Figure 18) and have worked for less than 10 years in the sector (90 per cent of respondents, see Figure 19). Respondents were more likely to be in a senior role (see Figure 20).

Age of Early Childhood Educator (ECE)

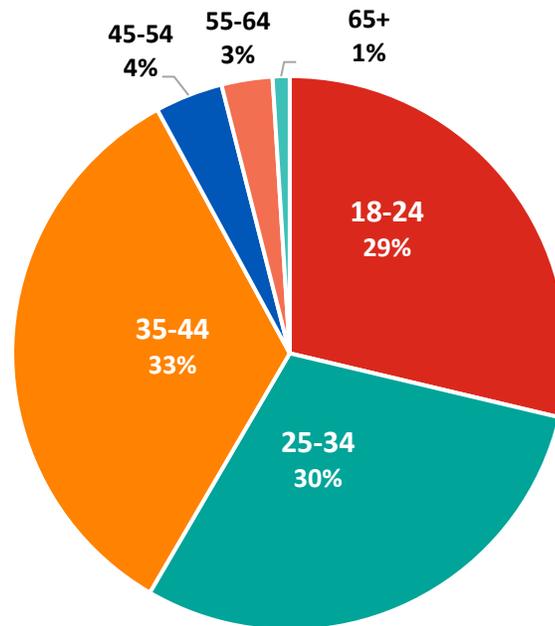


Figure 18: Age of respondents

Number of years worked in Early Learning and Childcare (ELCC)

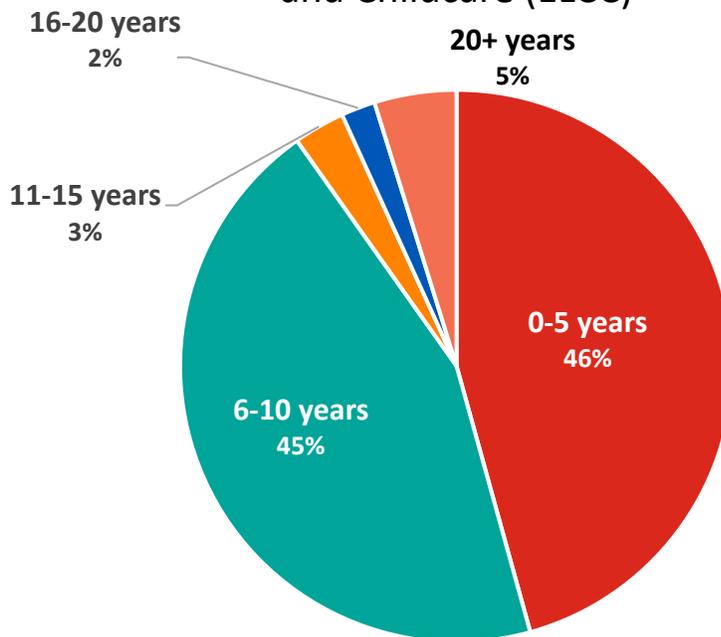


Figure 19: Number of years working in ELCC

69% of respondents have formal **ECE credentials**

66% provide **direct care to children** (**35%** as ECEs and **31%** as ECE assistants) [Figure 20]

56% work in a **licensed or regulated** child care setting

At least 30% of respondents worked in each of the major child care settings:

