

Position Statement

## **Access to Early Learning and Child Care for Children with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities**

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### Technical Version

Adopted May 2026

## Introduction

Inclusion BC is a federation of members committed to advancing the human rights and social inclusion of children, youth, and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, people with disabilities have the right to access lifelong learning on an equal basis, without discrimination, and with the support required to participate fully. Lifelong learning starts with early learning and child care.

Our position statements aim to challenge racist, ableist, ageist, colonial and other unfair ideas about people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Our goal is to promote the inclusion of everyone in the community, no matter how much money they have; where they come from (background or culture); what their religion is; if they are married or not; what their sex, sexual orientation, or gender identity and expression is; their age or the type of disability they live with.

We recognize and support Indigenous rights and titles throughout the province of British Columbia, the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the 94 Calls to Action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the B.C. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act.

## Position Statement

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities must have equitable access to education, from the early years, through K-12 and into adulthood. At every educational level, students should have access to the supports and accommodations that enable them to participate equally with their peers.

As part of lifelong learning, this position statement addresses early learning and child care, highlighting the specific needs of children and youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities and outlining clear actions to realize their rights.

Children with disabilities and support needs have the right to access inclusive early learning and child care. These programs must ensure that all children:

- Are welcomed into regular early learning and child care programs with same-age peers in their community.
- Receive the supports and accommodations needed for equal opportunities to learn, participate, and contribute fully.

The government at all levels, early learning and child care programs, and school districts are responsible for ensuring access to inclusive early learning and child care. To be effective, inclusive early learning and child care programs, activities, and physical spaces must use the principles of universal design.<sup>1</sup> The government must also ensure that options for First Nations, Metis, and Inuit children are created with Indigenous leadership.

All early learning and child care programs must be accessible, affordable, and culturally safe. This requires removing systemic barriers and providing the supports and services necessary for equitable access.

*To skip the background and rights-based section and move directly to the calls to action, click here. [LINK TO CALLS TO ACTION](#)*

## Background

In the 1950s, many parents of children with disabilities in British Columbia rejected advice to send their children to large institutions like Woodlands School. Instead, they believed their children belonged with their families and communities. Parents organized local non-profit groups and even held classes in church basements so their children could learn together.

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<sup>1</sup> Universal Design means designing an environment so that it can be accessed, understood, and used as much as possible by all people. This is explained further in the Universal Design section of this document.

Over time, education evolved from exclusion to segregated schools to integration in separate classrooms. Today, the goal is inclusive education, where all children learn together in their community schools.

While inclusive education has been mandated in K-12 since 1989 through a Ministerial Order, early learning and child care still lack the same legal requirement. British Columbia now has an important opportunity to establish a strong mandate for inclusion in all early learning and child care programs.

## Inclusive Child Care Strategy

Inclusion BC participated in engagement processes with the Ministry of Education and Child Care on inclusive child care. In June 2024, the provincial government released [Where All Children Belong: B.C. Inclusive Child Care Strategy](#), which establishes a definition of inclusive child care that Inclusion BC would like to see realized:

*"Inclusive child care means that children of all abilities and backgrounds, including neurodiverse children, children with a disability and children with other support needs have equitable access to quality child care. Inclusive child care recognizes the individual strengths and inherent gifts of each child, and all children are supported to belong and learn through play along with other children in a child care program of the family's choosing."<sup>2</sup>*

The strategy also considers equitable access and culturally safe child care, which are fundamental to an inclusive system. While the strategy sets clear, ambitious goals, it can be strengthened with data collection, reporting mechanisms, and decisive actions to uphold children's rights.

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Education and Child Care (2024), Where All Children Belong: B.C. Inclusive Child Care Strategy, online: [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/family-and-social-supports/child-care/info-partners-prov/inclusive-child-care/inclusive\\_child\\_care\\_strategy.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/family-and-social-supports/child-care/info-partners-prov/inclusive-child-care/inclusive_child_care_strategy.pdf), page 4.

