


CANADA'S NEW *EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE ACT*: *What is it and why is it important?*

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The *Canada Early Learning and Child Care Act* received royal assent and became official on March 19th, 2024. This Act is Canada's first national-level early learning and child care (ELCC) legislation since World War II (Dhuey, 2024), and has important implications for ELCC programs for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis families from coast to coast to coast.¹ This document provides an overview of the Act, with information for families, ELCC practitioners, researchers, and interested readers alike.



ELCC programs have the potential to promote and support young children's social, emotional, physical, linguistic, and intellectual growth and development.

What is ELCC?

ELCC programs have the potential to promote and support young children's social, emotional, physical, linguistic, and intellectual growth and development. Some ELCC programs not only provide opportunities to care for and supervise children, but also include parents and caregivers in their daily activities and/or engage with community organizations

and resources to improve program quality (Webb, 2025). High-quality ELCC programs, measured by many factors such as qualified ELCC staff and adequate funding, can improve children's health and well-being, with long-lasting effects (Dhuey, 2024). ELCC programs may exist in homes or centres, and may be run by private, public, or not-for-profit sectors.

¹ This summary is part of a collaborative project between the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health (NCCIH) and the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC). Together, the NCCIH and the FNIGC are unraveling concepts of quality ELCC programming and arrangements for First Nations families with young children on reserve. More information on this work is available on the NCCIH website.





What is the *Canada Early Learning and Child Care Act*?

The *Canada Early Learning and Child Care Act* sets into law Canada's commitment to collaborate with and provide long-term funding to provinces, territories, and Indigenous² governing bodies in support of a Canada-Wide ELCC system that is **accessible, affordable, inclusive**, and of **high quality**.

To create this Canada-Wide ELCC system, the Act commits Canada to:

- Establish an average of \$10-a-day regulated ELCC for all families in Canada, regardless of location or family income;
- Support regulated community-based, public, and not-for-profit child care providers;
- Bolster recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood educators;
- Create a National Advisory Council on ELCC to advise the Government of Canada on matters related to ELCC; and
- Report annually on federal investments and progress on meeting the Act's goals and objectives.

The Act builds on Canada's relationship with First Nations people, Inuit, and Métis people by:

- Contributing to Canada's implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples;
- Upholding Indigenous peoples' right to free, prior, and informed consent for legislation pertaining to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children; and
- Responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) Call to Action no. 12 for "federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families." (TRC, 2015, p. 2)



² The term "Indigenous" is used in this summary to refer to First Nations people, Inuit, and Métis people collectively. The terms "First Nations," "Inuit," and "Métis" are used when referring to specific populations.