39% work in a **child care centre**

30% work in **home child care**

31% work in a **kindergarten classroom**

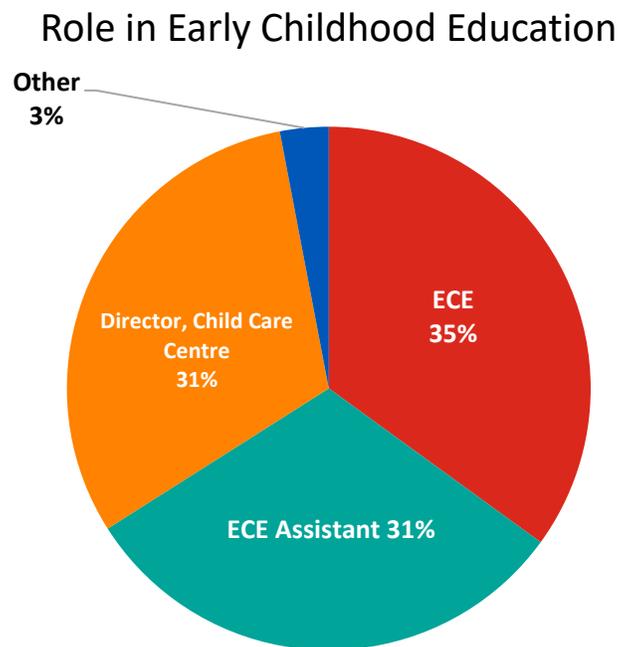


Figure 20: Role in early childhood education

Child care setting	Child care centre	Home child care	Kindergarten classroom
Percentage of sample	39.0%	30.0%	31.0%
Work in licensed care	64.1%	50.5%	51.0%
Work in unlicensed care	35.2%	49.2%	48.4%
Highest level of education completed			
Some high school	27.4%	31.7%	30.3%
High school	25.3%	32.6%	37.4%
Some post-secondary	29.3%	33.9%	32.1%
Post-secondary	39.0%	30.0%	31.1%
Level of formal early childhood development (ECD) education received			
College ECE diploma at a recognized college	42.6%	36.6%	27.6%
Early childhood studies university degree	28.1%	36.9%	35.6%
None	27.9%	26.5%	36.8%
Current role in child care			
Early childhood educator	35.5%	36.3%	33.8%
ECE assistant	27.9%	33.9%	35.0%
Child care centre manager/director	33.3%	28.6%	31.2%

Trends from the data

Respondents 45 years of age and older are more likely to have a postsecondary degree in early childhood education (see Figure 21).

- More than 60 per cent of respondents who hold a CEGEP/college/university degree are aged 45 and older
- Most respondents aged 18-44 have completed high school and some CEGEP/college/university training
- There is a steep drop in post-secondary degrees among ECEs below age 45: just 15 per cent of respondents aged 18-34 have a degree, and almost 99 per cent of respondents who don't hold a post-secondary degree are under 45