## Rights of Children with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Children with disabilities have the right to lifelong learning, without discrimination, and on an equal basis with others. Early learning and child care are part of the right to inclusive education, as affirmed in Article 24 of the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), which Canada adopted in 2010. This right is also protected by the [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#), the [BC Human Rights Code](#), and BC's commitments under the [Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act](#) (DRIPA), which aligns provincial law with the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#).

The BC Human Rights Code protects children with disabilities against discrimination in accommodation, service and facility under Section 8 of the Code. This includes early learning and child care services as they are customarily available to the public.

In 2016, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities issued a [General Comment on Article 24](#). This comment affirms that children are right-holders and clarifies how the right to inclusive education should be implemented. It also references four international agreements and frameworks that have strengthened the understanding of the right to inclusive education, while recognizing ongoing challenges, including the denial of this right and its provision in inferior and isolated settings.<sup>3</sup>

The BC [Early Learning and Child Care Act](#) (2021) focuses primarily on financial support, including grants and benefits. This Act continued the Provincial Child Care Council to guide B.C.'s child care strategy and established a new annual public reporting requirement. However, it fails to define inclusion or address the inclusion of children with disabilities in concrete ways.

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<sup>3</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016), General comment No. 4, Article 24: Right to inclusive education, online: <https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/crpd/2016/112080>. The Committee references the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the World Declaration on Education for All (1990), the UN Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1992) and the Salamanca Declaration and Framework for Action (1994).

In 2023, the federal government introduced a bill to establish Canada-wide legislation on early learning and child care. During the debate, Inclusion Canada submitted a [brief](#) and made several presentations to the House of Commons and the Senate, recommending that the new law embed and protect the right of children with disabilities to access early learning and child care.<sup>4</sup> However, in 2024, the [Canada Early Learning and Child Care Act](#) passed without including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in its purpose or definition of inclusion, and without explicitly addressing the rights of children with disabilities to equitable access. As a result, the Act does not strongly require disability inclusion across early learning and child care programs.

Despite well-documented legal obligations, serious gaps persist. In its [2025 Concluding Observations](#), the UN Committee highlighted concerns with the persistent discrimination of persons with disabilities in Canada, including:

- Legal and institutional frameworks for children do not properly include disability.
- Significant differences in federal, provincial and territorial policies which impede the effective protection of the rights of children with disabilities.
- Daycare and early childhood programs do not sufficiently address the needs of children or families with disabilities.

The UN Committee made several recommendations specific to early learning and child care in Canada:<sup>5</sup>

- Include the rights of children with disabilities in all its laws, public policies, action plans and strategies, at all levels and branches of government, including the Early Learning and Child Care Act.
- Collect disaggregated data and develop indicators to measure how effectively the rights of children with disabilities are protected.

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<sup>4</sup> Inclusion Canada (2023), Written Submission: For consideration of Bill C35, An Act respecting early learning and childcare in Canada for the Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology (SOCl), online: [https://sencanada.ca/Content/Sen/Committee/441/SOCl/briefs/2023-10-17\\_SOCl\\_Brief\\_InclusionCanada\\_e.pdf?](https://sencanada.ca/Content/Sen/Committee/441/SOCl/briefs/2023-10-17_SOCl_Brief_InclusionCanada_e.pdf?)

<sup>5</sup> Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2025), Concluding observations on the combined second and third periodic reports of Canada - Advance Unedited Version, online: <https://docs.un.org/en/CRPD/C/CAN/CO/2-3>

- Allocate sufficient human, technical and financial support to ensure that children with disabilities have access to daycare and early childhood programs on an equal basis with other children.
- Provide support to caregivers and early learning centres to teach children with disabilities.
- Ensure all programs that impact Indigenous, Black and other racialized children are fully responsive to their experiences and cultural context.
- Review decisions to restrict eligible supports covered under Jordan's Principle, reconsider plans to defund the Inuit Child First Initiative and establish an equivalent program for Metis children with disabilities.

