



## Synthesis on preschool programs

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### How important is it?

An increasing number of Canadian children are in some form of child care. In 2002–2003, 54% of Canadian children aged six months to five years were in some form of child care. Compare this to the statistic of 42% in 1994–1995 and it's clear that the numbers are on the rise<sup>1</sup>.

Also increasing is the proportion of families who opt for preschool programs, where [possible settings](#) include child-care centres, nursery schools, preschools, pre-kindergarten, child development centres, playgroups and Head Start. This can be attributed to the worldwide movement of mothers with young children into the workforce and the widespread knowledge of the value of good early childhood education, as evidenced by recent research on the development of the human brain and evaluative research on model early childhood programs.

[Preschool programs](#) provide care and education to children in the years before they enter school. They are structured programs with recurrent activities, the content of which is central to supporting and strengthening young children's learning and development. The curricula of these programs form the "front line" of children's experiences – what is taught and what is learned.

### What do we know?

High-quality early care and education have been associated with both short- and long-term cognitive, social and emotional [benefits](#) for young children's development.

Publicly funded preschool programs, such as Head Start, have been shown to affect different aspects of children's cognitive, social and emotional development. Results of short-term preschool studies (e.g. Head Start Impact Study and Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey) have found growth in children in areas such as literacy skills, vocabulary, early writing skills, social skills, and reduced behaviour problems. Benefits for families include access to health care and, reduced use of physical discipline.

[Evaluative program studies](#) (e.g. High/Scope Perry Preschool Study, Carolina Abecedarian Study, Chicago Longitudinal Study) have found a variety of important positive long-lasting effects on participants, including intellectual abilities, school achievement and commitment, high school graduation, college attendance and grade retention. Adult earning levels, as well as employment rates, special services placement, teen parenthood and juvenile arrests, have also registered long-term improvements. These studies also have demonstrated substantial economic return on investment – up to \$17.07 per dollar invested.

[Curriculum](#) (the content of what is taught and what is learned), which has been studied empirically, is a critical component of preschool programs. Theories of child development have served as the principal foundation for curriculum model development. Variations among curriculum models reflect differences in values concerning what is more or less important for young children to learn, as well as differences in the process by which children are believed to learn and develop. These variations inform the role of teachers, the curriculum's focus, the classroom structure and ways in which children participate in learning.

Early childhood curriculum models also vary in terms of the freedom granted to teachers to interpret how the model's framework is implemented. Some curriculum models are highly structured and provide detailed scripts for teacher behaviours. Others emphasize guiding principles and expect teachers to determine how best to implement these principles. Curriculum models, regardless of their goals and the degree of flexibility in their implementation, are designed to promote uniformity across early childhood programs through the use of a prepared curriculum, consistent instructional techniques and predictable child outcomes.

Each curriculum model has significantly different effects on children. [Child results](#) are contingent not only on the curriculum, but also on children's temperament, family background, social class, cultural traditions and the qualifications and qualities of the classroom teacher.

### **What can be done?**

[Two dimensions](#) typically measured when quality is discussed are process variables (e.g. the nature of children's interactions with adult caregivers) and structural variables (e.g. adult-child ratios, group size and teacher training and knowledge). Heightened awareness of early development has turned the attention of policy-makers and practitioners to the content or curriculum of preschool programs.

So far, no particular curriculum model has been proven to be more effective than any other; however, scholars and major national organizations have identified the following [key aspects](#) of an effective curriculum model:

- Children are cognitively, physically, socially and artistically active and engaged.
- Curriculum goals are clearly defined, shared and understood by all adults who have a stake in children's learning.
- Teachers have frequent, meaningful interactions with children.
- The curriculum is based on evidence that is developmentally, culturally and linguistically relevant for the children who will experience the curriculum.
- The curriculum builds on children's prior learning and experiences.
- The curriculum should cover all areas of development, including children's physical health, well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge.
- The curriculum is aligned with learning standards and appropriate assessments.

Children's needs vary greatly, making it impractical to identify one ideal curriculum model. Nonetheless, curriculum is central not only to the knowledge and skills children gain, but also to the application of particular pedagogical approaches and the nature of teacher/caregiver-child interactions.

Instead, research is needed to determine the conditions under which certain curricula work best for certain children. Starting Strong II, the second report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), summarizes the findings of a comparative review of early childhood education and care programs and policies in 20 countries (including Canada) between 1998 and 2005. It makes two [recommendations](#): 1) that we place well-being, early development and learning at the centre of early childhood education, while respecting the child's agency and natural learning strategies; 2) that we develop with stakeholders broad guidelines and curricular standards for all early childhood education services.

Even though [prevailing approaches](#) in the U.S. and Canada may be different at some levels, the critical element that runs across all discussions of effective preschool programs is the need for a skilled, reflective and responsive early childhood workforce to establish preschool programs as early learning environments.

### Reference

1. Statistics Canada. Child care: An eight-year profile, 1994-1995 to 2002-2003. *The Daily* April 5, 2006. Available at: <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/060405/d060405a.htm>. Accessed February 4, 2008.