



Policy Brief No. 12
November 2022

**Policy Recommendations for
inclusive early childhood services**



Introduction

The IECSS project has been publishing Policy Briefs since 2014. Each of the briefs is in response to a policy change or discussion that was current at the time of writing the brief. This document includes all of the policy recommendations from the IECSS project to date.

We are re-sharing the recommendations as a **CALL TO ACTION** because we have documented ongoing concerns about ableism, disability discrimination, and structural inequality that results from overly complicated service systems and requirements for engagement. We also know that it is possible to support families in a good way if we are able to start from their experience, and with their guidance. While some of the recommendations are now 7 years old, they continue to be relevant. We ask that decision makers and those working within social institutions pay attention.

At this time, the IECSS project has collected up to 9 interviews per family, from 152 participants, in 9 communities across Canada (Wellington County, City of Hamilton, City of Toronto, Peel Region, District of Timiskaming, Constance Lake First Nation/Hearst, Brandon, Powell River, Comox Valley, and Yellowknife). All of the recommendations are informed directly by our analysis of family interviews about their own and their children's experiences.

This call to action is being published following the Let the Rivers Flow gathering (<https://www.torontomu.ca/inclusive-early-childhood-service-system/newsandevents/2020/05/let-the-rivers-flow-responsive-early-childhood-and-community-inclusion/>).

The gathering was hosted by the District of Temiskaming Wisdom Keepers, who have guided this research from the outset, and Keepers of the Circle in collaboration with the IECSS research project. At the gathering, those with lived experience as disabled people, family members, and academics shared their views and stories. On the final day of the gathering, we presented findings from the IECSS project.

Elder Sally Susan Martel reminds us that policy does not hold authority over other people, particularly Indigenous peoples. Instead, being guided by traditional authority can help us to engage with children and families in a good way. In response to discussion from those who participated in the gathering, and with guidance from the Elders, we suggest that reading of these recommendations can be done through the lens of the 7 grandfather teachings: **Love, Respect, Bravery, Truth, Honesty, Humility & Wisdom**. These teachings are central to Anishnaabe ways of living, but hold relevance to anyone working with families, children, and who is seeking to centre the lived experiences of disabled children.

We welcome comments and collaboration on the implementation of these recommendations. For those who use them in their work, we encourage you to share your experiences with others and with us if you choose.

Calls to Action

Underwood, K., Haché, A., & Douglas, P. (2021). IECSS policy brief no. 11: Submission to the Day of General Discussion on Children's Rights and Alternative Care: Disability and childhood. Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project.

1. Given the prevalence of maltreatment and foster care placement for disabled children, it is critical that we listen to and understand the experiences and viewpoints of disabled children, through their own voices.
2. Remove unnecessary bureaucracy and ensure families have the support they need to access services.
3. Ensure that early childhood education, care and intervention systems recognize that children may have fluid custodial relationships. Attach funding to the child, recognizing that changes in custody must not lead to loss of services, or disruptions in communication with caregivers or disruptions in procedural access such as removal from waitlists.
4. Create a system where all parents and caregivers are able to participate in early childhood disability services. Ensure that disability is not a reason for parents to be perceived or feel that they do not have capacity to care for their children.
5. Create a system where parents are invited into the training environment – erase the false divide between worker expertise and parent expertise and generate a framework that says parents/workers need the same expertise and access to that training.
6. Disability is higher in communities that have experienced material and other effects of systemic racism and colonialism. Developmental assessments must be considered in this context.

Underwood, K., & Snoddon, K. (2021). IECSS policy brief no. 10: Deaf childhoods and inclusive early childhood education and care. Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project.

7. A national sign language strategy is needed in order to ensure that child care is inclusive of deaf children and maximizes access to comprehensive sign language programs and services that meet the needs of children and families. Both bilingual/bimodal early years programs and sign language programs for families must be adequately funded.
8. Deafness is intersectional; a national childcare strategy that is inclusive will recognize the language rights of deaf children. It will also recognize the intersectional identities of deaf children, ensuring access to national sign language programs and service, while protecting their other identities.
9. Inclusion means ensuring access to early childhood education and care for all children and support for deaf communities. The organization of services presents normative values, which may be perpetuating audism and ableism throughout early years systems.

Lawrence, B., Underwood, K., & Douglas, P. (2020). IECSS policy brief no. 9: Reconciling interests of children and economies during the COVID-19 pandemic: Learning from families in Brandon, Manitoba. Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project.

10. Recognize the importance of childcare for children, not just their families and the economy. The developmental impacts of service interruption will be experienced differently across the population, with disabled and vulnerable children likely to have the greatest adverse effects of the disruption.
11. Recognize that the early childhood education and care system is made up of more than just childcare. Critical to this system is preschool, family support, home visiting, and early intervention programs like speech and language and occupational therapy. As a result of the pandemic, many of these programs have not only stopped in-person service but the waitlists and intake processes have also been halted, so existing service delivery models must immediately be reassessed.
12. Recognize the disproportionate risk associated with the pandemic closures and reduced services for children who are accessing multiple services. These risks include disruption that could impact children's development, additional travel for families accessing services outside of their community, and risks associated with face-to-face contact with multiple professionals as services return to in-person models.

