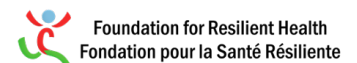
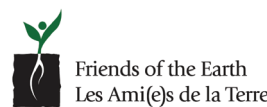


# HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE CHILD CARE ENVIRONMENTS – A Vision for Canada –



# HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE CHILD CARE ENVIRONMENTS

## – A Vision for Canada –

### Canada has an unprecedented opportunity to ensure that child care settings support optimal and equitable child health and well-being.

As of March 2022, federal-provincial/territorial child care investment agreements are in place across the country. With the prospect of much needed investments in the child care sector now a reality, there is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to define and act upon a vision for healthy and sustainable early learning environments that support the well-being of children and staff.

We, the undersigned, envision a Canada in which all levels of government are working in concert with the child care sector, advocacy organizations, communities, families, and other stakeholders to ensure that *all* children in Canada have the opportunity to learn, play, grow and thrive in child care settings that are:

- **Healthy**, with health defined broadly to include the full array of physical, mental, emotional, social, and ecological dimensions of human well-being; and
- **Sustainable**, climate-resilient, and respectful of the land, with design features and day-to-day practices that conserve resources, reduce waste, minimize carbon emissions and other pollutants, and support children's connections with the natural world.

### Why are healthy and sustainable child care environments important?

The first five years of life are of critical importance for healthy child development. The indoor and outdoor environments in which young children learn, play, and grow contribute in crucial ways to children's lifelong health trajectories. With many children spending six or more hours per day in child care,<sup>1</sup> it is important to focus on the quality of those settings. A growing body of scientific and practitioner knowledge attests to the importance of healthy settings as a determining factor in child well-being. Spending time in healthy and nurturing physical and social environments – having ample access to nature and green spaces, and seeing their cultural identities reflected and celebrated in their surroundings – can contribute positively to children's development and their growth as lifelong environmental stewards. Building a sense of connection to land and natural places early on in life is essential to fostering reciprocal

relationships between children's health and the health of the environment for this and future generations.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, spending time in unhealthy conditions – with ongoing exposures to poor air quality, pesticides, toxic substances in cleaners, toys and furnishings, or contaminants in drinking water – can harm children's developing bodies and brains, exacerbate asthma and other health conditions, and interfere with their endocrine and immune systems.<sup>3</sup> As such, harmful exposures during these critical early years can contribute to developmental, learning, and behavioural challenges, and set children on a path towards chronic diseases later in life.<sup>4</sup>

### All children have a right to healthy learning environments

Every child has the right to breathe clean air, consume safe food, have access to safe drinking water, and be protected from exposure to toxic chemicals, pollutants, radiation and other hazards in their indoor and outdoor environments.<sup>5</sup> Yet, widespread disparities persist in children's levels of exposure to pollution and toxic chemicals, their access to clean drinking water, green spaces and safe places to play, and their exposure to climate change-related health impacts.<sup>6</sup> These disparities result from socio-economic marginalization, legacies of colonial oppression, and other determinants of health inequity. Providing *all* children in Canada with an equal opportunity to learn and play in healthy and sustainable child care environments, achieved through sound policies, sufficient resources, and meaningful engagement of children, parents/guardians, care providers and communities, is a necessary and attainable step towards reducing environmental health inequities.

### Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care

This vision statement does not identify specific policy actions linked to Indigenous early learning and child care. We recognize and affirm the rights of Indigenous governments to design and develop early learning and child care (ELCC) systems and services that are distinctions-based and self governed consistent with the vision and principles set out in the **Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework** and commitments under the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**.

## A Vision for Healthy and Sustainable Child Care and Early Learning Environments

Ensuring that all children in Canada have access to healthy and sustainable child care settings is a collective responsibility. The ten core elements of healthy and sustainable child care environments set forth in this vision statement are intended as a framework to support collective efforts towards a world-class child care system in Canada that supports and promotes child health and well-being, now and into the future.

All children in Canada have the right to access child care settings that:

1. Are purposefully designed, built and/or retrofitted to promote health, wellness, and environmental sustainability. This includes adequate ventilation, heating and cooling; natural light and fresh air; ample outdoor space with adequate shade; and measures to increase energy efficiency. Additional measures to protect health and reduce ecological impact should also be pursued, including the adoption of renewable energy sources (especially in new builds) and the use of sustainable and zero/low-toxicity building and renovation materials.
2. Are located away from sources of pollution, such as high traffic corridors and industrial facilities.
3. Minimize carbon emissions and reliance on fossil fuels, and mitigate adverse effects of climate change such as extreme heat and flooding, through building design and operations.
4. Have indoor radon levels that are at or below the Government of Canada guideline.
5. Minimize or eliminate exposure to toxic chemicals (1) in products such as toys, arts and crafts supplies, plastics, and furnishings, (2) in foods (e.g., pesticide residues) and in the practices and materials used in preparing, serving and storing food, (3) through the use of safer cleaning and disinfecting practices and products, in compliance with public health guidelines, (4) in the prevention and control of pests and in the maintenance of lawns and gardens, and (5) in building maintenance, renovation and repairs.
6. Provide access to clean and safe drinking water.
7. Prioritize children's access to the natural world by (1) situating child care programs within or near natural areas or urban green spaces, (2) optimizing outdoor learning and play spaces, and (3) promoting nature-based child care practices and land-based learning.
8. Advance societal action on climate change and counteract climate anxiety by modeling climate action best practices such as energy conservation, low-carbon travel, use of renewable energy sources, gardening, de-paving, and greening initiatives.
9. Are inclusive, accessible and culturally appropriate<sup>7</sup> for all children.
10. Are staffed by professionals who have the funding, training, and other resources to support their role in ensuring healthy, safe, and sustainable early learning environments.

