

Supporting Children's Health through Movement Behaviours in Childcare

Response to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health Study on Children's Health
(7 September 2022)

PREAMBLE

Budget 2021 proposes a \$30 billion investment for Early Learning and Childcare,¹ and for the first time **a national childcare strategy is underway**, with buy-in from federal politicians and childcare stakeholders. **What is sorely missing from the national framework on quality childcare is the impact and role that childcare plays for young children's development of healthy movement behaviours.** Childcare should be at the forefront of efforts to undo the detrimental effect that the COVID-19 pandemic had on young children's movement behaviours.

This is critically important as we saw lower levels of physical activity participation among children during the pandemic and soaring rates of screen time, which we are only beginning to see a rebound from. The need for Canadian childcare policy in support of children's physical activity and health behaviours has never been more important.

THE ROLE OF CHILDCARE CENTRES IN SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S HEALTH

On 27 September 2022, at the House of Commons Standing Committee of Health - Children's Health Study, Member of Parliament Adam van Koeverden voiced need to support resilience in our children through upstream approaches to healthcare spending to support healthy development. Specifically mentioned were the roles of both childcare and physical activity in this pursuit.

Childcare provides a logical and equitable setting to support healthy movement behaviours in young children by promoting physical activity and limiting sedentary time (especially screen use).

Providing young children with opportunities to engage in an active life offers many physiological, social, and cognitive health benefits, and is vital to promoting a lifetime of physical activity. However, **Canada is facing an inactivity crisis** which is associated with direct and indirect health care expenditures of **\$6.8 billion**.² This inactivity crisis starts in childhood, with **only 13% of children under 5 meeting the 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for the Early Years, and these concerningly low rates have been further exacerbated by the pandemic**.³

Here are the facts:

- Ensuring children engage in adequate physical activity and limiting sedentary time during the early years (ages 0-5) consistently demonstrates both short- and long-term positive impacts on physical health, motor and cognitive development, and psychosocial wellbeing.⁴
- Physical activity behaviours in childhood track throughout the life course and are predictive of health supporting physical activity behaviours later in life.⁵
- In Canada, more than **80% of young children** are enrolled in, and spend **~30 hours per week in childcare settings**.^{6,7}
- These settings have been identified as critical environments for fostering and prioritizing movement behaviours (i.e., encouraging physical activity and limiting sedentary time) during early childhood, more so than individual level factors such as sex and ethnicity.⁸

Early intervention is **essential** to address the **physical inactivity crisis** and to complement the **national childcare strategy**.

THE NEED FOR RESEARCH & KNOWLEDGE TO ACTION

Physical inactivity has been noted as one of the top 10 threats to Canadian children in the 2022 Raising Canada report.⁹ To create a stronger future for our nation's children, the Inspiring Healthy Futures Initiative calls for *impactful research and knowledge*. Training and development of early childhood educators (ECEs), and the creation of activity supporting childcare policies and environments, is an important investment under this priority to support children's health.

While in childcare, **ECEs serve as the primary daytime role models** of young children in Canada, and play an important role in supporting children's health and development. Research has shown that ECEs **profoundly influence children's physical activity and sedentary behaviours**.¹⁰ In fact, ECEs' confidence and values regarding these movement behaviours, and the amount of physical activity-related training they have completed have been positively associated with children's movement levels in childcare.¹¹

By promoting healthy movement behaviours during the early years, there are opportunities for **ECEs to support young children's overall wellbeing and can positively impact children's long-term healthy growth and development**.¹²⁻¹⁴ Therefore, it is essential that ECEs are trained on the role of physical activity and sedentary behaviour in children's health, and how to incorporate appropriate amounts of high-quality movement experiences in their classrooms. Supported with childcare environments that are conducive to physical activity participation and childcare policy which guides appropriate daily movement affordances, young children's physical activity levels will improve.

CURRENT STATE OF ECE TRAINING ON MOVEMENT BEHAVIOURS

Despite the important role they play in shaping children's movement behaviours in Canada, ECEs consistently report a lack of knowledge and confidence for supporting physical activity in childcare. These two factors are critical to modifying children's movement levels.¹⁵ As a result, **physical activity in childcare settings remains low, while sedentary time remains high**.¹⁶ Furthermore, ECEs feel ill-equipped to support inclusive options in these settings, for children of equity deserving populations such as Indigenous children and children with disabilities.^{17,18} Research-based interventions to improve physical activity levels in childcare settings are needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We call on the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health to support the development of ECEs capacity to promote healthy movement behaviours in childcare via the following recommendations:

1) Support the development of Canadian childcare-specific physical activity guidelines.

Young children attending childcare spend approximately 4-8 hours per day in these settings. Childcare-specific physical activity guidelines are vital to inform childcare programming and regulations. This is crucial to ensuring a high proportion of children in Canada are receiving adequate opportunities for physical activity, and direction for limiting sedentary time, during care hours.

2) Provide research and training support for ECEs to facilitate movement behaviours in childcare settings under Canada's national childcare strategy.

Nationally, the value of equitable access to childcare has been identified; therefore, adequate resources are needed to ensure high quality programming is offered in these settings. The federal government must prioritize spending on evidence-based research to support knowledge acquisition and skill building in ECEs as one step to ensure childcare settings prioritize movement behaviours. This investment will support the development of a highly skilled ECE workforce, a proactive approach to supporting healthy development and growth.

3) Prioritize the movement activities of all children, including children with disabilities.

Although ECEs in Canada are expected to facilitate the inclusion of children with disabilities in their classrooms, 80% of Canadian children with a disability have experienced exclusion in early learning settings.¹⁹ This is attributed to ECEs lacking skills, training, and resources to provide inclusive care.²⁰ The federal government is urged to invest in training to support ECEs' knowledge acquisition and fund environmental adaptations to support inclusive classrooms where children of all abilities can engage in quality physical activity.

4) Support the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge in childcare settings.

As our nation prioritizes its relationship with Indigenous peoples, we must ensure Canadian childcare settings provide effective approaches to meeting the unique needs of Indigenous children. This requires research and policy related to Indigenous children's early learning and development,¹⁷ through co-design with Indigenous community members to ensure reciprocity, reconciliation and respect, in addition to the incorporation of authentic movement for young children via play on the land.

SUMMARY

NOW is the time to prioritize movement in childcare, through impactful research and knowledge while a national strategy is implemented.

We are at a critical turning point in the uptake of childcare in Canada. We call on the federal government to acknowledge the importance of childcare settings as a setting to support upstream healthy development and build resilience among children in Canada. Investing in the knowledge and skills of ECEs to embed physical activity in their daily programming will have direct impacts on children's overall health, wellbeing, and development. By prioritizing and re-allocating spending to research and professional development in this area, we can foster supportive and inclusive environments that ensure children in Canada are set on the right developmental trajectories for healthy, happy, and active lives.

We welcome the opportunity to speak to the committee further about our work.

*Located at Western University on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak and Chonnonton Nations and under the direction of Dr. Trish Tucker, **the Child Health and Physical Activity Laboratory** is a research and training environment specializing in the measurement, promotion, and influences of young children's physical activity and sedentary behaviours.*

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