Provincial and federal legal frameworks have not yet established a decisive and strong mandate for the inclusion of children with disabilities in early learning and child care on an equal basis with their peers. As a result, children are being discriminated against on the basis of disability. There are clear opportunities to correct this and ensure children with disabilities can equally participate, belong, and thrive.

## Universal Design

Universal design principles must be part of the early learning and child care system. This is not only a beneficial approach; it is essential for an inclusive environment where all children have the same opportunities to grow, learn, interact, and thrive, regardless of their abilities.

Universal design involves creating environments that can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability. It is not a special requirement for the benefit of only a small group; it is a fundamental condition of good design.<sup>6</sup> To achieve these goals, it is critical to address both the built environment and service delivery.

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<sup>6</sup> Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, National Disability Authority, online: <https://universaldesign.ie/about-universal-design>

In education, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that emphasizes flexibility in how material is presented and how students demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and engage with learning.<sup>7</sup>

This inclusive approach not only supports the diverse needs of children with disabilities but also enriches everyone's overall child care experience. When early learning and child care settings embrace universal design, they cultivate a culture of acceptance and equality, setting the stage for a more compassionate and equitable society.

## The Importance of Equitable Access

The early years are critical developmental years that shape children's self-concept, relationships with peers, and how they see their place and value in society. Thus, equitable access to high-quality, universal, culturally safe, affordable, flexible, and inclusive early learning and child care is fundamental to children's well-being. Equitable access means that all children, regardless of background or ability, can find child care spaces with same-age peers in their communities and receive the supports or accommodations needed to experience belonging and participate fully.

[Research](#) shows that families of children with disabilities in BC often encounter ableism and exclusion when accessing child care. As a result, many parents become persistent advocates, not by choice, but out of necessity to secure a spot.<sup>8</sup> Equitable access cannot be achieved without structural changes.<sup>9</sup>

In this 2025 [report](#), the Auditor General of Canada found that the creation of child care spaces may not be equitably accessible to diverse or vulnerable families. The Auditor General noted that insufficient data collection prevents determining whether

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<sup>7</sup> Universal Design for Learning, What is UDL?, Paul R. MacPherson Institute for Leadership, Innovation and Excellence in Teaching, McMaster University, online: <https://mi.mcmaster.ca/universal-design-for-learning-what-is-udl>

<sup>8</sup> Newbury, J. & Gerlach, A. (2022), Parents pushing for equity and inclusion in the child care system in BC. A summary of research with BC parents of young children with support needs, online: <https://inclusionbc.org/resource/2022-research-summary-on-parents-pushing-for-equity-in-the-child-care-system-in-b-c/>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

the provincial plans provide equitable access, despite this being one of the objectives of the funding agreements.<sup>10</sup>

Indigenous families raising children with disabilities need access to culturally based child care and supports. The [Aboriginal Head Start](#) program has been successfully supporting Indigenous children in the early years and needs to expand. Ensuring equitable access for Indigenous children with disabilities is a path that must be led by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people and Indigenous-led organizations.

The Pacific Immigrant Resource Society issued a [report](#) based on the experiences of immigrant and refugee women in Canada who are trying to access child care for their children, and as a career option. Their research included women with disabilities and women raising children with disabilities. The recommendations call for affordable, culturally inclusive child care and the necessary settlement supports for their families.<sup>11</sup>

Applying an equitable approach to early learning and child care requires designing spaces, programs, and activities that allow all children to participate and learn together. It also means recognizing that each child and family is unique and must be met with a system that welcomes and supports them.