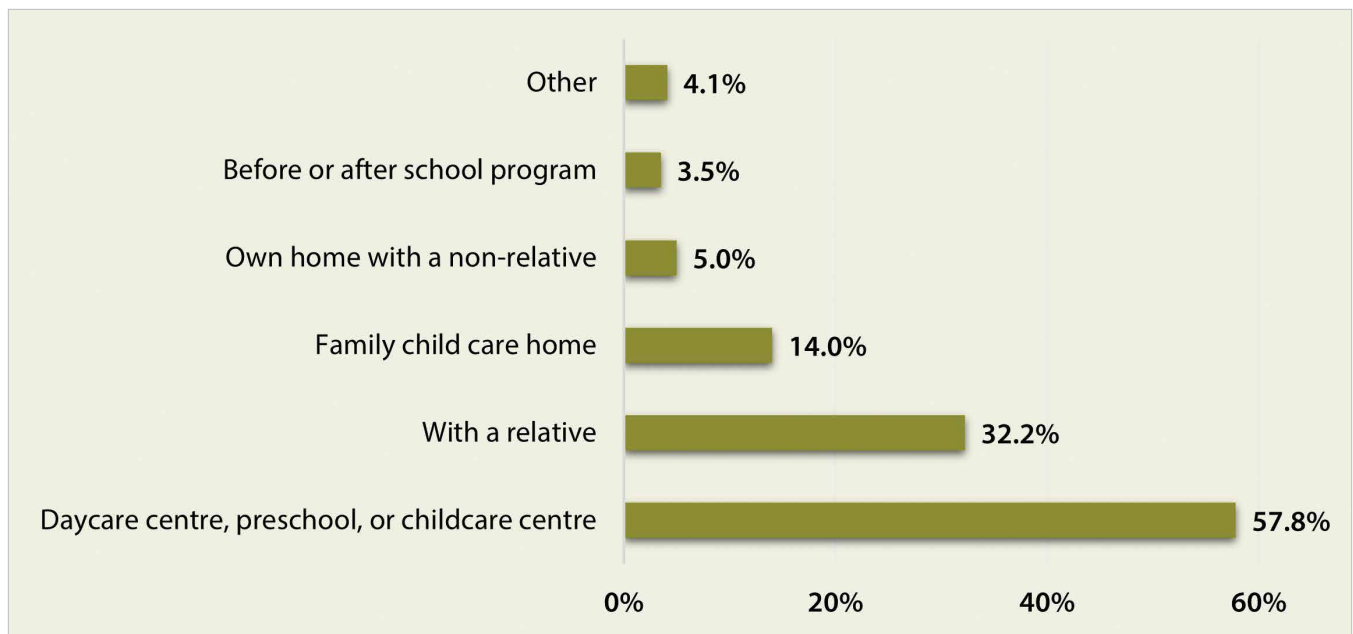
Child care use among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children across Canada

How the *Canada Early Learning and Child Care Act* will impact First Nations, Inuit, and Métis families depends on each family's use of ELCC and preference for differing ELCC arrangements. For instance, the Act prioritizes federal funding for ELCC offered by public and not-for-profit providers. The data below provide a glimpse into the use of ELCC arrangements among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children across Canada.

In 2023, 50.5% of First Nations children living off reserve, 39.7% of Inuit children, and 56.3% of Métis children aged 0 to 5 years attended child care (Statistics Canada, 2023a). Collectively, most children attended a daycare centre, preschool, or child care centre (57.8%), and/or care provided by a relative (32.2%) (Statistics Canada, 2023b). Figure 1 displays the proportion of Indigenous children attending these and other arrangements (excluding First Nations children living on reserve).

