



Giving Children the Best Start

The Early Years: Discussion Paper

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Introduction

The province is committed to making life better for Nova Scotian families. That work starts with our children, giving them the best possible start.

“...This year, my government will consult with Nova Scotian families to develop an approach to early childhood development that ensures our children get the best possible start in life. This innovative and integrated approach will bring together resources from health, community services, and education to best align programs and supports for Nova Scotia’s families and children.”

– Speech from the Throne, March 2012

The early years – from before birth to age 6 – are among the most important in a child’s development. Research suggests that quality early childhood services and programs help children succeed in school and help them live healthier, happier lives.

The province is taking significant steps to support families and children in their early years. For example, the province is

- putting more money in the hands of families (through the Nova Scotia Child Benefit, income assistance, and income tax cuts)
- helping kids with special needs earlier
- creating hundreds more child-care spaces, making child care more affordable with more subsidies, and increasing support for child-care staff
- tackling childhood obesity
- developing resources to support the transition to school for primary students

Leading up to this consultation, provincial staff gathered information on programs and services funded by the departments of Health and Wellness, Community Services, and Education. Staff identified more than 200 programs and services, and a provincial investment of about \$100 million for the early years. This number does not include programs and services delivered by non-profit and other community organizations.

Thousands of people are working hard in the 200+ programs and services dedicated to supporting families and children. And an investment of about \$100 million is significant.

Yet the Early Years Study 3, a national report released in November 2011, says one in four Canadian children arrive at school with vulnerabilities that make them more likely to fail in school. Vulnerabilities can include physical or mental health challenges; behavioural challenges; social, emotional or learning delays; or other developmental issues.

This statistic – one in four children starting school with vulnerabilities are more likely to fail – likely holds true for Nova Scotian children too. That is not acceptable. Our children deserve better.

The same early years study said Nova Scotia is lagging behind other provinces in providing a co-ordinated approach to deliver such programs. This has to change.

Are all of the programs and services offered now making a difference? Are all focused on the right priorities? Is there duplication? Are there gaps? How do we protect or build on the current strengths within our system at a time when the province is committed to balancing the budget?

Could our well-intentioned, individual efforts add up to greater success through better integration, co-ordination, and collective action – focused on the needs of children and families, instead of individual departmental or program mandates?

The Early Years Study 3 concludes that it is time to go beyond simply adding up child-care spaces, programs, and dollars. The province agrees, and, in partnership with families and early-years partners, will

- set a vision, outcomes, and priorities
- define actions that align with these priorities
- strengthen partnerships within government, with stakeholders and organizations, and with communities and families
- monitor progress
- focus on results

The work starts with talking to Nova Scotians, so all children will have the best start in life.

The Importance of Early Learning and Development

A child's earliest experiences have the greatest impact on their development. In the first year of life, brain growth is staggering: 700 new synapses form every second. Between the ages of 3 and 6 years, children experience extraordinary brain growth. By age 7, a child's brain is fully developed.

The many settings where children live and learn, play and grow (home, community, church, child care, school) and the relationships they have within them dramatically influence their future. The greater the opportunities for play, for interaction with family and friends, and for exposure to new experiences, the greater the benefits.

Conversely, when a child's positive experiences are limited, gaps in learning and development can affect that child well into the future. While support and intervention can help close the gaps, it is better for the child, and less costly to the system, to provide rich and diverse experiences for children in the early years to prevent developmental gaps from forming.

A growing body of research assesses the educational, health, and economic benefits of investing in the early years.

Educational Benefits

Starting school is a big transition for children and their families. It is a busy place, filled with new faces, new routines, and expectations.

Children who make the transition most successfully are those in good health and at a level of social and emotional development that is age-appropriate. Their early experiences have helped them develop self-confidence, curiosity, and motivation to meet new challenges.

Participation in quality early childhood programs is linked to gains in mathematics and literacy, school achievement, intelligence tests, school readiness, and passing each grade. Children who enter school with a well-developed vocabulary are also more likely to succeed.

While studies largely focus on families with lower income or educational levels, many children who arrive at school with vulnerabilities do not live in poverty; rather, they live in middle- to upper-income homes and neighbourhoods.

Early learning is not limited to structured programs or regulated child-care centres. Early learning can occur at home and in the community, and can contribute significantly to a child's development and readiness for school.

Finally, the number of children identified with special needs continues to grow in our schools. At birth, three to four per cent of newborns are vulnerable or at risk for developmental delay. By school entry, this statistic has grown to approximately 25 per cent.

