

**First Ministers' Meeting  
Ottawa, Ontario - September 11, 2000**

**FIRST MINISTERS' MEETING COMMUNIQUÉ  
ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT**

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**Introduction**

*First Ministers, with the exception of the Premier of Quebec<sup>1</sup>, agree on the importance of supporting families and communities in their efforts to ensure the best possible future for their children. Every child should be valued and have the opportunities to develop his or her unique physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and creative potential.*

*First Ministers affirm their commitment to the well-being of children by setting out their vision of early childhood development as an investment in the future of Canada. Canada's future social vitality and economic prosperity depend on the opportunities that are provided to children today.*

*First Ministers recognize that parents and families play the primary role in supporting and nurturing children. Communities, businesses, non-profit organizations, professional networks, associations, volunteers and governments also make key contributions to the well-being of children. Governments have shown leadership by taking steps to address key children's issues in their jurisdictions, individually and in partnership.*

The early years of life are critical in the development and future well-being of the child, establishing the foundation for competence and coping skills that will affect learning, behaviour and health. Children thrive within families and communities that can meet their physical and developmental needs and can provide security, nurturing, respect and love. New evidence has shown that development from the prenatal period to age six is rapid and dramatic and shapes long-term outcomes.

Intervening early to promote child development during this critical period can have long-term benefits that can extend throughout children's lives. Governments and other partners currently provide a range of programs and services to effectively support early childhood development. The challenge is to build on existing services and supports, to make them more coordinated and widely available.

*First Ministers therefore agree to work together so that young children can fulfill their potential to be healthy, safe and secure, ready to learn, and socially engaged and responsible.*

In support of this common goal, governments will improve and expand early childhood development programs and services over time. Governments will work with families and communities to help meet the needs of young children and their families. Governments

will report regularly on their progress and will continue to build knowledge and disseminate information to parents, communities and service providers to help them to give children the best possible start in life.

## **Objectives**

Focussing on children and their families, from the prenatal period to age six, the objectives of this early childhood development initiative are:

- to promote early childhood development so that, to their fullest potential, children will be physically and emotionally healthy, safe and secure, ready to learn, and socially engaged and responsible; and
- to help children reach their potential and to help families support their children within strong communities.

## **Four Key Areas for Action**

To meet the objectives set out above, First Ministers agree on four key areas for action. Governments' efforts within this framework will focus on any or all of these areas. This will build on the priority that governments have placed on early childhood development and the investments that governments have already made.

### ***1. Promote Healthy Pregnancy, Birth and Infancy***

Prenatal, birth and infancy experiences have a profound effect on the health and well-being of infants and young children, and contribute to continuing good health. This priority addresses needs related to the prenatal, birth and infancy periods and includes supports for pregnant women, new parents, infants and care providers. Possible examples are prenatal programs and information, and infant screening programs.

### ***2. Improve Parenting and Family Supports***

Parents and families have the primary responsibility for the care of their children. This priority addresses the needs related to positive parenting and includes supports for parents and caregivers. Possible examples are family resource centres, parent information, and home visiting.

### ***3. Strengthen Early Childhood Development, Learning and Care***

Quality early childhood development, learning and care have been shown to promote physical, language and motor skills; and social, emotional and cognitive development. This priority includes supports that promote healthy development, provide opportunities for interaction and play, help prepare children for school and respond to the diverse and changing needs of families. Possible examples include preschools, child care and targeted developmental programs for young children.

#### ***4. Strengthen Community Supports***

Communities make key contributions to the well-being of children through formal and informal networks. This priority includes supports to strengthen community capacity to meet the needs of children and families from a healthy community perspective. Possible examples include supports for community-based planning and service integration.

***Governments recognize that effective approaches to supporting early childhood development are:***

- focussed on prevention and early intervention;
- intersectoral;
- integrated; and
- supportive of the child within the family and community context.

Early childhood development programs and services should be inclusive of:

- children with different abilities; and
- children living in different economic, cultural, linguistic and regional circumstances.