## Barriers to Early Learning and Child Care

Research strongly demonstrates the positive impacts of inclusive child care.<sup>12</sup> However, Statistics Canada's 2024 report, [Child care for young children with disabilities](#), acknowledges the limited data available regarding child care attendance among children with disabilities. Key findings include:

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<sup>10</sup> Canada, Office of the Auditor General (2025), Canada-wide early learning and child care system: independent auditor's report, online:

<https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.955164/publication.html>

<sup>11</sup> Pacific Immigrant Resource Society (2026), Building a Childcare System that Works for Immigrant and Refugee Women in Canada 2.0, online: [https://pirs.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/PIRS-Building\\_A\\_Childcare\\_System\\_That\\_Works\\_2.0.pdf](https://pirs.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/PIRS-Building_A_Childcare_System_That_Works_2.0.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Canadian Institute for Inclusion and Citizenship (2019), Inclusive Child Care in Universal Child Care Settings. A Review of the Literature and Jurisdictional Scan. Report to the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development.

- Nearly half the parents who participated in the study reported difficulty finding child care.
- Close to 1 in 10 parents reported that their child had been denied a child care space because of their disability.
- Difficulties among families using child care, including:
  - increased costs due to the child's needs,
  - finding physically accessible child care,
  - finding a caregiver with the appropriate training and supports.<sup>13</sup>

Data collection is critical for strong policy decisions and is an obligation under the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. However, in BC, there is a lack of consistent provincial data that can inform policy changes. Accountability, transparency and oversight are needed.

Based on the experience of our federation members, the trends identified by our Community Inclusion Advocacy Program, and the community conversations we hosted as part of the Community-Led Collaboration Project, we discuss key challenges families face in accessing early learning and child care in the following subsections.

### Limited Child Care Spaces

The [Child Care BC](#) plan includes commitments to increase child care spaces and to increase funding for the Supported Child Development Program (SCDP), among other measures.<sup>14</sup> However, child care spaces are not being created at the pace needed to meet demand, especially in rural and remote communities, and funding for the SCDP hasn't been sufficient either.

According to the 2025 Auditor General's report, only about 45% of new spaces from federal and provincial agreements have been created over three years.<sup>15</sup> As of February 2025, BC had met just 62% of its March 2026 target.<sup>16</sup> While it is

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<sup>13</sup> Stacie, et al (2024), Statistics Canada: Child care for young children with disabilities, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25318/82-003-x202401000003-eng>

<sup>14</sup> British Columbia (2018), B.C. Caring for Kids, Lifting Up Families. The Path to Universal Child Care. Online: [https://www.bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/2018/childcare/2018\\_Child\\_Care\\_BC.pdf](https://www.bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/2018/childcare/2018_Child_Care_BC.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Canada, Office of the Auditor General, *supra note* 10.

<sup>16</sup> Employment and Social Development Canada (2025), Toward \$10-a-day: An Early Learning and Child Care Backgrounder, online: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2025/03/toward-10-a-day-an-early-learning-and-child-care-backgrounder0.html>

encouraging that the federal-provincial agreements have been extended until March 2031, this extension must include concrete targets to measure progress in including children with disabilities.

## Exclusion of Children with Disabilities

In BC, multiple child care centres are denying or terminating the enrolment of children with disabilities, saying they don't have the resources (human, financial, knowledge, or physical accessibility) to support them because of the children's support needs. This violates their rights protected under the Human Rights Code, and expecting families to navigate legal processes to exercise these rights places an enormous, unfair burden on them. Exclusionary practices significantly limit options for children with disabilities across the province.

At this time, the government is not collecting data on the number and types of exclusions from child care centres based on a child's support needs. As a consequence, there is no comprehensive understanding of the scope and scale of this problem.

In September 2025, a grassroots effort, called the Exclusion Tracker, led by the Family Support Institute and Inclusive Education Canada, began. This tracker includes a section in which parents can self-report experiences of exclusion from early learning and child care centres.

For stronger policy decision-making, our province needs official, consistent mechanisms to collect data on inclusion in early learning and child care, which would also inform accountability measures to track progress.

## Waitlists for the Supported Child Development Program (SCDP)

The Supported Child Development Program (Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal options) is the current mechanism in BC to support the inclusion of children with disabilities. It provides consulting services and/or funding for additional staff. Since child care programs do not have a legislated mandate for inclusion, they can deny access to a child with a disability if they don't have confirmed funding from the SCDP.