This is due, at least in part, to the fact that health professionals, families, and others interacting with children are identifying special needs earlier. However, research shows that early childhood education and other interventions are critical in improving the outcomes for children with special needs. They could and do reduce the amount and intensity of the supports required in school.

Health Benefits

Many factors influence health – genetics, biology, gender, lifestyle, culture, education, employment, family income, and support networks.

The experiences of a mother before birth, at birth, and after, greatly influence the best possible start in life for a child. Secure attachment through nurturing and interaction with caregivers (usually the mom) lays the foundation for trust, coping, confidence, and resiliency.

Children's experiences and relationships, including where they live, play, and grow, affect their physical and mental health in the early years, and reach far into adulthood. In fact, the early years set the path for our health, including coping skills, emotional control, and behaviour.

For example, children who have trouble coping in grade primary are less likely to graduate from high school or go on to college or university. As adults, they are more likely to fail in their personal relationships and have difficulty finding steady work.

Negative early experiences are also linked to chronic health disease, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease, as well as mental health issues.

Economic Benefits

When children do not get off to the best start, there is great cost to the individual and to society.

According to the Canadian Council on Learning, the cost of one child leaving school before graduation is \$7,515 annually. This figure is based on a combination of lost tax revenue and increased spending on unemployment insurance, social assistance, and the criminal justice system. Total lifetime costs related to those who drop out of high school each year across Canada are estimated in the hundreds of billions of dollars.

On the other hand, getting the early years right has significant economic benefits:

- Children who get off to a good start are likely to reach higher levels of education and earn more money in good jobs.
- Fewer tax dollars are required for costly interventions, remediation, and treatment.
- If parents can secure reliable and affordable child care, they are more likely to enter the workforce. Currently, fewer parents (especially women) in Nova Scotia are working, compared to the national average.

Research suggests that early childhood programs and services return society's investments seven times over.

"Healthy, competent children require less expensive interventions today, and become adults who are able to contribute not only to their own families, but to the social and economic well-being of society."

–Hon. Margaret McCain

The Early Years in Nova Scotia

Thousands of Nova Scotians work hard every day on behalf of children. Their efforts have made great strides in improving the conditions for success.

Work Under Way

A multitude of government agencies, community organizations, and private service providers offer early-years programs and services. Many of these are regulated and/or funded primarily through three provincial departments:

- Community Services is responsible for programs related to child welfare, income assistance, family and youth services, persons with disabilities, housing, early intervention, and early childhood development, including regulated child care.
- Education is responsible for early elementary education. This includes curriculum development, support for teachers, and classroom and parent resources.
- Health and Wellness provides health services for the prenatal period and for young children. As well, Public Health focuses on healthy public policy such as the Smoke Free Places Act and injury prevention (e.g. booster seat legislation).

Across the province local partners, including school boards, district health authorities, and the IWK Health Centre, develop, manage, fund, and deliver more than 200 programs and services for children from the prenatal period to age 6.

Support at home and in our communities

- Health professionals work with moms and families during and following pregnancy. This work includes linking moms with community-based services so families have the support they need during a newborn's critical first weeks and months. Home visits can continue for the first three years for families who are struggling.
- The province's new plan – called Together We Can – to improve mental health and addiction care commits to screening every child at 18 months of age to pick up any delays or developmental concerns, in order to identify these early and ultimately improve outcomes.
- The province is investing \$4 million to make the Early Intensive Behavioural Intervention Program available to all children who need it. Until the province acted in 2011, only half of the children who needed this intervention received it.
- The province is investing additional funds to address wait lists in early intervention programs.
- Healthlink 811 enables families to talk to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The nurse can advise parents on ways to keep their baby safe and healthy, can help parents help their child at home, or link parents to the care their child needs.
- The province is tackling the issue of childhood obesity: one in three youth from age 2 to 17 is overweight or obese and at risk for a lifetime of health issues. The provincial budget includes \$2 million to support priorities in a childhood-obesity prevention strategy to be released this year.
- The province is putting more money into the hands of families through the largest increases in decades in the Nova Scotia Child Benefit and income assistance – as well as income tax rebates and reductions.

Support for child care

- The province has created 1,500 more child-care spaces in licensed centres. As well, more than 700 children are now in regulated family home day care.
- The province is investing \$13.5 million to make child care more affordable for more families. About 1,000 more families are benefiting from new subsidies. As well, the province adjusted income eligibility rates so more families can qualify.
- Early childhood educators play a critical role in the learning and development of children. The province invested \$13.6 million to increase wages, training, and professional development.
- More children with special needs are benefiting, with \$4.4 million provided to more than 200 centres to support more inclusive child-care spaces.