Smith, A. (2020). IECSS policy brief no. 8: Black experience and disabled childhoods: Comparison of federal and provincial policies. Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project.

13. Federal and provincial policies need to address intersectional interests related to Black lives and disabled children and their families.
14. There needs to be increased public awareness and understanding of systemic anti-Black racism across early childhood education, intervention and care services. This must include recognition of both the ways the historical and present-day anti-Black racism impact childhoods, and how ableism and disability effect early childhood and family experiences.
15. Targeted recruitment and engagement of Black families to better understand the institutional experiences of Black disabled children in research that informs policy related to Black families and disabled families.

IECSS. (2017b, July). Policy brief no. 7: A submission to the Canadian National Engagement on an Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework. Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project.

16. Intervention for Indigenous children should be provided in a context that is culturally safe and familiar to the child. An Indigenous ELCC Framework must recognize diversity of ability and development of individual children. More work is needed to articulate a theory of Indigenous Disability Culture.
17. ELCC programs should be family oriented and reduce institutional barriers including exclusion of children on the basis of disability. There must be a recognition of the

broad range of early years and family services. Indigenous children and families access both Indigenous and disability services.

18. Indigenous specific ELCC programs can be important places for children to develop their cultural understandings and self-identities. However, they are not always disability accessible. All programs that serve Indigenous children should be both accessible and culturally safe. Diagnostic assessments should not pathologize children by not recognizing their cultural context.

IECSS. (2017a, February). Policy brief no. 6: Response to the discussion paper on an Education Accessibility Standard for the AODA. Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project.

19. The Standard should include a statement about the need to accommodate regardless of diagnosis. The Standard should also point out the deficiencies in the categories of exceptionality. The Standard should recognize that the time and effort it takes to get a diagnosis means that many children are “undiagnosed”, but this institutional practice should not preclude accommodation.
20. Acknowledge the broad range of early years education programs. Ensure that definitions of Education Accessibility are inclusive of the broad range of setting in which people learn.
21. Recommendations:
 - The existing Accessibility Standards need to be reaffirmed and reinforced in early childhood and school settings.
 - The Accessibility Standard should acknowledge that high quality teaching and instruction are part of access.
 - The Accessibility Standard should acknowledge early intervention as a right under the CRPD and as part of the education system, and therefore, under the jurisdiction of an Accessibility Standard.
 - Finally, early intervention should be part of the general practice of early childhood education and care programs as part of an Accessibility Standard.
22. Recommendations:
 - The purposes of education should be explicit in the Standard
 - The Standard should explicitly state that geography should not limit access
 - Non-educational institutions and services should be required to adhere to the Standard where they impact educational accessibility.
 - Intersectional accessibility should be acknowledged in the Standard.

IECSS. (2017, January 30). Letter to Minister Naidoo-Harris: Submission to building a better future. Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project.

Based on the findings from the IECSS project, we put forward the following 5 recommendations:

23. Transformation of the early years system must be defined through the lens of children and families, not by funding envelopes or current service delivery systems. For

example, each community in this study is made up of diverse families, and each family has unique circumstances. However, the funding envelopes do not allow communities to design their budget for the families who are part of their community. Some of the communities where families in our study live have extraordinarily high rates of disability and the CMSM/DSSABs must be able to develop appropriate budgets for their community. We must also ensure that it is the documented experiences of families in the community driving the planning.

24. Ensure that access is considered across the full spectrum of the early years; this means that child care and family supports as well as many other direct services families with children with disabilities and special needs access under the special needs strategy must be considered at the same time as child care. For example, while you intend to increase child care spaces under your plan, 60% of families will not have child care. There must be a plan in place for those families which includes services outside of child care.
25. Quality needs to be synonymous with inclusive practice. Ample research demonstrates that meaningful inclusive services have the characteristics that make services high quality for all children.
26. As normative understandings of development are discriminatory, difference and diversity need to be stated as the norm, and equity to be a central rather than a peripheral concern for social policy. This is in keeping with the Ministry's document *How Does Learning Happen?*
27. Child care, Ontario Early Years Child and Family Centres, and Resource Consultation need to be a collective and central part of early childhood education, care and intervention. This means that they should all be working together with the understanding that many families are using all three. As CMSMs and DSAABs are now in the position of dictating how they will plan individual programs (child care, speech and language, autism supports, children's mental health, family support) they need the authority to make resource decisions that will allow them to support all families in a true system of services.

IECSS. (2016b, September). Policy brief no. 5: Ontario Early Years and Child and Family Centres: Opportunity for creation of an inclusive ECEC system. Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project.

28. It is recommended that CMSM/DSSABs use this opportunity to address many of the systemic barriers families encounter. By providing ongoing early intervention services for children and their families, OEYCFCs can offer children much higher levels of access to the early childhood education and care system and to ongoing, early intervention that is universal, free, and does not have qualifying criteria. This, however, will only happen if early intervention is considered to be a core service of OEYCFCs.
29. While some professionals in the system are supportive of families, there are no other services that have as their core mandate the support of parents and caregivers. It is critical that family support continues as a core service. It is recommended that family support includes support to navigate and coordinate services, to identify sources of funding and apply for funding and services, in conjunction with services that support the child.

