

Ontario Early Years Centres and Child and Family Centres

Moving Forward

*Every day, all across Ontario, thousands of children and their families walk through the door of their community's Ontario Early Years Centre. Families are greeted by a caring team of professionals representing an interdisciplinary wealth of knowledge that supports children and families. They create environments that welcome children and their caregivers, providing opportunities for early learning through play for both adult and child. A wide range of programs are offered. Access to specialized support services is facilitated either on site or at other neighbourhood places. Services range from interactive play for parent and child, literacy and numeracy activities, supported by Early Literacy Specialists, social skill development, speech and language intervention, parenting classes, to post-natal support groups for mothers who may be struggling. Between January and March 2009, **256,817** individual children and **232,288** parents/caregivers were served making more than **2,000,000** visits in total.*

Ontario Early Years Centres:

A name and logo families recognize- wherever they go in the province

Recognizing the key role of parents as the child's first teacher

Making a difference: the more than 450 000 individual children participating each year can attest to the strengths of the Ontario Early Years Centres

Introduction

Ontario Early Years Centres are located throughout Ontario in schools, recreation centres, storefronts, community agencies, and other accessible locations. More than **450,000 individual children** participated in Ontario Early Years Centre programs and services in 2009. More than **400,000** parents and caregivers learned right along beside them. A high level of service interconnectivity resulted in more than **100,000** referrals to specialized services made by Ontario Early Years Centre staff, who are often the first to identify potential developmental concerns.

As the Provincial Government moves forward with the introduction of Child and Family Centres, Ontario Early Years Centres across the province are committed to ensuring that our children and families are represented in the planning and implementation process.

This brief paper proposes a strategy to include all stakeholders and suggests a potential model for the development of Child and Family Centres that builds on existing programs, services and expertise, making the best possible use of all available resources. In communities across the province, parents and children will have access to a continuum of services that supports and strengthens their family's ability to reach their full potential. Child and Family Centres will reflect the strengths and needs of the neighbourhood and will use an integrated and holistic approach that is evidence based. Every community will have a Child and Family Centre operated by a lead agency charged with the responsibility of both directly delivering programs and linking to specialized services.

The Development of Child and Family Centres

The Planning Process:

To be successful, a collaborative and inclusive planning mechanism will be required. To be effective it must:

- ✓ Build on existing programs, community systems, planning tables that have demonstrated healthy outcomes.
- ✓ Recognize the uniqueness and importance of existing community resources.
- ✓ Work within a provincial framework that supports the ability to reflect community diversity and neighbourhood need.
- ✓ Be both transparent and accountable to the community.
- ✓ Actively engage all stakeholders.
- ✓ Recognize the importance of communities.

Across the province, there are differences not only in the way communities plan but in the level of community engagement in the planning process and in the depth of participation at planning tables. Under municipal leadership there are Best Start Planning Tables that are already actively engaged in a collaborative and inclusive process of moving forward to implement the vision of Child and Family Centres.

Ontario Early Years Centres are active participants at many but not all of these planning tables. As the planning process moves ahead, it is essential that a place be set at the table for all key stakeholders and that includes local Ontario Early Years Centres. It is Ontario Early Years Centres that are currently delivering many of the services identified as being key to the success of Child and Family Centres (please see below for additional details) and it is Ontario Early Years

Centres who have daily contact with thousands of parents whose young children are becoming more resilient, and more ready and able to learn. Ontario Early Years Centres possess a wealth of valuable knowledge about their communities, with significant knowledge about the children and families as well as the broad range of programs and services which can be available to contribute to this planning process. Ontario Early Years Centres have integrated staff, programs, planning and collaborative partnerships that provide a continuum of services to families and children. The provincial framework must include a requirement that Ontario Early Years Centres be at the table.

The Principles:

Each Child and Family Centre will reflect the community in which it is located. However, each will also be built on shared and fundamental principles. Every Child and Family Centre will:

- ✓ Build on existing capacity established since 2001 with the creation of Ontario Early Years Centres.
- ✓ Be universal and inclusive in approach, supporting and encouraging access to all and include all families including those living in poverty, coping with the challenges of special needs, and who are newcomers to the country.
- ✓ Strengthen the capacity for linkages and partnerships that maximize the use of all resources: financial, physical and human.
- ✓ Implement a consolidated funding mechanism that facilitates and rewards flexibility and responsiveness to changing community dynamics.
- ✓ Expand the mandate of Ontario Early Years Centres to serve families and children up to the age of 12.
- ✓ Be universal in approach – programs and services are for ALL families.