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### Towards the realization of the Vision

Progress is being made, much more needs to be done.

There are encouraging markers of intersectoral commitment and progress towards the realization of high quality, healthy, and sustainable child care environments in Canada. Information resources are increasingly available, such as the newly-updated [CPCHE/CCCCF online child care resource and checklist](#), which reflects more than a decade of intersectoral work to equip the child care sector with evidence-informed measures to improve environmental health. Sectors and organizations are coming together to promote knowledge sharing and action, as evidenced by the many collaborators involved in the 2022 [Healthy Environments for Learning Day](#) campaign for healthy and sustainable child care environments. Baseline understanding of practices, challenges, and opportunities related to environmental health and sustainability in child care settings is coming into clearer focus with the results of the recent [national survey of child care professionals](#). Multiple organizations and networks are working to advance key aspects of the vision, such as outdoor and nature-based play, inclusive spaces, environmental justice, climate action, and sustainable built environments.

Yet, much more needs to be done to support the child care sector in creating and maintaining healthy and sustainable settings. Evidence-informed guidelines are currently not available on many environmental health parameters. Most child care programs lack the resources, training, and supports needed to improve environmental health conditions in their settings and enhance their day-to-day practices. Effective collaborative structures and improved communications across multiple levels of governance and with relevant stakeholders are needed to define and advance necessary actions. And there is a

need to increase investments in research to better understand levels of exposure to toxic substances and related health implications, in order to inform health-protective guidelines and track the effectiveness of exposure reduction measures.

To support action towards this collective vision, the Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment (CPCHE) and the Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCCF) commit to continuing to work in concert with the undersigned to bring together relevant sectors, stakeholders, and partners; identify knowledge gaps and capacity needs; foster the development of, and access to, relevant information and guidance; support the child care sector in tracking and celebrating progress; and amplify the collective voices of child care professionals, families, young people, and relevant stakeholders in pursuing this national vision.

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## Signatories

In solidarity and with determination for the health and well-being of our nation's children and future generations, this vision is advanced collectively by:

Canadian Partnership for Children's Health  
and Environment

Canadian Child Care Federation

Child Care Now

Child and Nature Alliance of Canada

Outdoor Play Canada

Canadian Public Health Association

Children's Environmental Health Clinic: A World Health  
Organization (WHO) Collaborating Centre in Children's  
Environmental Health

Raffi Foundation for Child Honouring

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada

For Our Kids

First Call Child and Youth Advocacy Society

Canadian Association of Physicians for  
the Environment

Canadian Association of Nurses for the Environment

Ontario Public Health Association

Women's College Hospital – Environmental  
Health Clinic

Canadian Environmental Law Association

Pollution Probe

Équiterre

Environmental Defence

David Suzuki Foundation

Climate Emergency Unit

New Brunswick Lung Association

Prevent Cancer Now

Friends of the Earth

Green Teacher

EcoSchools Canada

Evergreen

Shake Up The Establishment

Centre for Environmental Health Equity

Prenatal Environmental Health Education (PEHE)  
Collaboration

Foundation for Resilient Health

Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC

Early Childhood Educators of BC

Alberta Family Child Care Association

Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association

Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care

Association of Early Childhood Educators Nova Scotia

Saskatchewan Early Prevention Institute

Association of Regulated Nurses of Manitoba

Manitoba Nurses for Health and Environment

Andrew Fleck Children's Services

Today's Family Early Learning and Child Care

South Riverdale Community Health Centre

Grey Bruce Health Unit

Thunder Bay District Health Unit

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Peace & Health, McMaster University

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Environmental Health, Simon Fraser University



## Endnotes:

- 1 While data are scarce, a [2011 Statistics Canada report](#) noted that among families that use child care, most have their children in care on a full-time basis (30 hours per week or more).
- 2 See, for example, Outdoor Play Canada's [Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play](#).
- 3 For a summary of the child health implications of environmental exposures to toxic substances, see CPCHE's [Child Health and the Environment Primer](#).
- 4 See, for example, Clark, H. et al (2020). [A future for the world's children? A WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission](#); and Cooper, Marshall, Vanderlinden & Ursitti (2011). [Early Exposures to Hazardous Chemicals/Pollution and Associations with Chronic Disease: A Scoping Review: Executive Summary](#).
- 5 The right to a healthy environment is increasingly recognized worldwide. The [1972 Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment](#) affirmed a fundamental right to an environment "of a quality that permits a life of dignity and wellbeing." In October 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted [Resolution 48/13: The Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment](#). In Canada, the right to a healthy environment is included in [Bill S-5](#) to amend the Canadian Environmental Protection Act.
- 6 For example, a 2007 [Ecojustice report](#) and 2019 [update](#) detail the disproportionate burden of industrial pollution affecting Aamjiwnaang First Nation in Canada's Chemical Valley. Across Canada, 34 First Nations reserves remain [under long-term drinking water advisories](#). Multiple studies document unequal access to green space (e.g., tree canopy, parks) in low-income and racially-marginalized communities as compared to more affluent and predominantly white neighborhoods.
- 7 See, in particular, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Call to Action #12. [https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf)

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