



Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health

Study on Children's Health

October 2022

The Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCCF), a diverse community of leaders in the early learning and childcare sector in Canada, is pleased to submit to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health's study on children's health.

Canada has an unprecedented opportunity to ensure that child care settings support optimal and equitable child health and well-being. As of March 2022, all 13 provinces/territories have signed agreements with the federal government as a part of the Canada-wide child care plan. These historic and transformative agreements will provide significant investments in the child care sector and combined with a national study on child health, there is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to define and act upon a vision for healthy and sustainable early learning environments that support the well-being of children across Canada.

About The Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCCF)

The Canadian Child Care Federation is a diverse community of early childhood educators, providers and policy makers committed to giving the children of today the head start they need tomorrow. We are a trusted, well respected, and authoritative national voice that champions high quality Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) services for all children. Along with our provincial and territorial affiliates, we provide and facilitate a collective voice and an inclusive community of sharing, learning, experience, resources, commitment and passion.

Early Learning and Child Care environments are foundational for the health and development of Canadian children

The first five years of life are of critical importance for healthy child development. Over half of all Canadian children, ages 0 to 5, are enrolled in child care.¹ Among families enrolled in child

¹ Statistics Canada. [Table 42-10-0004-01 Use of early learning and child care arrangements, children aged 0 to 5 years](#)

care, most have their children enrolled in full time care, for over 30 hours per week.² An increasing body of evidence demonstrate a link between participating in ELCC with positive developmental outcomes.²

The indoor and outdoor environments in which young children learn, play, and grow contribute in crucial ways to children’s lifelong health trajectories. With many children spending six or more hours per day in child care, it is important to focus on the quality of those settings. A growing body of scientific and practitioner knowledge attests to the importance of healthy settings as a determining factor in child well-being. Spending time in healthy and nurturing physical and social environments – having ample access to nature and green spaces, and seeing their cultural identities reflected and celebrated in their surroundings – can contribute positively to children’s development and their growth as lifelong environmental stewards. Building a sense of connection to land and natural places early on in life is essential to fostering reciprocal relationships between children’s health and the health of the environment for this and future generations.³

Conversely, spending time in unhealthy conditions – with ongoing exposures to poor air quality, pesticides, toxic substances in cleaners, toys and furnishings, or contaminants in drinking water – can harm children’s developing bodies and brains, exacerbate asthma and other health conditions, and interfere with their endocrine and immune systems.⁴ As such, harmful exposures during these critical early years can contribute to developmental, learning, and behavioural challenges, and affect their educational pathways and lifelong health trajectories.^{5,6} Harmful environmental exposures can set children on a path towards chronic diseases later in life, including cancer, cardiovascular disease, asthma, diabetes, and neurodegenerative diseases.^{7,8}

Thus, widespread investments in ELCC programs and environments have the potential to significantly impact the health and wellbeing of children and families across Canada.

National survey of child care professionals points to unhealthy conditions in early learning settings

The Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCCF) and the Canadian Partnership for Children’s Health and Environment (CPCHE), in collaboration with University of Ottawa researchers, conducted a national survey on health and sustainability within the child care sector. Over 2000 child care professionals responded, sharing their experiences and views on indoor air quality, reducing

² Findlay, L, Wei, L, et al. (2021). Patterns of Participation in early learning and child care among families with potential socioeconomic disadvantages in Canada. Statistics Canada.

<https://doi.org/10.25318/36280001202100800002-eng>

³ See, for example, Outdoor Play Canada’s [Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play](#).

⁴ For a summary of the child health implications of environmental exposures to toxic substances, see CPCHE’s Child Health and the Environment Primer. https://healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/2005/09/15/primer_en/

⁵ Vrijheid, M., et al. (2016). Environmental pollutants and child health – A review of recent concerns. *International Journal of Hygiene and Environmental Health*; 219(4-5): 331-342. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijheh.2016.05.001>

⁶ Bennett, D., et al. (2016). Project TENDR: Targeting Environmental Neuro-Developmental Risks The TENDR Consensus Statement. *Environmental Health Perspectives*. 124 (7): A118-122.

<https://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/doi/full/10.1289/EHP358>

⁷ Clark, H., et al. (2020). A future for the world’s children? A WHO-UNICEF Lancet Commission. *The Lancet Commissions*. 395 (10224): 605-58. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(19\)32540-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(19)32540-1/fulltext)

⁸ Cooper K, Marshall L, et al (2011) [Early Exposures to Hazardous Chemicals/Pollution and Associations with Chronic Disease: A Scoping Review: Executive Summary](#).

toxic exposures, climate action, greener play spaces and more (see [Report on Environmental Health and Sustainability Practices in the Child Care Sector in Canada](#)).