Through the [Kids Can't Wait](#) campaign and the [Community-Led Collaboration Project](#), we have been raising awareness of the need to enhance access to the SCDP, which means increased investment to create more supported child care spots. With limited resources, organizations that manage SCDP's across the province have developed their own priority-setting tools and waitlists to determine access to programs.

Inconsistent SCDP guidelines across the province create significant disparities between regions. The BC Association for Child Development and Intervention has documented and requested a coordinated data-collection system to accurately measure waitlists for early years services and for the SCDP.<sup>17</sup> Without data on how many children with disabilities are on waitlists, we can't tell whether supporting 8,400 children per month through the SCDP (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) means BC is meeting the need or still falling short.<sup>18</sup>

## Affordability

Despite the growth of the \$ 10-a-day program and the BC Affordable Child Care Benefit, the cost of child care remains beyond the reach of many families. Some children with disabilities are subject to higher fees because of their disability, creating additional inequity and perpetuating disability poverty.

Without stable access to inclusive child care, including before and after-school care, families are forced to forgo employment opportunities. This challenge disproportionately impacts one-parent households. [First Call's 2025 BC Child Poverty Report Card](#) found that income inequality continues to grow alongside housing and food insecurity, and the number of families living far below the poverty line.

We address the role of access to early learning child care as an income security measure in our [Position Statement on Income Security for Families Raising Children and Youth with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities](#).

## Lack of Adequate Support for Children with Medical Complexity

Nursing Support Services is a provincial program that supports the inclusion of children with medical complexity by providing training or task delegation.

When the program moved from the Ministry of Children and Family Development to the Ministry of Health in 2016, the delegation of nursing tasks to child care staff ended. Consequently, child care programs have denied access to children with disabilities and medical complexities because Nursing Support Services can't delegate tasks or train them.

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<sup>17</sup> BC Association for Child Development and Intervention, (2019) [BC Specialized Services for Children with Extra Support Needs](#).

<sup>18</sup> British Columbia (2025), Early Learning and Child Care Act, Annual Report 2024-2025, online: [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/family-and-social-supports/child-care/our-plan/elcca\\_annual\\_report\\_2024-25.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/family-and-social-supports/child-care/our-plan/elcca_annual_report_2024-25.pdf), at 25.

In some health authorities, Nursing Support Services coordinators continued doing this, without explicit instruction. Once a hard stop was instructed, some community nurses have taken on this function, but it is not consistent across the province. Currently, there is no established framework or collaboration between the health care and child care sectors to address this need, which is resulting in the full exclusion of a group of children solely because of their disability and support needs.

### Before and After-School Care Programs

As of 2025, School Districts in the province can run before and after-school care programs on school grounds. This is a welcome opportunity to enhance access; however, to date, there are no clear requirements to ensure equitable access for children and youth with disabilities in these programs.

During the pilot of Seamless Day programs, support for children with disabilities emerged as a challenge. Staffing issues arose, including the unclear delineation of responsibilities between Educational Assistants employed by the school district under collective agreements and Early Childhood Educators.

As the province grows and expands access to school-age care, it must adopt inclusive policies and investments to ensure that all new programs and initiatives meet human rights obligations towards children with disabilities.

### Lack of Child Care Options for Children with Disabilities Aged 12+

The support needs of children with disabilities don't end as they grow; they change. Some youth with disabilities require supported options beyond when their peers start staying home alone. When youth outgrow the typical child care age, families have limited or no options in their community. This can force parents to leave the workforce or forgo safe, age-appropriate child care.

Organizations that coordinate the Supported Child Development Program (Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal) are required to prioritize children in the early years (under 5 years old), a cohort that many organizations struggle to fully serve. It is imperative to designate a funding stream of the Supported Child Development Program dedicated to supporting school-age children in before and after-school care programs. As well as to create age-appropriate options for youth in middle or secondary schools.