#### **Working Together to Meet Children's Needs**

Governments will work together in full respect of each other's responsibilities, recognizing that provinces and territories have the primary responsibility for early childhood development programs and services. Each government will determine its priorities within this framework.

Governments will work with the Aboriginal peoples of Canada to find practical solutions to address the developmental needs of Aboriginal children.

Governments will ensure effective mechanisms for Canadians to participate in developing early childhood development priorities and reviewing outcomes.

#### **Funding**

*First Ministers agree* that ensuring effective early childhood development is a long-term commitment to our children's future. *First Ministers agree* that investments for early childhood development should be incremental, predictable and sustained over the long term. *First Ministers are committed* to helping all sectors of society support children in their early years and to making incremental investments in this area.

*First Ministers recognize* that this initiative builds on the significant provincial/territorial investments already made in early childhood development and agree on the need to ensure flexibility to address local needs and priorities. This initiative also complements existing important federal investments for children and families.

## **Public Reporting**

*First Ministers believe* in the importance of being accountable to Canadians for the early childhood development programs and services that they deliver. Clear public reporting will enhance accountability and will allow the public to track progress in improving the well-being of Canada's young children. Regular measuring of, and reporting on, early childhood development provides governments and others with a powerful tool to inform policy-making and to ensure that actions are as focussed and effective as possible.

Therefore, *First Ministers commit* their governments to:

- report annually to Canadians on their investments and their progress in enhancing programs and services in the four areas described above, beginning with establishing a baseline of current early childhood development expenditures and activities. Governments will begin reporting within one year and will strive to continue to improve the quality of reporting over time;
- develop a shared framework, including jointly agreed comparable indicators to permit each government to report on progress in improving and expanding early childhood development programs and services within the areas for action described above. The framework will be developed in a manner that recognizes the different starting points and pressures in each jurisdiction and is informed by their diverse priorities. Examples would include indicators of the availability and growth of programs and services related to pregnancy, birth and infancy; parenting and family supports; early childhood development, learning and care; and community supports. Governments will report on the results of this work by September 2002 and annually thereafter, beginning with the development of indicators in areas identified as priorities by jurisdictions, and expanding with the overall development of early childhood development programs and services; and
- make regular public reports on outcome indicators of child well-being using an agreed upon set of common indicators to be developed by September 2002 related to the objectives established for early childhood development. This could include currently available indicators (such as children born at healthy birth weight and infant mortality); and newly developed indicators (such as a measure of the proportion of children who are ready to learn when they start school).

*First Ministers agree* that governments will consult third parties to assist, as appropriate, in developing indicators and assessing progress on early childhood development.

The purpose of performance measurement is for all governments to be accountable to their publics, not to each other. The amount of federal funding provided to any jurisdiction will not depend on achieving a given level of performance.

## **Knowledge, Information and Effective Practices**

Research, knowledge and information are the foundations of evidence-based decision-making and are critical to informed policy development. Dissemination of information and sharing of effective practices can create a more knowledgeable public on issues of child development and can promote the enhancement of early childhood development programs and services.

Governments agree to work together, where appropriate, on research and knowledge related to early childhood development, share information on effective practices that improve child outcomes and work together to disseminate the results of research.

## **Next Steps**

*First Ministers direct* Ministers responsible for Social Services and Health to begin implementation as soon as possible of the commitments and priorities outlined above.

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<sup>1</sup> While sharing the same concerns on early childhood development, Québec does not adhere to the present federal-provincial-territorial document because sections of it infringe on its constitutional jurisdiction on social matters. Québec intends to preserve its sole responsibility for developing, planning, managing and delivering early childhood development programs. Consequently, Québec expects to receive its share of any additional federal funding for early childhood development programs without new conditions.

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**Canadian Intergovernmental  
Conference Secretariat (CICS)**

[webmaster@scics.gc.ca](mailto:webmaster@scics.gc.ca)