Age compared to level of education

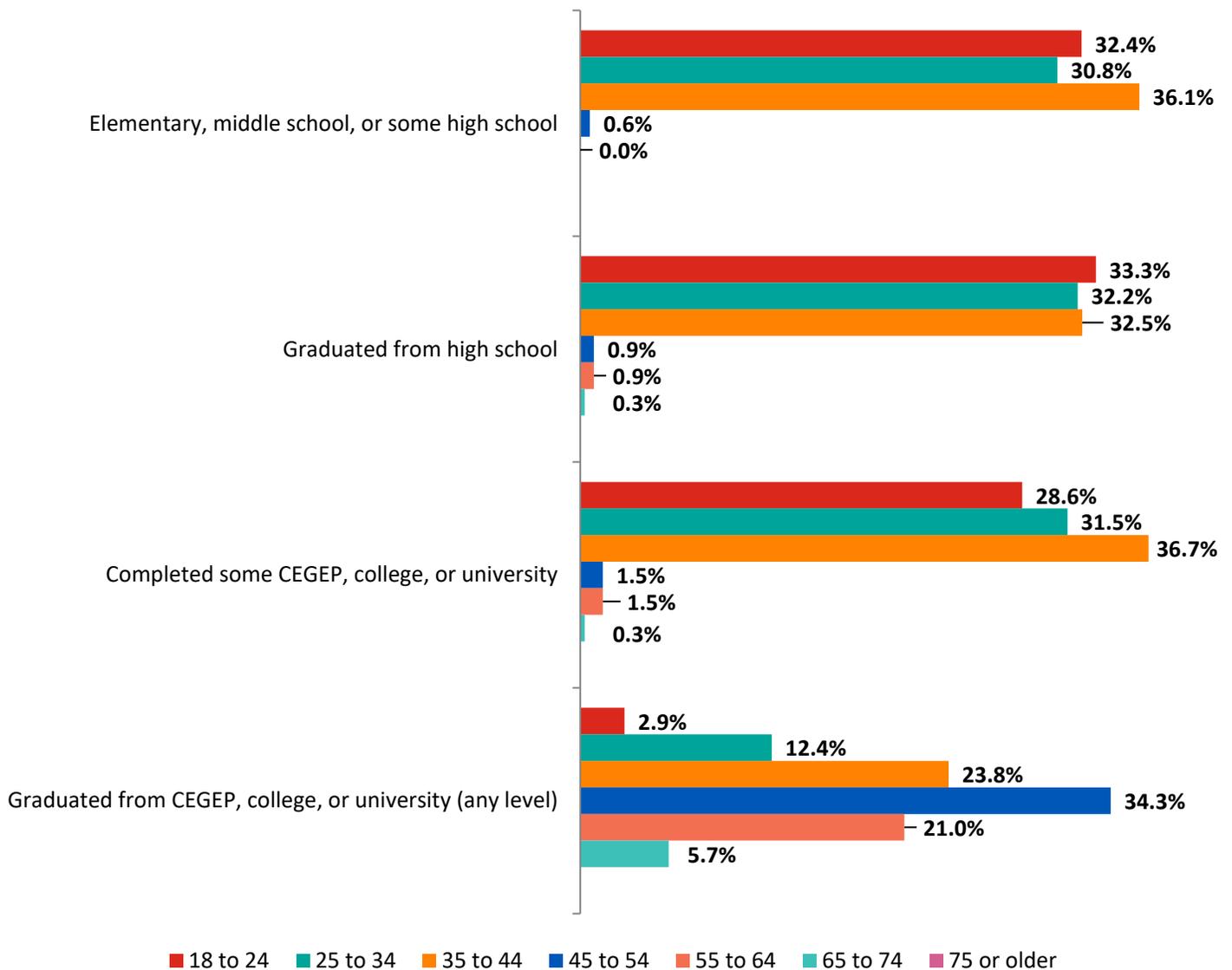


Figure 21: Level of education by age among respondents

More than 60 per cent of post-secondary graduates have been working in child care for at least 15 years (see Figure 22).