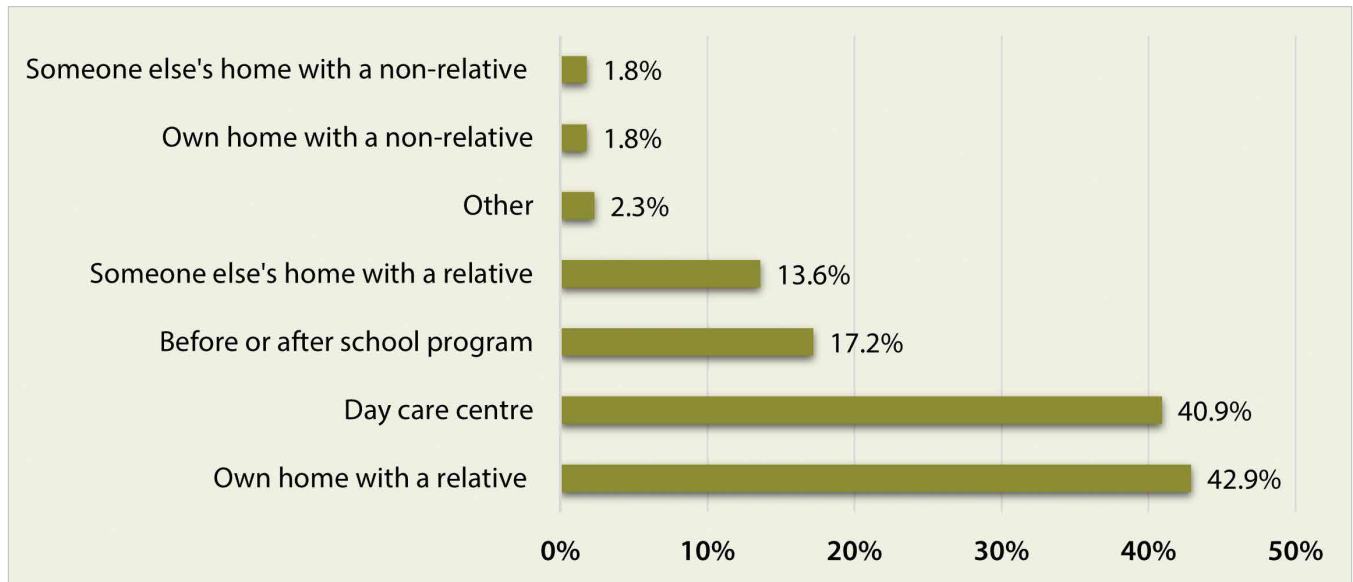


FIGURE 1. TYPE OF CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENT ATTENDED BY FIRST NATIONS CHILDREN LIVING OFF RESERVE AND INUIT AND MÉTIS CHILDREN IN 2023



Total weighted count for Indigenous respondents in Figure 1 is 52,900, 95% CI [48,300, 57,400]. Data source: Statistics Canada (2023b).

FIGURE 2. TYPE OF CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENT ATTENDED BY FIRST NATIONS CHILDREN LIVING ON RESERVE OR IN A NORTHERN COMMUNITY IN 2016

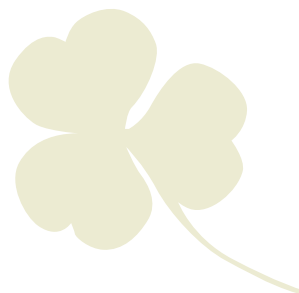


N = 7,158 primary caregivers responding for First Nations children. Data source: FNIGC (2016).

In 2016, the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC) found that 21.3% of children aged 0 to 11 years living on reserve or in a northern community attended regular child care. Most of these children also received care in their own home provided by a relative (42.9%) or at a daycare centre (40.9%), and some attended a before or after school program (17.2%) (FNIGC, 2016). Figure 2 displays the proportion of First Nations children who attended these and other arrangements.

What makes the *Canada Early Learning and Child Care Act* significant?

National-level ELCC legislation was first recommended in 1970 by the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada to address gender equality and improve women’s social and economic prosperity (Bird et al. 1970). Over half a century later, the *Canada Early Learning and Child Care Act* is part of Canada’s commitment to meeting human rights obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. It is also intended to comply with the Conventions on the Rights of the Child and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. With these obligations, the Act will hold regulated ELCC programs to standards of accessibility, affordability, inclusivity, and high quality for all families and children across Canada.



The Act stipulates that any federal investments in ELCC for Indigenous Peoples must align with the principles of the Indigenous-ELCC framework. This framework was co-developed by the Government of Canada and First Nations, Inuit, and Métis partners in 2018. The principles set out to guide the development of Indigenous-led, high-quality, and culturally appropriate ELCC. The nine principles of the Indigenous-ELCC framework include (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018, p. 6-7):

1. Indigenous knowledges, languages and cultures;
2. First Nations, Inuit and Métis determination;
3. quality programs and services;
4. child and family centred;
5. inclusive;
6. flexible and adaptable;
7. accessible;
8. transparent and accountable; and
9. respect, collaboration and partnerships.

What happens now?

Each province and territory has signed a multi-year agreement with the federal government to outline how they will support the establishment of a Canada-Wide ELCC system by 2026 (Government of Canada, 2024). These agreements commit the provinces and territories to work collaboratively with Indigenous communities, governments, and organizations to support Indigenous-led ELCC. This work will take different forms across the country.³ Nevertheless, the *Canada Early Learning and Child Care Act* will guarantee federal investments to support this work and ensure efforts align with the nine principles of the Indigenous-ELCC framework.

