

Building Connections:

An Early Years Framework for Nova Scotia

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Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

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Minister's Message

The early years, from before birth through school entry, are crucial for a child's healthy development. Children's early experiences – good or bad – can have a significant impact on their long-term development and well-being.

The Government of Nova Scotia is committed to providing our children with the best possible start in life. That is why we have reached out to families, early childhood educators, health care professionals, community based agencies, partners and many others so together we can improve early learning for all children.

As a result, our Education Action Plan is broadening supports for school-age children and we are improving access to early intervention services. Our childcare plan includes steps to ensure a high quality and affordable childcare system with early childhood educators who are better compensated and valued for the important work they do.

Our commitment to children has also led us to create the Provincial Early Years Partnership (PEYP), a diverse, child-focused network of people all over the province—all with expertise and experience in early years education and support.

We know that especially in their first six years, child and family-centred programs and services can make a tremendous difference in the long term health, well-being and learning success of our children. The PEYP will build on our collective knowledge and expertise to provide a framework to ensure that children from birth through school entry have every opportunity for success.

I look forward to watching this framework come to life under the leadership of these exceptional partners, working with dedicated advocates and service providers throughout the province to provide the best possible early learning system for our youngest Nova Scotians.



Zach Churchill

Minister, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Introduction

By the time children arrive for the first day of school, their path for learning is clearly laid out.

Think about that. By the age of five, we can predict which little ones are likely to face challenges in their school lives¹. More than a quarter of Nova Scotia's grade primary students will likely have a tougher time in school than their peers².

The Early Development Instrument (EDI) is a population-level research tool used in Nova Scotia, that measures the developmental health of populations of children at school entry. Children's development is measured on five key domains: physical health and well being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge. The EDI results generate dialogue and support collaborative work among community partners, government, schools and families plan to improve children's futures.

The early years are a period of intense learning and development, when the brain develops and changes over a short period of time. In the first year of life, the architecture of the brain takes shape at an astounding rate – approximately 700 new neural connections are being built *per second*. Scientists now know that this process is not genetically predetermined, but is in fact dramatically influenced by children's early experiences with people and their surroundings³.

We know that the more stimulating and nurturing their early environment is, the more children develop in these areas. At the same time, negative experiences in the early years can leave children vulnerable to behavioural and emotional challenges throughout their lives⁴. In some cases, this can lead to long term physical and mental health issues and increased contact with support services⁵.

In Nova Scotia, 25% of children will be vulnerable on at least one of the five key domains, when they arrive in Primary⁶.

High quality early childhood programs and services set children up for success, giving them better prospects to graduate and enter post-secondary education. They can help parents identify learning or developmental needs of their children at an early stage, allowing them to get the specialized attention they may need earlier in life. This can lead to better outcomes and more opportunities for success.

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- 1 McCain, M.N., Mustard, J.F., & McCuaig, K. (2011). Early Years Study 3: Making Decisions, Taking Action. Toronto: Margaret & Wallace McCain Family Foundation.
 - 2 Offord Centre for Child Studies McMaster University (2016). The Nova Scotia Early Development Instrument (EDI) Report 2013-2015. Retrieved from ednet.ns.ca/earlyyears/documents/EDI-report-2013-15.pdf.
 - 3 Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2009). In Brief: The Science of Early Childhood Development. Cambridge, Ma.: Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University. Retrieved from developingchild.harvard.edu/.
 - 4 Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2009). In Brief: The Science of Early Childhood Development. Cambridge, Ma.: Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University. Retrieved from developingchild.harvard.edu/.
 - 5 Melhuish, E. et al. (2015). A Review of Research on the Effects of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) on Child Development. Oxford: University of Oxford. Retrieved from ecec-care.org/fileadmin/careproject/Publications/reports/CARE_D4_1_review_of_effects_of_ecec.pdf
 - 6 Offord Centre for Child Studies McMaster University (2016). The Nova Scotia Early Development Instrument (EDI) Report 2013-2015. Retrieved from ednet.ns.ca/earlyyears/documents/EDI-report-2013-15.pdf.

Quality, accessible programs and services also allow more parents and caregivers to be in the workforce, reducing family poverty and helping to address income inequality.