Duration of employment in the early learning and child care sector

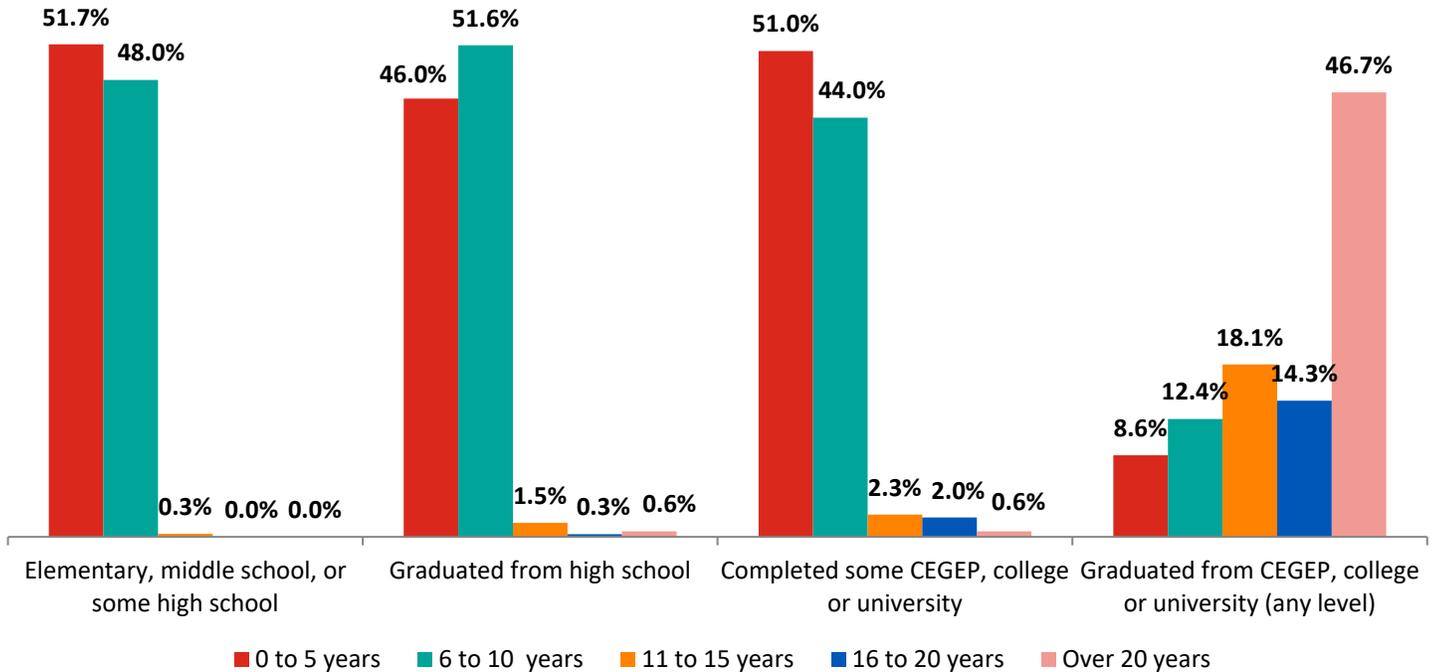


Figure 22: Employment duration in the early learning and child care sector

General education levels across positions

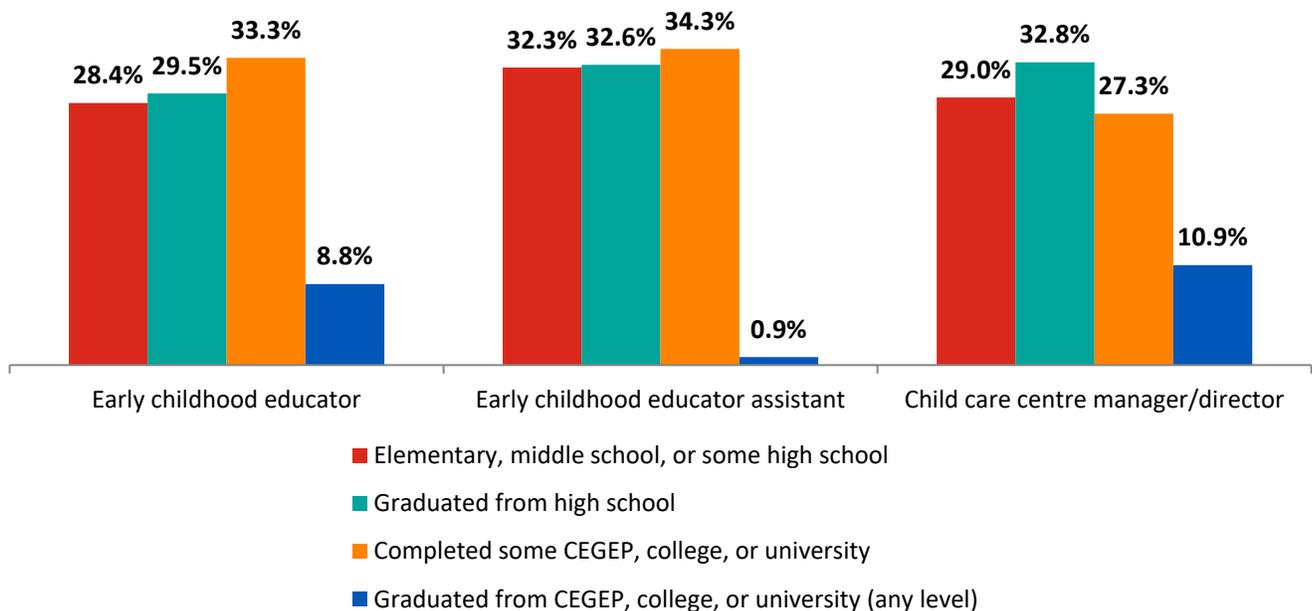


Figure 23: Education levels across positions

As can be seen in Figure 23, fewer ECE assistants have formal early childhood training (34 per cent) compared to early childhood educators (28 per cent) and administrators (30 per cent).

However, the survey found that ECE assistants were more likely to hold a university degree in early childhood studies than ECEs and managers and directors of child care centres (see Figure 24). As well, more than 65 per cent of ECE assistants possess either a college diploma or degree in early childhood education, compared to approximately 70 per cent of ECEs and child care centre managers and directors.