Support in school

“The plan will help children get off to a better start by strengthening links among day care, other early childhood development programs, and grade primary.”

– Kids and Learning First, February 2012

- The Kids and Learning First education plan commits to helping children before they begin school. One action is to strengthen connections between child care and elementary.
- Mental health clinicians will work in SchoolsPlus families of schools across the province to identify and address children’s mental health issues earlier.
- The province is assessing children’s developmental readiness for school at grade primary with the early development instrument. This information can assist in identifying and responding to issues at both the community and school levels.
- As part of the province’s autism action plan, health professionals, educators, and families are developing school entry plans for more children.
- Curriculum in grade primary is shifting toward a play-based approach – in the classroom and in partnership with families. Early child development experts recognize and recommend play as an effective way to support student learning.

The Work and Challenges Ahead

It is time to build on this foundation, based on a clear vision and priorities, and focused on results.

Of the 200+ programs and services on the preliminary inventory

- many have wait lists
- only 37 per cent are offered province-wide
- some do not define expected outcomes, or are not measured to evaluate results
- many of the programs are not linked to each other, and do not share common goals

Many children are cared for through a wide variety of informal arrangements. In some cases, this reflects a parent's choice. In others, this is not the case—parents must use what is available to them even when it is not their preferred or best option.

Government also relies on community organizations to deliver early-years programs (e.g. family resource centres, early intervention centres, district health authorities, community organizations). In some cases, the supports for programming are specific to the setting or organization, and funding streams may vary (e.g. various grant programs, fundraising). This can result in variations in the scope and stability of the programs delivered.

The national Early Years Study identifies that families and children are better served when programs and services are connected and delivered within a system where professionals and community stakeholders work together. This helps ensure that families receive the right services and programs when and where they need them.

Developing an early-years strategy and action plan for Nova Scotia will provide a foundation for integrated delivery of the many early-years programs and services. As well, strengthening and creating new partnerships will ensure children get the best start in life, leading to a better future for them and their families.

Vision and Guiding Principles

A Vision for Early Years in Nova Scotia

The vision for early years in Nova Scotia is clear:

Children are healthy, safe, and nurtured in their families and communities.

Guiding Principles

Comprehensive: Programs and services should address the needs of the whole child in the context of their families and communities, recognizing that the child, parent, caregiver, and community all contribute to optimal child development.

Integrated: Programs should be co-ordinated and integrated – without duplication – encompassing all aspects of the early years, including health, education, and child care.

Accessible: Programs and services must be accessible for people with a diverse range of social, cultural, economic, or geographic circumstances. Families should also be able to easily identify and access programs and services available to them, ideally through a single entry point.

Inclusive and Respectful of Diversity: Every child should have opportunities to grow, learn, and develop a sense of belonging within their families, communities, and society. The needs of children and families with diverse values, beliefs, and behaviours must be addressed, including tailoring the delivery of programs and services to meet social, cultural, and linguistic considerations.

High Quality: Policies and programs should be based on recent research and best practices for children. Programs, services, and resources should be appropriate to the age and developmental stage of the child.

Accountability: Programs and services must be tied to a vision, policy, and priorities. They also must be evaluated, based on standards, outcomes, or other measures, to ensure accountability for results.

Community-based: Programs, services, and policy will be based on the needs and strengths of communities. This will be a continuous process of adapting and refining our ability to reach our communities. Programs, services, and policy will also build on community leadership, knowledge, and life experiences.

Priority Areas of Action and Outcomes

The discussion on the early years can be organized around five main themes:

- early learning
- children's growth, development, and wellness
- support for families
- the workforce
- leadership, system integration, and accountability

Each theme is introduced with a brief definition, current issues are identified, and potential outcomes are proposed. This information is intended to start the discussion and stimulate thinking about what an early-years system will look like.

Early Learning

Early learning refers to a wide range of activities that can occur in a variety of settings to expand young children's physical, emotional, social, and creative development. Children develop their ability to learn through supportive relationships with their families, with other children and adults in their communities, and all that is around them. Play and experimentation also form a critical part of a child's early learning.

Nova Scotia also has approximately 400 licensed child-care centres. All of them play a valuable role in ensuring that families have access to child care.

Current Issues

Low Understanding and Awareness: Families, and society in general, do not fully understand the importance of the early years and early learning. As well, people are not aware that early learning can occur in a variety of settings – from play at home and outings with family and friends to events organized in the community and regulated child care.