Nearly half (49%) of the professionals in child care programs across Canada who responded to this national survey report unhealthy conditions for children. More than two-thirds of respondents expressed concern about risks to children's health and well-being posed by air pollution (indoor 64%; outdoor 69%), toxic chemicals in products (69%), a lack of access to nature (68%), and climate change (68%).

More than half (53%) cited lack of funding and 45% cited lack of support from government as barriers to action to improve environmental health protection and sustainability in their program.

The findings suggest that while child care professionals believe it is important for program settings to become healthier and more ecologically sustainable, the sector lacks the resources and supports to make needed changes. This survey speaks to the gap between commitment and capacity.

Not all child care settings are equal: children living in low-income households experience higher reports of unhealthy conditions

Child care professionals who indicated that the majority of children in their care are living in low-income circumstances were more likely to report unhealthy conditions in their programs, such as structural disrepair, lead in water supply pipes, recent insect and/or rodent infestation, mould or mouldy smell, excessive moisture, peeling paint, noticeable air pollution and/or excessive noise from a nearby roadway, industrial facility or other source, and the use of artificial air fresheners, among others.

A Vision for Healthy and Sustainable Child Care Environments in Canada

In April 2022, in response to the national survey results, CCCF, CPCHE, and more than 40 organizations across Canada jointly released a [Vision for Healthy and Sustainable Child Care Environments in Canada](#). It outlines 10 priority areas for action, including reducing toxic exposures, fostering children's access to natural play spaces, creating culturally inclusive settings, and taking action on climate change through building design/operations, energy conservation and uptake of renewable energy sources.

The aim of this shared vision is to shine a light on the actions needed to ensure that all children in Canada have the opportunity to learn, play, grow and thrive in child care settings that are:

- Healthy, with health defined broadly to include the full array of physical, mental, emotional, social, and ecological dimensions of human well-being; and
- Sustainable, climate-resilient, and respectful of the land, with design features and day-to-day practices that conserve resources, reduce waste, minimize carbon emissions and other pollutants, and support children's connections with the natural world.

Recommendations

Early Learning and Child Care settings are an essential pillar of child health and development. Investing in ELCC environments are essential to foster the health and wellbeing of children in Canada, now and into the future.

As outlined in the Vision for Healthy and Sustainable Child Care Environments in Canada, ensuring that all children in Canada have access to healthy and sustainable child care settings is a collective responsibility.

Action in the following areas is needed:

1. **Develop a framework to establish a world class child care system in Canada, drawing on the 10 priority areas set out in the [Vision for Healthy and Sustainable Child Care and Early Learning Environments](#):** to build on collective efforts towards a child care system in Canada that supports and promotes child health and well-being, now and into the future.
2. **Build capacity of ELCC programs to improve environmental health conditions in their settings and enhance their day-to-day practices:** through the establishment of evidence-informed guidelines on environmental health parameters; equipping all child care programs with resources, training, and supports; and, tracking progress across the sector.
3. **Establish effective collaborative structures and improved communications across multiple levels of governance and with relevant stakeholders:** to define and advance necessary actions.
4. **Increase investments in research to better understand the health implications of children’s environments including early life exposure to toxicants and climate change impacts:** in order to inform health-protective guidelines and track the effectiveness of exposure reduction measures.

We believe that Canada can achieve a world-class child care system that supports all children to thrive, models best practices on climate change, and fosters the child-nature connections that we know are so important for children’s emotional well-being and their future. We want to see action towards the Vision for Healthy and Sustainable Child Care and Early Learning Environments, and our sector is keen to do our part.

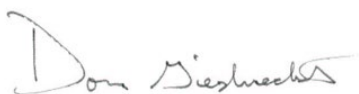
Every child has the right to breathe clean air, consume safe food, have access to safe drinking water, and be protected from exposure to toxic chemicals, pollutants, radiation and other hazards in their indoor and outdoor environments.⁹ Yet, widespread disparities persist in children’s levels

⁹ The right to a healthy environment is increasingly recognized worldwide. [The 1972 Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment](#) affirmed a fundamental right to an environment “of a quality that permits a life of dignity and wellbeing.” In October 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted

of exposure to pollution and toxic chemicals, their access to clean drinking water, green spaces and safe places to play, and their exposure to climate change-related health impacts. Providing *all* children in Canada with an equal opportunity to learn and play in healthy and sustainable child care environments, achieved through sound policies, sufficient resources, and meaningful engagement of children, parents/guardians, care providers and communities, is a necessary and attainable step towards reducing environmental health inequities and improving health for all children.

Children have a right to grow up in healthy learning environments and this is why governments must consider the foundational role of early learning and child care environments when considering a national health strategy for all children in Canada.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Don Giesbrecht". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "D".

Don Giesbrecht

CEO

[Resolution 48/13: The Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment](#). In Canada, the right to a healthy environment is included in [Bill S-5](#) to amend the Canadian Environmental Protection Act.