Formal early childhood development training across positions

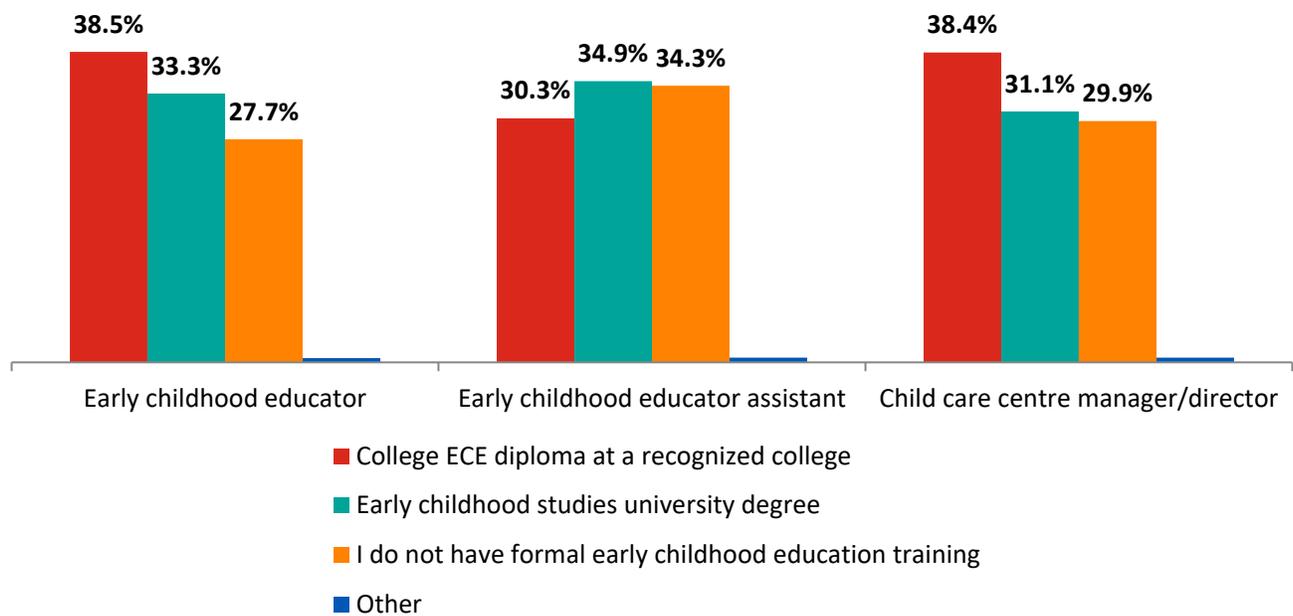


Figure 24: Formal early childhood development training across positions

As can be seen in Figure 25, more home-based child care workers held formal qualifications than ECEs in child care centres (74 per cent compared to 71 per cent).

Educators in a child care centre were more likely to hold an ECE diploma (43 per cent, compared to 37 per cent of home child care workers and 28 per cent of kindergarten classroom workers) but were less likely to have an early childhood studies university degree (28 per cent, compared to 37 per cent in home care and 36 per cent in classroom settings). ECEs in kindergarten classrooms were the most likely to have no formal early childhood qualifications, with almost 37 per cent not having any formal training in early childhood development.

