

It's time to increase funding for children with support needs

More than 15,000 children in British Columbia have physical, behavioural, neurological, and developmental disabilities, including cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, autism, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and other mental health and behavioural issues. These children, and their families, receive a wide range of therapy and care from health science and community social services professionals across the province. Currently this care is delivered through Child Development Centres.

Funding challenges and shortages of health care and community social services professionals are taking a toll on the critical services on which children and their families depend.

And it's not certain that the proposed new Family Connection Centre model will increase services -- or even ensure continuity of care.

Lack of early intervention – and lack of staff to deliver it – is failing children in need

- Early intervention therapies include speech and language therapies to help develop the ability to communicate, physiotherapy to improve mobility and coordination, and occupational therapy to enable children to manage a variety of daily living activities.
- A lack of adequate funding for early intervention therapists and a shortage of professionals means that CDCs have long waits for children and families trying to access therapy.
- The supply of specialized professionals in CDCs is outstripped by demand, and is contributing to the long wait lists for service. Meaningful recruitment and retention initiatives for therapists and health science professionals are critical to the long-term sustainability of these services.

*In one Northern CDC there are nearly 250 children
on the waitlist trying to access Early Intervention Therapies.*

*As a result, children are going to school
without ever receiving assessments.*

We made a promise to deliver mental health care for children under six

- In June 2019, the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions released *A Pathway to Hope: A Roadmap for Making Mental Health and Addictions Care Better for People in British Columbia*. This policy paper committed to “enhance and expand core programming offered in child development centres and by community-based organizations delivering a core set of early intervention services for children under the age of six.”
- CDCs and frontline therapists are eager to provide expanded access to services essential for strong early childhood development, but more resources are needed to increase staffing levels and meet the high demand for service.

Children with disabilities are being left behind as wait lists grow

- Children with support needs around the province rely on CDCs for specialized services and supports that enable them to participate in activities that many families take for granted. Supported child development (SCD) assistance provides children with support needs the opportunity to attend child care and preschool programs.
- Over the last few years funding increases have not kept up with need for CDCs’ SCD programs. As a result, wait lists for these services have grown, and too many children with support needs and their families are unable to access child care. Put simply, there are not enough SCD consultants at CDCs for the many children and families who require supports.

Recommendations

- Significantly increase funding for MCFD’s early intervention therapy (speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, and physiotherapy) so that Child Development Centres can ensure timely access to critical services based on a three-month wait-time benchmark.
- Ensure new autism funding models enable Child Development Centres to ensure continuity of services and increased levels of service.
- Provide ongoing, appropriate, funding to ensure that children and families in BC can access publicly funded early-years mental health services at their local Child Development Centre.
- Increase funding for supported child development services delivered by Child Development Centres, so that children with support needs will have equitable access to newly funded child care spaces.