³ Some provincial/territorial ELCC legislation apply to programs provided in Indigenous communities, while other do not or use alternative arrangements. See Friendly et al. (2023) and Webb (2025) for further information.





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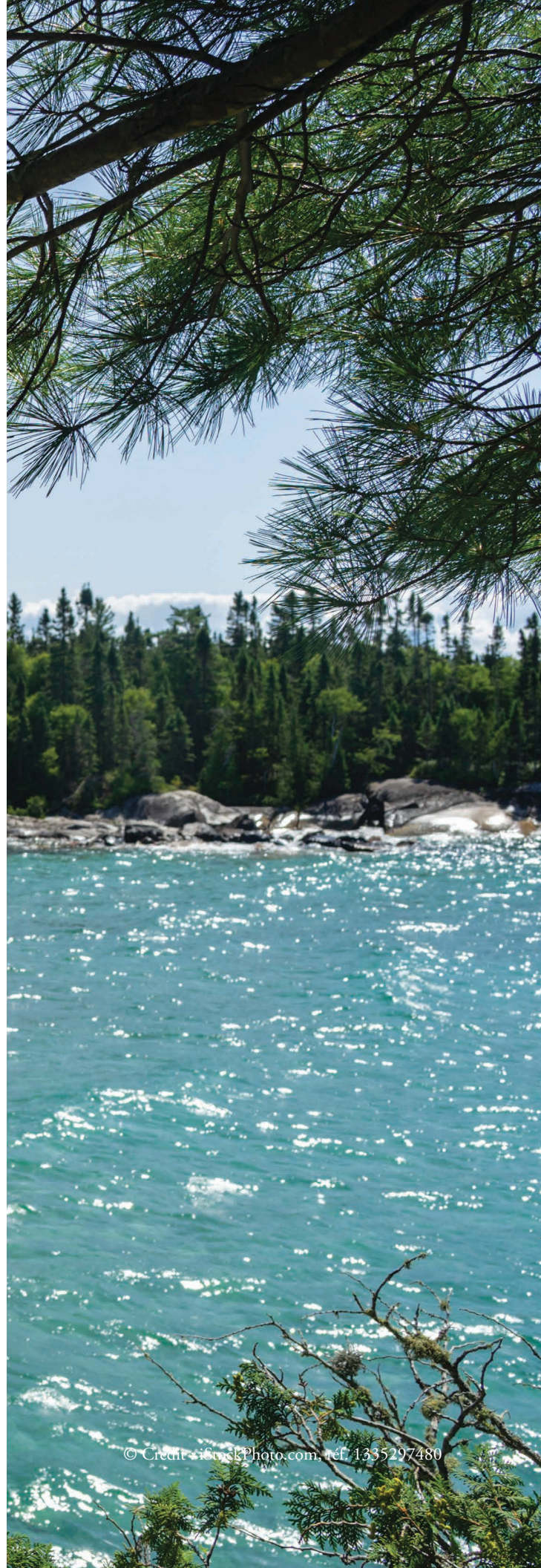
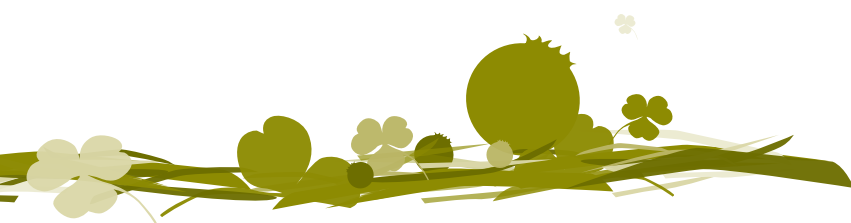
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REFLECT

Talk to others in your community, reflect on the content of this fact sheet, and contemplate how you could make a difference in the health and well-being for yourself, your family or your community.



ENGAGE

Find local friendship centers, community organizations or groups where you can volunteer or participate in healthy positive actions. You too can share knowledge and make a difference in the health and well-being of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples’ of Canada.

sharing knowledge · making a difference
partager les connaissances · faire une différence
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