Formal early childhood development training across workplaces

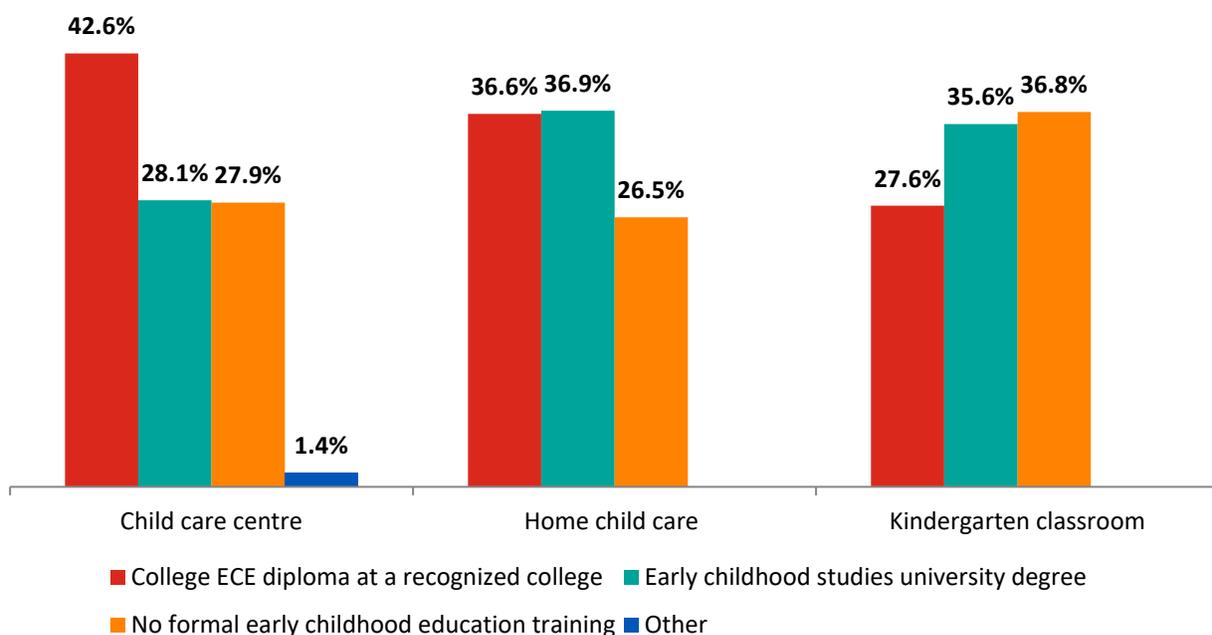


Figure 25: Formal early childhood development training across workplaces

We also explored how the CCLF/CCFF's survey sample deviated from a recent Statistics Canada study on early childhood educator qualifications,⁴⁷ with results outlined below.

	CCLF/CCCF ECE Survey	Statistics Canada ⁴⁸
Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) with formal qualifications*		
<i>*Defined as completing an ECE diploma or ECS university degree by CCLF; completed an ECE one-, two-, or three-year certificate in, or obtained an ECE diploma from, a postsecondary institution by Statistics Canada</i>		
Centre-based child care	70.7%	54%
Licensed home-based care	72.6%	35%
Unlicensed home-based care	74.4%	21%
Kindergarten classroom	63.2%	x
ECEs without formal qualifications*		
Centre-based child care	27.9%	25%
Licensed home-based care	27.4%	15%
Unlicensed home-based care	25.6%	41%
Kindergarten classroom	36.8%	x

⁴⁷ Katherine Savage and Sharanjit Uppal. (2021, June 25). *Insights on Canadian Society: Child care workers in Canada*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-006-X. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00005-eng.htm>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Statistics Canada. *Chart 3 Proportion of child care providing employees, by Early Childhood Education training and by business type, January 2021*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210615/cg-c003-eng.htm>

Comparing this survey sample to population-level data from Statistics Canada

We compared the CCLF/CCCF survey sample to a study released by Statistics Canada in June 2021 on child care workers in Canada.⁴⁹ The study used data from both the 2016 Census of Population and the Labour Force Survey to examine the personal and job characteristics of child care workers across the country. According to the census, nearly 280,000 individuals were employed as child care workers in Canada.⁵⁰ Of these, 69 per cent (194,000) were early childhood educators and assistants, and 31 per cent (86,000) were home child care providers. Together, child care workers represented almost 2 per cent of the national labour force.

Though there are differences in how Statistics Canada and CCLF/CCCF collected data on child care workers — more so with respect to education level than with respect to age — a comparison is still helpful to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the landscape and to identify data opportunities.

Category	CCLF/CCCF Survey	Child care workers in Canada study*
Sample/population size	1,108	194,000
Median age	25-34 years	39.9 years
Respondent age		
15-24	x	12.3%
18-24	28.7%	x
25-34	29.7%	25.7%
35-44	34.0%	27.3%
45-54	4.2%	21.9%
55-64	2.7%	11.3%
65+	0.7%	1.6%
Highest level of education completed		
No certificate, diploma or degree	x	5.4%
Elementary, middle school or some high school	29.0%	x
Graduated from high school	30.6%	15.6%
Apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma	x	7.7%
Completed some CEGEP, college or university	31.0%	x
College, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma	x	47.3%
University certificate or diploma below bachelor level	x	5.0%
Graduated from CEGEP, college or university (any level)	9.5%	x
University certificate, diploma or degree at bachelor level or above	x	19.0%

*Data for early childhood educators and assistants only. Supervisors of early childhood educators and assistants are also included in this group but managers of child care centres are excluded.