With the knowledge and expertise of all our partners we have the ability to make a profound difference in the early years in Nova Scotia. It is vital that we take a thoughtful and coherent approach to the programs and services we provide. With the shared commitment and participation of our partners, the Early Years Framework will guide our collective approach to the development and delivery of integrated early years programs and services that focus on improving outcomes for our children and families.

“The true measure of a nation’s standing is how well it attends to its children—their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they are born.” – UNICEF⁷

The Provincial Early Years Partnership (PEYP)

The critical importance of a strong start in life is recognized by Nova Scotians, including early childhood educators, school boards, educators, health care providers, First Nations communities, African Nova Scotian communities, Acadian and Francophone communities, Early Childhood Development professionals, policy makers, inclusion partners, special needs advocates and many others involved in supporting young children’s education and healthy development.

The Provincial Early Years Partnership was established in response to recommendations from the Early Years Consultation held in 2012. Many organizations, partners and individuals are represented on the Provincial Early Years Partnership (see Appendix A). A key element of their work has been the development of this Early Years Framework.

⁷ UNICEF (2007) Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries, *Innocenti Report Card 7*, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence. Retrieved from unicef.org/media/files/ChildPovertyReport.pdf

The Early Years Framework

We know that not every child starts life on an equal playing field. For reasons related to health, economics, environment, and a number of other factors, approximately 25% of children and their families will need extra support to work toward their full potential.

By creating an integrated early years framework, the Government of Nova Scotia and its partners are taking an important step toward ensuring that every child in the province has the best possible start in life, and a positive transition into the public school system.

We will do this by taking the very best knowledge, research, and insight from a wide array of disciplines, and distilling them into **one system, entirely dedicated to our youngest children**. We will then introduce that system to families through a seamless, open-door approach that supports young children and those who care for them, no matter where they are in the province and what challenges they face.

Traditionally, the responsibility for developing our youngest children has been left entirely to families, with inconsistent access to services and programs. In other words, our programs and services were designed, delivered and administered by a wide variety of groups and departments.

Let's be clear – excellent work is happening all over this province, led by passionate advocates for young children. Thousands of people working in more than 200 programs and services are dedicated to supporting children and families and early years professionals.

Still, without widespread coordination between the various government departments, health and education professionals, and service providers that form our early years system, we run the risk that children, specifically those with more complex situations, will fall between the cracks.

The Early Years Framework is not intended to be a set of prescriptive actions. Rather, the Early Years Framework establishes guiding principles and focus areas, to help guide the collaborative efforts of many partners throughout the province in developing a continuum of programming and services for the early years that begins prenatally and continues through the transition into the elementary school system.

Guiding Principles

The seven principles below will guide the work of the Provincial Early Years Partnership, and the hundreds of organizations and individuals who will collectively build a more comprehensive and coordinated early years system in the coming months and years.

High Quality: Policies, programs and services must be true to internationally-recognized standards for the health and development of children. Programs, services, and resources should be appropriate to the age and developmental competencies of the child and provided by trained individuals.

Comprehensive: Programs and services should be child and family-centered and address the needs of the whole child within the context of their families and communities. Effective programming recognizes that the child, parent, caregiver, and community all contribute to optimal child development. Family-centered is interpreted as a collaborative approach to service delivery and decision-making where each party respects the knowledge, skills and experience that others bring to the table.

Integrated: Programs and services should be collaborative and delivered through an integrated approach, filling gaps in order to best meet the needs of children and their families and encompassing all aspects of the early years system, including health, education, and child care. The provision of the same or similar services in an additional language or to reflect cultural factors should not be construed as duplication.

Accessible: To the greatest extent possible, programs and services must be accessible in a timely manner, recognizing that, at times, programs may require support to meet a wide variety of pressures. Programs and services are culturally safe and unbiased, reflecting 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 and safety within their families, communities, and society. The strengths and needs of children and families with diverse values, beliefs, abilities, and practices must be addressed, including tailoring the delivery of programs and services to meet social, cultural, jurisdictional and linguistic considerations.

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

Accountable: Programs and services must be tied to the organization's vision, policy, and priorities. They also must be evaluated, based on standards, outcomes, or other measures, to ensure accountability for results.