30. It is recommended that early intervention services are integrated into OEYCFCs, where professionals will be able to provide children with embedded learning opportunities. It is also recommended that OEYCFCs do not just refer children out of the program but welcome them into a facility already prepared to support their development.
31. OEYCFCs should be working closely with child care as the core community service for young children in our society. Integrating the Resource Consultant model from child care into the OEYCFCs, and ideally into kindergarten, would provide opportunity for the same person or team to know a child and their family from birth through the school years. This would dramatically reduce the amount of time spent on relationship building, documentation, and administration.

IECSS. (2016a, March). Policy brief no. 4: Response to proposed regulations and changes to the Child Care and Early Years Act 2014. Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project.

Drawing on the emerging findings from the IECSS project, the following feedback is offered.

32. The proposed changes to age–range and group size for toddler and preschool rooms are inadequate to support the diversity of children in child care. The reality is that all classrooms have children with diverse developmental trajectories and disabilities. Classroom composition must honour the commitment to equity, inclusiveness, and diversity for all children.
33. The proposed changes do not address any requirements to ensure that staff, policy and child care practice are designed with the needs of all children being considered throughout the child care system. While increasing the minimum qualifications of staff may improve the capacity of staff to design more inclusive programs, the system must be designed to value them as central to the special needs strategy.
34. The qualities of child care that are known to support inclusiveness include the broader activities of family support, and inter-professional practice. The proposed changes to group size and age-range would undermine the capacity for programs to carry out these activities.
35. The proposed changes to age–range and group size for toddler and preschool rooms does not consider the reality of identification of developmental concerns and referrals and the ages at which this is most likely to happen. Our research indicates that from 18 months to 36 months is a critical time for families as they are referred to services, and work to establish a support network for themselves and their children.

If these recommendations are to be effectively implemented, the definition of “special needs” must be aligned with the values of inclusion. The limitations of the definition need to be understood:

- a) many children experience disability without formal diagnosis of a health condition;
- b) many children experience disability, but do not think of it as a “disability” or recognise the language of “special needs”;
- c) many children experience disability but do not have fixed “needs” as defined by the system. The child’s needs are as much a function of the way in which the service is

delivered, as they are of the characteristics of the child themselves. For this reason, it is critical that the principles of “equity, inclusiveness, and diversity” are embedded in the organisational arrangement of services.

36. Ratios must acknowledge the diversity of children attending all programs and the reality that every childcare classroom has children with diverse developmental trajectories and disabilities, whether they are identified or not.
37. Quality of care is connected to the recognition of children’s capabilities through ongoing interaction with caregivers. Early Childhood Educators are taught that high quality inclusive programs are created through universal design as well as individualised interactions for all children. This can only be done when they have time, resources, and ratios that support these practices.

IECSS. (2015b, September). Policy brief no. 3: Recommendations for creating an INCLUSIVE early childhood education and care system. Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project.

38. Inclusion is about diversity, so any policy must acknowledge the widely variable understandings of disability that exist across cultural viewpoints.
39. Inclusive practice is premised on the right of all children to access high quality early childhood education services as well as early intervention services
40. Service navigation and coordination need to be addressed in policy, in order to address the discrepancies between health, education and social services legislation.
41. The national childcare policy should ensure ongoing funding of itinerant resource consultation. In addition, centres should designate in-house staff for additional training, staff development, and communication with resource consultants.
42. The need for assessments and qualifying criteria to access services is fundamentally a diagnostic approach that is not a good fit for education. Early intervention services and supports for individual children should be accessible without institutions reinforcing deficit or medicalized views of difference and disability.

IECSS. (2015a, September). Policy brief no. 2: A submission to the *Day of General Discussion (DGD) on the right to education for persons with disabilities* to be held on 15 April 2015, at Palais des Nations, Geneva. Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project.

43. Early childhood education and care must be recognized as integral to inclusive education and the CRPD should be interpreted to include the ECEC system. Continuing to examine what it means to experience disability in early childhood will support children to preserve their identity. Acting to ensure that early intervention is not a health provision alone will support more inclusive early childhood experiences for children and their families. Our aims through research are to:
 - 1) Find collective identity for social action
 - 2) Ask: Is this working and who is it working for?
 - 3) Act to make others aware of when the system is not working
 - 4) Share experience and knowledge of what is working

The Inclusive Early Childhood Service System Project (IECSS)

This policy brief was prepared by:

The Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project (IECSS), in collaboration with Keepers of the Circle and the Wisdom Keepers.

The IECSS project is a multi-year partnership that seeks to understand how institutions are constituted in our society in order to organize children and their families. The project focuses on disabled childhoods in the context of family, community and society.

IECSS is funded by SSHRC/CRSH and Ryerson University. To learn more about IECSS, our partners, a full list of our team, and to see other publications from IECSS please visit our website:

www.InclusiveEarlyChildhood.ca



Funded by SSHRC/CRSH | Partnership Grant #895-2018-1022

