



Synthesis on child care (0-5 years)

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How Important Is It?

The number of women participating in the Canadian labour market has increased substantially over the past 25 years. According to Statistics Canada, the labour force participation rate of women with children under three rose from 28% in 1976 to 63% in 2003. Similarly, the number of women with children between the ages of three and five increased dramatically, from 37% in 1976 to 69% in 2003.¹

The need for non-parental care, or child care, has risen alongside the ever increasing number of women joining and returning to the workforce. In 1996-97, almost 2 million children under 12 years of age were participating in some type of non-parental care. Approximately 25% of infants under one and 46% of children between the ages of one and five were involved in some form of non parental care.²

Non-parental care or [child care](#) can be defined as the care of children in their home, someone else's home or in a centre, where care and education are provided by a person other than an immediate family member. As child care programs vary in location and design, so do the levels of quality.

The provision of quality in child care centres is mainly determined by [three factors](#):

- low child-adult ratios;
- highly educated providers with specialized training; and
- stimulating environments.

What Do We Know?

Studies examining the effects of early child care experiences on young children's development investigate [diversity](#) in child care quality and differences among [individual children](#) and their [families](#). Variations in the quality of child care are reflective of program practices, educators' training and teacher-child relationships, whereas [variations](#) among children and families include socio-economic status, parent education, parent-child relationships, child temperament and choice of care.

Only a few studies have investigated the level of quality available in the United States and Canada, and even fewer studies have attempted to determine the level of quality needed for optimal development. These few studies suggest that the [degree of quality](#) needed for optimum development is high — higher than the average child care arrangements currently available in North America.

Evidence suggests that high-quality child care is associated with [moderate gains](#) in cognitive, linguistic and social and emotional development for children. Quality care is also associated with increased [cooperation and compliance](#) with adults and social interactions among peers. On the other hand, participation in low-quality care, large

groups, long hours of care and instability within the care environment may have a [negative impact](#) on early child development. Young children participating in this low-quality care are [at risk](#) for insecure attachments and heightened [behaviour problems](#).

Additional research demonstrates that:

- mothers' [sensitivity and responsiveness](#) have a greater impact on early childhood social and emotional development than early care experiences;
- [children enrolled earlier](#), before age 3, may experience higher levels of stress (worry) and antisocial behaviours;
- participation in high-quality child care may act as a [protective factor](#) for children from disadvantaged homes and increase their chances of [academic success](#).

Family factors influence parents' decisions on the use and type of care they select for their children. [Socio-economically advantaged families](#) tend to choose higher quality care for their children.

What Can Be Done?

Recommendations from researchers for child care policy focus on accessibility, affordability and high-quality care for all young children. The likelihood of children [accessing quality child care](#) is dependent on the material and social resources of parents. If high-quality child care is positively associated with improved development in young children and if all children are to benefit from their early experiences in child care, the [overall quality](#) of care needs to be enhanced. Nevertheless, is quality care enough?

Researchers have provided valuable information about the impacts of early care and development, yet [further longitudinal studies](#) are needed to examine short and long-term outcomes (i.e. "sleeper" influences) of child care and to evaluate which types of child care should be promoted.

Child care varies across countries in terms of government involvement. Comparative studies suggest that higher quality child care services are those that are [integrated](#) (day care and kindergarten together) and receive high government support. Further research is required in order to address how different degrees of government centralization or decentralization have an effect on child care services. In the present globalized context, the effect of [migrant care providers](#) on child care services should also be studied.

Additional recommendations include [monetary provisions](#) to support families with infants and toddlers ([extended and paid parental leave, child tax credits](#)). The integration of day care and kindergarten in child care services managed by a [single ministry](#) is also recommended. For example, in Sweden child care is included in the educational system and efforts to provide quality care are ensured through [state regulation](#). Family support also plays a large role in the context of early care in Sweden. Family support includes, but is not limited to, the parents' ability to stay home when a child is very young (parental leave, lasting for twelve months with 80% of the salary paid by the state) or ill (same financial support as received from parental leave if a child falls ill during the preschool years). These provisions greatly [alleviate parental concerns](#) regarding child-rearing choices and care arrangements.

To ensure that all children receive the highest quality of child care, policies and regulations need to promote and support:

- well-trained and educated staff;
- high staff-child ratios (plus attention to group size and composition);
- low staff turnover and good wages;
- quality of the curriculum and access to a variety of positive social relationships and experiences;
- quality of the care provider-child relationship;
- effective leadership;
- an integrated child care system led by the state.

All levels of government and the public need to take decisive action to assign [responsibility](#) for the provision of quality child care. [Benefit-cost analyses](#) regarding interventions provide wide margins for benefits over costs, suggesting that even small to moderate benefits from quality care are of sufficient value to warrant government regulation and financial support on behalf of all children.

References

1. Statistics Canada. *Women in Canada: Work chapter updates*. Ottawa, Ontario: Statistics Canada; 2003. Catalogue no. 89F0133XIE. Available at: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89f0133x/89f0133x2003000-eng.pdf>. Accessed February 11, 2009.
2. Statistics Canada. (2000). *Women in Canada*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Catalogue 89-503-XPE. Cited in: Johnson KL, Lero DS, Rooney JA. *Work-life compendium 2001: 150 Canadian statistics on work, family and well-being*. Guelph, Ontario: Centre for Families, Work and Well-being, University of Guelph; 2001:9,43. Available at: <http://dsp-psd.communication.gc.ca/Collection/RH64-3-2001E.pdf>. Accessed March 20, 2009.