Limited Accessibility to Early Learning: Not all children have access to early learning and play opportunities in a developmentally appropriate group setting prior to starting school.

Inconsistency in Program Quality: The quality of programs for children from birth to age 6 varies widely across the province. Some have standards and expected outcomes; some are evaluated, and others are not.

Transition to School: Many children have difficulty making the transition into school – and if they enter school behind their peers, they may not catch up. A contributing factor is the lack of connection between programs for children from birth to age 6 and public schools – for instance, no shared learning outcomes.

Children’s Growth, Development, and Wellness

Children rely on others to provide conditions that support their growth and development and their safety. Children are part of families and therefore what impacts the family also impacts the child (e.g. poverty, housing, unemployment, stress, etc.).

The experiences and relationships that children have during their early years (from prenatal development to 6 years of age) have lasting effects that reach far into adulthood: physical and mental health, physical activity, coping, emotional control, habitual ways of responding, behaviour, and self-regulation.

Current Issues

Lack of Opportunity for Assessment: Opportunities to assess the development of children from birth to age 6 (specifically at 18 and 24 months of age) are currently lacking. This results in missed opportunities to diagnose health or developmental issues at a crucial time.

Lack of Opportunity for Assessment of Stressors on Families: While an increase in home visits and other services present some opportunities to identify stressors on families, these opportunities are limited. This in turn limits the ability for service providers and health professionals to identify appropriate supports for families and children.

Health Issues: Nova Scotian children are facing significant health issues resulting from premature births, low birth weight, low breastfeeding rates, smoking in pregnancy, poor nutrition, obesity affecting prenatal care and birth, childhood obesity, and mental health and substance abuse issues.

Outcomes

- Families are supported (with knowledge, skills, and services) in their children’s growth and development, beginning in the prenatal period.
- Children thrive and grow up with health-promoting attitudes and behaviour.

Support for Families

Children are part of families; issues that impact the family impact the child. For example, low income levels and low literacy rates can challenge the most caring and committed parents in doing and being everything they want for their children. Families with children with special needs are particularly vulnerable.

That's why families are stronger when friends and neighbours reach out – and why community groups and provincial organizations must find new ways to work together to support children and their families.

Our families are also changing. Nova Scotia's families are more culturally diverse than in the past. Programs and services must be delivered in ways that respect this diversity.

Changing family structures, including the ways families balance the responsibilities of paid work, within the home, and raising children, are all important considerations. For example, more single dads are parenting, and grandparents are playing an increasingly important role.

Current Issues

Low Literacy Rates: Low literacy skills are an issue for many Nova Scotians. Research shows that a parent's education level and literacy skills are key factors in predicting positive outcomes for children.

Low Income Levels: Low incomes prevent some families from taking advantage of the 12-month maternity leave. As well, child care is too expensive for some families, even with existing financial assistance.

Transportation: In rural Nova Scotia in particular, lack of transportation limits access to early-years programs and services.

Services for Children with Special Needs: Families with children with special needs often are on waiting lists for early intervention programs and diagnostics.

Sustainable, Predictable Funding: Community-based organizations often must apply for funding or have multiple funding sources (including the unpredictability of fund-raising), challenging them in their long-term planning and certainty in delivering services.

Cultural Relevancy: With diverse backgrounds and needs of children, we must ensure that programs and services are respectful and engaging for all.

The Workforce

Workforce refers to those individuals who work in programs with a mandate to provide services to young children and their families. This could include early childhood educators, early interventionists, home visitors, and family resource centre staff.

This discussion can also include issues related to working parents.

Current Issues

Wages and Working Conditions: The extent of the role and contributions of this workforce to a child's learning and development is not well understood. As a result, wages and benefits remain low, making a career in the early years less attractive for potential workers. Government has provided funding to child-care centres to increase salaries. However, many experienced staff still make only minimum wage or slightly above, despite having completed post-secondary training. Benefits, including paid leave, vacation, and pension opportunities, also vary greatly across the workforce.

Qualifications and Training: A wide range of positions, representing the many types of programs and services, exist across the workforce. Education and training requirements also vary greatly. This limits opportunities for professionals from across the workforce to pursue professional development as a group – to share their expertise and develop stronger links and a common understanding of how their work is related.

Growing Demand for Child Care: As Nova Scotia's economy grows, the province will need more qualified early childhood educators and more child-care options for families.

Support for Parents in the Workforce: Child care helps women to obtain higher education and to enter and stay in the workforce. This leads to increased financial independence and, in some cases, helps break the cycle of poverty. Currently in Nova Scotia, access to reliable and developmentally appropriate child care can be difficult for families. Barriers include a limited number of child-care spaces, limited options for parents who work irregular hours or shifts, and the cost of child care, especially for families with more than one child.