⁴⁹ Katherine Savage and Sharanjit Uppal. (2021, June 25). *Insights on Canadian Society: Child care workers in Canada*.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

APPENDIX B

Additional comments from respondents

Survey participants were provided an open-ended question asking them to share any “additional thoughts on early literacy and [their] work with children and families.” Some of the responses are provided below.

Some ECEs were happy to see a focus on literacy

- *Early literacy is of great importance. It is a lost piece I find in many daycare settings. However, I find workshops are a needed reminder/refreshers.*
- *Literacy is important, I think we have gotten away from it.*
- *I would love the opportunity to delve deeper into this issue as reading levels in my province continue to decline by grade 3.*
- *Happy to see that this is a focus and is getting the attention it deserves.*

Some ECEs described how they incorporate early literacy activities in their work

- *Building literacy with families has been a constant discussion in my career. We have moved from so many methods and age expectations. I LOVE that we are bringing literacy into environments other than just at the tabletop programming. We are building it into nature programming, physical activity joined with literacy and through music, which is SO important.*
- *I believe in exposing children to literacy in multiple ways throughout the day in a more fluid way, and through play and experiences rather than through work sheets, flash cards and a structured manner. It needs to be developmentally appropriate and through the interest of the child.*
- *I feel it is a very important topic and I work with children every day, increasing their love of literacy, language and communication. I encourage children to talk about whatever they are thinking or feeling. I encourage them to ask questions. Every question gets answered. We have a very rich literacy environment in our Centre.*
- *I feel that early literacy is extremely important in my work with children and families. I often get asked how parents can help their child with literacy and language. I also inform them about literacy and the impact it has on their child’s brain and language development.*
- *The use of songs, stories, shared experiences and puppets are tools I use to engage with the children, and sharing with pictures for the parents to see the children's own stories that they create and share with their peers.*

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- *Repetition is the secret ingredient because an average child needs to get exposed seven times to a new word to internalize it, hence the need of the cooperation and the support of parents at home and the libraries in the community to provide a variety of lingually diverse audio books and stories that appeal to young audience.*
 - *I find the terminology about early literacy fraught with misleading notions. It's not necessarily about books at all. I am a proponent of later exposure to abstract processes associated with reading, while allowing children to hone skills in oral language use, in gross-motor capacities, and in eye-tracking ability, as well as much else. Later literacy relies on skills that can be developed in play, and which should be fully invested in before asking children to reach for abstract conceptualizations once the window for learning these cracks open.*

Some ECEs requested parent resources and support in parent engagement

- *I would like to learn more about accessing services that can provide educators and parents more information on early literacy.*
- *A list of resources available for all parents of all cultures, especially those who have a child with supportive requirements or children who are not meeting developmental milestones.*
- *I would love an up-to-date research synopsis as it is not always easy to read academic journals quickly at work.*
- *Translating the information to parents in a way they respond to is key.*
- *I would love to add more resources to our centre for early literacy; however, it can sometimes be tough to try to find French language literacy as our centre is a Francophone centre. I would also love to incorporate Métis cultural resources as well, but again, it's a challenge finding French Métis resources. Any help or leads would be greatly appreciated!*
- *I'm interested in participating in different recorded workshops and online courses about Early Literacy. I believe it's a critical topic. I feel like the school gets a lot of credit and what we do in the centre — singing, labelling, and modeling — is overlooked by the general public*

Some ECEs provided examples of COVID-19's impact on early literacy in child care

- *[The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early literacy] is an extremely important topic and not one that many ECEs in my experience are familiar enough with.*
- *Early literacy is an important part of my work with children. [The COVID-19 pandemic] has had a detrimental impact on my ability to support literacy to the maximum.*
- *The pandemic affected the way we set out books in my child care centre. We had to provide board books rather than paper books.*
- *I would love to see research on how [the COVID-19 pandemic] has affected language development and how quickly child care settings can close the gap.*