Focus Areas

The Early Years Framework focuses on five key areas to create an integrated early years system that supports all young children and their families. The work will, above all, encompass the following:

1. **Ensuring positive developmental outcomes for children** by providing their families with the knowledge, skill and services they need, when and where they need them, beginning in the prenatal period.
2. **Supporting children and families** with a seamless, integrated approach that responds to their unique, diverse needs. This includes collaborating to reduce gaps in programs and services while removing barriers to ensure the most accessible system possible.
3. **Improving access to positive and meaningful early experiences** in high-quality early learning environments, centred on children and families. These environments allow children to learn and develop through play and hands-on experiences, while following best practices and promoting healthy living.
4. **Demonstrating leadership, integration and accountability** by working collaboratively to get the best possible results for children, families, and communities. This will occur by ensuring that the voices of families and communities are sought out and heard, that insights and resources are shared across the province, and that the strength and wisdom of all cultures comes through in our early learning system.
5. **Supporting and developing a highly-skilled, valued and motivated workforce** to make the early years experience as healthy, safe and nurturing as possible for our children. To build a robust system, the people doing this crucial work must be given ways to thrive and develop in a fair and equitable system that celebrates their commitment and dedication.

The Framework is grounded in a common set of guiding principles that reflect the values and goals of the partners whose work or lives have a direct connection to the early years. It is the lens through which we will develop an integrated and collaborative approach for the provision of early years programs and services in Nova Scotia.

A Call To Action

We all have a role in working to improve the lives of children and families in Nova Scotia. The framework recognizes that we are all part of a system and can guide our collective approach to the development and delivery of early years programs and services. However, change will only happen with the shared commitment and participation of all our partners.

Going forward, the Provincial Early Years Partnership will lead the cross-province effort to bring the principles in this framework to life. Each member of the partnership will have its own approach – within professions and associations, among colleagues and community members, in community centres and kitchens, child care centres and offices, and so on. Although the approach may vary, the collective work will culminate in a shared culture and commitment to an integrated early years system for Nova Scotia.

Provincial government departments with roles that touch on the early years will work together to ensure that they are aligned and working together, in conjunction with the PEYP.

The common threads in all of this work will be discussion, reflection, and teamwork, focusing on how the work of each organization, practice or individual aligns with a coordinated early years approach, and where changes are needed to create a more effective system with better outcomes.

The partnership will work with smaller groups in many communities to design a truly integrated early learning, care, and support system for the entire province. It is only by channeling the collective experiences, expertise and enthusiasm of those of you in the early years community that we will succeed.

Together, using this common framework, we will develop a streamlined, coordinated, proven approach to learning that will result in improved outcomes for the lifelong development of Nova Scotia's children.

Spotlight On Community: Guysborough County

The Guysborough County Early Years Networking Committee has representation from Recreation, Kids First, NS Early Childhood Development Intervention Services, SchoolsPlus, DCS, Public Health, Guysborough Adult Learning Association, and a Family Practice Nurse. In recent months the committee received a presentation on the EDI results for Guysborough County and recognized there is concern in several domains. In response to recognizing that the state of children's readiness for school impacts the whole community, the GCEYNC felt various parts of the community need to be involved with addressing this. As a result the Committee struck a working group which included Parents, Community members, a Speech Language Pathologist, a Child, Youth and Family clinician, and others including some committee members. The working group was tasked with reviewing the EDI results with the goal of creating strategic actions for the GCEYNC to use to support families and communities in fostering healthy child development. Several recommendations were put forward and are being acted upon.

For more information, contact the Early Years Branch at ednet.ns.ca/earlyyears.

Appendices

Appendix A

Provincial Early Years Partnership (PEYP) membership:

- African Nova Scotian Community
- Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority (APSEA)
- Centre provincial de ressources préscolaires
- Early Childhood Education Training Institution
- Early Childhood Interventionists Association of Nova Scotia (ECIANS)
- Early Intervention Association of Nova Scotia (EINS)
- Family Home Day Care Coalition
- Family Resource Centres
- First Nations Health Directors
- IWK Health Centre (inclusive of Women's & Newborn Health, Mental Health & Addictions, Primary Health Care, RCP and Children's Health)
- Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey
- Nova Scotia Child Care Association (NSCCA)
- Nova Scotia Hearing and Speech Centres
- Provincial government program leads
- Public Health Services
- School Boards

Appendix B

Convention on the Rights of the Child [ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf)