Ontario Early Years Centres and Child and Family Centres: Programs and Services

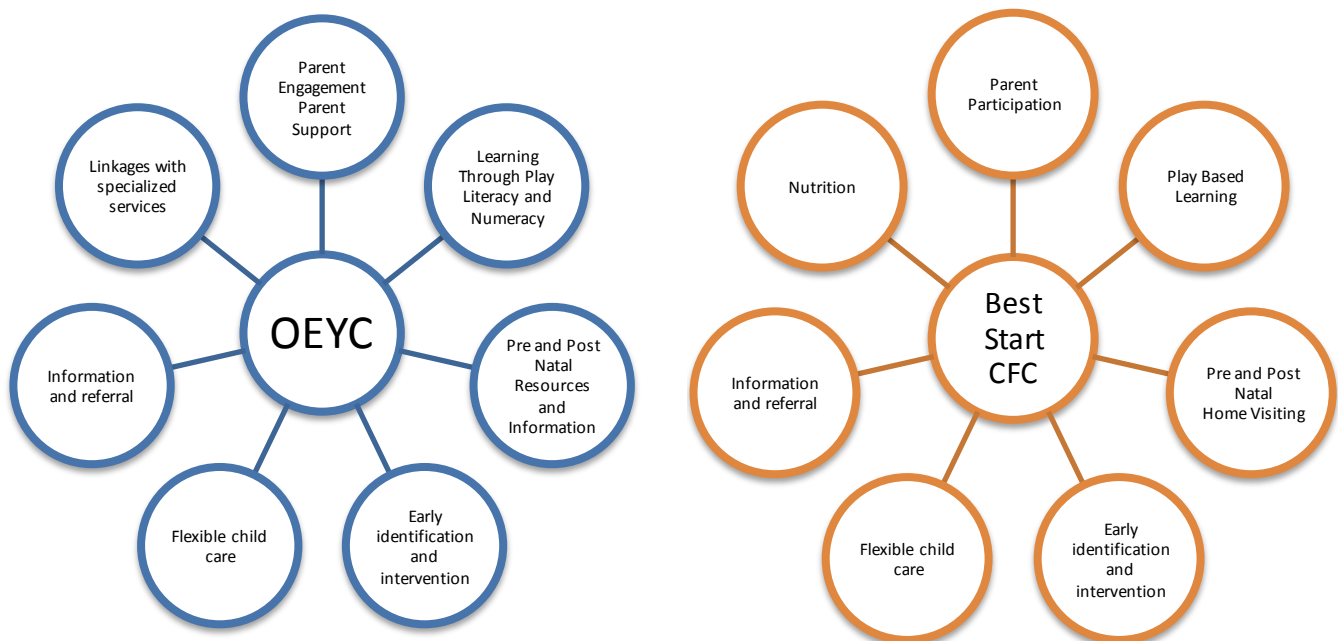
In his 2009 report, ***With Our Best Futures in Mind***, Dr. Charles Pascal outlines his vision of Best Start Child and Family Centres. He describes a “one stop opportunity” for families to access a range of services including licensed child care. The report states that they will be in or connected to schools and that Child and Family Centres will be accountable for their outcomes through “improved monitoring and evaluation and public reporting on early learning outcomes.”

In many ways, what is described in ***With Our Best Futures in Mind*** is very similar to what Ontario Early Years Centres are currently doing across the province. Many Ontario Early Years Centres are located in schools and even more satellite programs are school based. Principals

support the work of Ontario Early Years Centres and the high level of parental engagement that they encourage and support. Ontario Early Years Centres are viewed as an asset by school communities and their presence in a school helps to strengthen school readiness for the young children.

Building on the information and research gathered and analyzed by Data Analysis Coordinators, Ontario Early Years Centres are able to tailor their programs and services to the identified needs within each community.

The graphic¹ below describes the core services provided by Ontario Early Years Centres across the province and the services that ***With Our Best Futures in Mind*** identifies as being core to Child and Family Centres:



As the above graphic demonstrates, there is a high level of congruence between what Ontario Early Years Centres are currently doing and what ***With Our Best Futures in Mind*** recommends that Child and Family Centres do. As the province moves forward with the planning and implementation of Child and Family Centres, it makes sense to build on the existing strong foundation in many communities of the Ontario Early Years.

The addition of licensed child care to the roster of core services provided by Ontario Early Years Centres and/or the connecting of existing child care programs to an Ontario Early Years Centre

¹ Adapted from Region of Peel, Ontario Early Years Centres Power Point, 2010

is something that would look different in each of the diverse communities that make up Ontario. In some instances it would make sense for the Ontario Early Years Centre (or the agency that currently operates the Ontario Early Years Centres) to directly operate licensed child care. Indeed, many agencies do this now.

In others, where there is already a strong and vibrant community-based child care sector, it might be more reasonable for local centres to continue to operate within the context of planning and support from the local Child and Family Centre.

Accountability:

Ontario Early Years Centres are currently directly accountable to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. This accountability framework has resulted in a number of outcomes that have benefited children and families across Ontario and that should be duplicated as Child and Family Centres are developed:

- ✓ Ontario Early Years Centres have received uniform direction from the Ministry with respect to core services and operational requirements. This has resulted in both consistency across the province and flexibility to meet local needs.
- ✓ The consistent branding of Ontario Early Years Centres across the province has assisted families in locating the services they need. An extensive public awareness campaign has greatly aided the Ontario Early Years Centres' brand recognition.
- ✓ The Ministry of Children and Youth Services' promotion and support has helped pave the way for Ontario Early Years Centres to adhere to principles of universality. This commitment has provided families with access to a broader range of programs and services than they might not have been able to access previously.

No matter which Ministry and/or order of government Ontario Early Years Centres and/or Child and Family Centres are accountable to, what matters most is that they are accountable to the communities within which they deliver services and to the children and families they support.

Moving Forward:

In these challenging economic times, both provincial and local government resources are limited. Achieving the Child and Family Centre vision is critical to the well-being of families in Ontario. It is imperative that existing Ontario Early Years Centres are seen as the foundation of Child and Family Centres. Ontario Early Years Centres deliver programs and link to specialized services, well known and respected sources of support for families and their children.

Building on existing strengths is fundamental to moving forward. Ontario Early Years Centres across the province look forward to playing a keen and active role as Child and Family Centres evolve from vision to reality.