

Kids Can't Wait

*The Case for Investing in Early Childhood
Intervention programs in British Columbia*

Sponsored by:



December 2016 Report on the Provincial Summit

Introduction

This report summarizes what we heard at the November 16th 2016 Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) Summit in Vancouver, which brought together almost 100 child-serving professionals and agency leaders from around BC to build the case for investing in ECI in our province.

We've long had extensive evidence that ECI is one of the very best investments a society can make. But summit participants described mounting pressures facing ECI programs across BC, after a decade of no new provincial program funding to address growing demands. Children with developmental delays are not receiving timely supports critical to their development. And as summit attendees emphasized, the narrow window for most effectively delivering ECI means children can't wait.

The November 16th Summit was co-sponsored by Inclusion BC, the BC Association for Child Development and Intervention (BCACDI), BC Centre for Ability, Langley Association for Community Living, Richmond Association for Community Living and Family Support Institute of BC. It builds on our recent FSI-BC led collaboration with BCACDI to document the experience of families of children with developmental challenges, as captured in our [December 2016 report](#). That investigation documented excessive wait times, information gaps and a lack of support as parents struggle to navigate a complex and often inaccessible system and fight to get their children the help they need.

Thanks to all who contributed so much positive energy and expertise to spark this initiative. We will continue to rely on your active support, leadership and collaboration as we build momentum and take action in the coming months to advance the messages we heard loud and clear.

Kids can't wait. Neither can we.

What if....

...all children could thrive because they had access to supports if and when they needed them?

...preschoolers didn't have to wait so long for early intervention that they aged out and started kindergarten without being ready to learn and achieve their potential?

...families could get their children the help they need promptly instead of watching the window for intervention close due to waitlists for rationing services?

Challenges and Solutions

While the November 16th ECI Summit focused on identifying solutions to key challenges, participants emphasized the importance of seeing these in the context of a strong and effective sector of committed professionals, whose work is making a real difference in the lives of many children and families. Addressing the following key issues would build on these successes, unlocking the significant untapped potential of our ECI sector.

1. Waitlists & wait times

Challenges

- Excessive wait times for Infant Development Program (IDP), Supported Child Development (SCDP) and early intervention services such as speech and language therapy (SLP), Physical Therapy (PT) and occupational therapy (OT). Some children “age out” before ever accessing ECI services.
- No new ECI program funding since 2006, but agencies are being asked to respond to growing needs, a broader range of needs, and increased complexity of child/family needs.
- This is a rights issue: children with special needs are being left out, left behind and excluded in their communities.

Solutions

- Significant new funding to address waitlists, provincial standards on waitlists/wait times and resourcing consistent with mandates.

2. Early Intervention to K-12 Transition

Challenges

- Children not ready to learn on entering kindergarten: denied ECI due to waitlists or because families don't know ECI services exist.
- Gaps in coordination required between ECI providers and schools to support successful kindergarten transitions.

Solutions

- Stronger community relationships to support collaborative problem-solving.
- More flexibility in kindergarten/early childhood programs to allow overlaps: Expand ECI to age 8 to support school transitions.
- Address education gaps: recent Supreme Court of Canada ruling is an opportunity for “remaking the classroom.”

3. Policy shifts & gaps

Challenges

- MCFD framework lacks clear vision and policy objectives for ECI. Services are fragmented, with too much short-term funding and reactive “policy panic.”
- Concern about shift in ministry's special needs framework toward child protection.

- ECI mandate expanding without matching resources; increased eligibility and shift to serving more children with multiple, critical and complex needs without the appropriate resources.
- Disturbing shift back to segregated models vs. inclusion and community-based supports.

Solutions

- Clear vision, defined outcomes, sustained program funding and proactive evidence-based policy for ECI. Could a provincial early-years office supported by Health, Education and MCFD provide more stable direction?
- Shift from medical models of “fixing” individuals to focus on family resilience and capacity building: recognizing that real change will take time.
- Promote community-based integrated services, inclusion and collaboration.

4. Geographic, regional & cultural disparities

Challenges

- Most challenges are province-wide, with acute gaps and additional challenges in remote areas; also significant geographic disparities within some provincial programs.
- Cultural barriers to access; additional challenges/opportunities in Aboriginal services.

Solutions

- Consistent provincial standards, with flexibility to adapt delivery to regional needs
- Increase connectivity: Invest in technology infrastructure, strengthen links to Aboriginal agencies and broaden community partnerships and collaboration

5. Skills & staffing shortages

Challenge

- Significant staffing gaps due to low wages, geography, competition from better-paid sectors, staff burnout due to crushing workloads and training capacity gaps (pre-and in-service).
- This sector doesn't recognize its expertise and accomplishments very well.

Solutions

- Positive stock-taking and sharing our success stories: If we don't value and celebrate the work we do, it will be harder for others to do so. We're getting the job done in imaginative ways and there is much to be proud of.
- Attract more men to careers in this sector: Build on the Premier's Jobs Agenda and highlight the multiple immediate and long-term economic costs of not filling this gap.
- Work with universities and governments to address shortage of training spaces.

6. Child- and family-centred services

Challenge

- Family voices are not being heard; many don't even know services exist or how to access them. How extensive are the unmet needs?

- Families overwhelmed by case management, navigating the maze, fighting for services: More are experiencing breakdown: getting help too late or facing multiple challenges. These very complex crises required a coordinated response, which no one is equipped to offer.

Solutions

- More child- and family-centered service throughout childhood, with parents as true partners. This includes eligibility for ECI whenever need is identified, better integration of services, one-stop navigators and improved communication to help families access needed services.
- Invest in community development and strengthen community connections to help families raise children.
- Apply lessons from Truth & Reconciliation Commission, Jordan's Principle, work with Aboriginal Health Authority and community health authorities.

7. Data gaps

Challenges

- Gaps in provincial data collection and analysis, standards and expected outcomes. MCFD's data does not reflect its service model; key data missing to make the case for ECI investment.
- MCFD Website no longer mentions IDP, SCDP and other ECI services, so parents in the dark.

Solutions

- HELP tracking project shows broad deteriorating trend for children starting kindergarten.
- ECI sector taking the lead in building data sets and sharing family stories.

Action Plan, Phase 1

The November 16th Summit culminated with a strong mandate from participants to launch a 6-month action plan, led by the Sponsors Working Group, to raise understanding of these issues and support collaborative work towards solutions. The Working Group is incorporating the Summit recommendations into an action plan based on the following strategies.

1. Publicize the issues: Believe in our capacity to effect change

- #Children Can't Wait: Very strong evidence base for investing in early years: combine that with hard data, family voices and key messages in a sustained campaign

2. Build connections: One clear voice from multiple groups

- Strengthen connections within our sector, with families, partners, funders, champions and decision makers. As a diverse, complex sector, we need to speak with one voice.

3. Develop a comprehensive action plan, messages and campaign strategy

- Working Group to develop and implement staged action plan, work to fill info gaps, mobilize and coordinate activities via our provincial networks and partnerships.