Leadership, System Integration, and Accountability

The early years begin before birth, in the prenatal period, and continue until a child reaches 6 years of age.

Currently across the province, a patchwork of programs and services intended to benefit families with children in the early years are delivered in a wide variety of ways. This fragmented approach leads to variations in quality of programs and services, creates gaps and duplication, dilutes accountability, and limits the opportunity for integration and co-ordination.

We have strengths to build on. A critical piece is to ensure programs and services that are working well are sustained and can grow. There is also work to do to ensure that our collective efforts are integrated, support priorities, and lead to the best results for families and children. The province now has a leadership opportunity to develop an early-years policy framework and action plan built on partnerships and integration – with clear accountability for results.

Current Issues

Integration: No single program or department holds the responsibility for children. This results in a multitude of issues such as

- fragmented management and delivery of programs and services (in “silos”)
- the lack of a common framework to establish measures of quality, inclusiveness, affordability, and developmentally appropriate programs and services
- limited ability to share information and data, which in turn creates barriers to effective communications within government and with and among partners
- a lack of an integrated continuum of supports and services for children and families, including children with special needs
- poor linkages with other levels of governments, such as municipalities and school boards
- difficulty for families to find and access the right support at the right time, based on their needs

Stakeholder Involvement: Stakeholders (e.g. businesses and community groups) want to be involved in policy, program planning, and delivery of early childhood programs but are not aware of clear and meaningful opportunities to do so.

Accountability: Nova Scotia does not have a common policy direction or strategy to guide program development and service delivery for the early years. Accordingly, program standards and guidelines, as well as monitoring and evaluation, are often program-specific. They do not build upon each other in ways that could lead to a sense of shared responsibility or a potential for greater benefit collectively than what can be achieved through individual and isolated efforts.

Outcomes

- Partnerships—within government and with partners—improve communication, planning, integration, evaluation, and shared accountability for early-years programs and services.
- Families are aware of supports available to them, and can access the programs and services they need, when and where they need them.

Moving Forward

In your opinion, what are the priority areas for action to address the current issues and achieve the outcomes related to **leadership, system integration, and accountability**? Is there anything we are doing that we shouldn't be doing?

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Next Steps

All Nova Scotians now have the opportunity to share their views on priorities for the early years.

Beginning in June, provincial staff will have six regional meetings with partner organizations involved in early learning. As well, regional meetings will be held with focus groups of parents and families.

The Advisory Council is now in place. The Council will advise the Minister of Education and the Better Health Care Ministers on strategic issues related to the early-years work.

The council is composed of highly respected, committed, and qualified people, and represents a wide scope of interests spanning the early years. Council members are:

Anne McGuire (co-chair), president and CEO of the IWK Health Centre, champion for early years

Dr. Mary Lyon (co-chair), Professor Emerita, Mount Saint Vincent University; research interests include early childhood education, integration of children with special needs, and issues related to rural and remote service delivery systems

Darrell Samson, superintendent, Conseil scolaire acadien provincial

Cyril Reid, former high school teacher and current chair of the N.S. Council of Chairs for Community Child Welfare Boards and V.P. of the Nova Scotia Council for the Family, Amherst

Dr. Elizabeth Munroe, assistant professor, Faculty of Education, St. Francis Xavier University; recent research in early years programs in Nova Scotia's Mi'kmaw communities

Dr. Gaynor Watson-Creed, Medical Officer of Health, Capital District Health Authority

Dr. Martha MacDonald, Professor of Economics and Chair of the Department, Saint Mary's University; where she teaches courses in labour economics and women and the economy

Dr. Andrew Lynk, Chief of Pediatrics, part time medical officer of health, Cape Breton District Health Authority, President-Elect of the Canadian Paediatric Society

Ted Muggah, retired public school administrator with extensive experience in special education and early intervention, Annapolis Valley

Nova Scotians can also share their views by responding to the questions in this discussion paper online or in writing.

Go to novascotia.ca/earlyyears and complete the survey.

Send online submissions to: EarlyYears@gov.ns.ca

Send written submissions to:

Early Years Project Office
Department of Education
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Halifax, NS
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Provincial staff will analyze results from the consultation over the summer months and provide recommendations to government in the fall. While changes will be phased in as part of a multi-year plan, Nova Scotians will begin seeing action in 2013 on how we can work more effectively together to give children the very best start in life.