### Training and Workforce

There is a shortage of early childhood educators in BC, especially with training in inclusion. Post-secondary programs do not offer sufficient training in inclusive

practices in their core curriculum. Thus, early childhood educators need to take additional training in inclusion after earning their certificate. This makes inclusion training optional rather than a core competency, limiting the professional capacity of many child care programs.

BC has prioritized increasing the capacity of the child care sector by creating resources such as the [Inclusive Child Care Toolkit](#), and voluntary professional development. In collaboration with [CanAssist](#), they have developed high-quality [training opportunities](#). These should be required across the province to maximize their impact.

Themes such as compensation, licensing ratios, enhanced educational standards, better policies, and the need to address structural inequities have been highlighted in reports from professional organizations.<sup>19</sup> These factors affect inclusion; for example, the low-wage cap for early childhood educators with inclusion training creates hiring and retention challenges for child care programs.

## Calls to Action

Inclusion BC calls on the provincial government, early learning and child care centres, and school districts to adopt a comprehensive, rights-based approach to early learning and child care, including before and after-school care, that is guided by the principles of universal design and equitable access.

This approach, along with the following actions for inclusive early learning and child care, must be an important part of a **Provincial Disability Strategy**.

### **Inclusion Mandate**

- Establish a clear **legislated mandate for disability inclusion** in all early learning and child care programs by:
  - Amending the BC Early Learning and Child Care Act to add a definition of inclusion that aligns with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons

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<sup>19</sup> Early Childhood Educators of BC (2025), Reports Highlight Progress with BC's Early Care and Learning recruitment and Retention Strategy and Priorities for the Sector, online: <https://www.ecebc.ca/news-events/labour-market/media-release-reports-highlight-progress-bcs-early-care-and-learning-recruitment-and-retention-strategy-and-priorities-sector>.

with Disabilities and require all child care programs across the province to operate on an inclusive basis consistent with the Convention.

- Issue a Ministerial Order under the BC School Act to require that all child care programs created by school districts be inclusive and aligned with the principles of the Convention.

## Equitable Access

- Ensure all children with disabilities have **equitable access to a fully resourced, universal, inclusive, culturally safe, and affordable** early learning and child care model.
- Include **school-age care programs** as part of the BC child care model, whether they are provided by community organizations or school districts.
- Create and fully resource age-appropriate options for **youth aged 12+ with disabilities** who require after-school care with support.

## Child Care Programs

- Fully fund the **Supported Child Development Program** (Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal) to eliminate waitlists and ensure access to inclusive spots across BC.
- The Ministry of Education and Child Care must collaborate with the Ministry of Health and Health Authorities to **re-establish a process that ensures the delegation of or training on nursing tasks** for child care staff as required by children with medical complexity.
- **Require inclusion policies** in all early learning and child care programs to promote a culture of inclusion and belonging.
- Ensure all early learning and child care programs have **accessible indoor and outdoor spaces** to play.

## Workforce

- Develop a **workforce strategy** to address staffing needs in early learning and child care that coordinates with staffing needs in other levels of education.

- Ensure all early childhood educators and child care staff maximize the existing **training and professional development opportunities** on inclusion.

### Accountability

- Create consistent provincial **data collection** mechanisms on access to inclusive child care.
- Set **concrete goals to measure** the progress and quality of disability inclusion in all programs and add it as a set of licensing standards.
- Include mandatory annual reporting on the progress of inclusive child care in the **report** required by the BC Early Learning and Child Care Act.
- Establish formal accountability and transparency measures and public reporting on the **use of funds** that are designated to meet the needs of children with disabilities.

The most effective way to ensure all early learning and child care programs have the capacity to support children of all abilities is to recognize, through federal and provincial laws, policies, regulations, and practices, that inclusion is not optional, but a protected right for all children. For children with disabilities, this right is guaranteed under Canada's obligations as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The time to act is now.