



# CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN KINDERGARTEN

How can we act collectively to offer Quebec children  
an equal chance of success starting right at birth?

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

OBSERVATOIRE  
des tout-petits

 Fondation Lucie  
et André Chagnon

# SUMMARY

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In Quebec, **ONE CHILD OUT OF EVERY FOUR** in kindergarten is vulnerable in at least one area of their development. This proportion reaches one out of three in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. When brought to the attention of the general public, these figures were deemed unacceptable by 81% of Quebecers. The dialogue process initiated by the Early Childhood Observatory—particularly the survey conducted by the Léger firm in the summer of 2016—has established that Quebecers look very favourably on increased investment in early childhood.

The general population and stakeholders in early childhood education and development strongly agree on the importance of investing in community organizations that offer services to families and very young children, helping municipalities offer better early childhood services, and creating more social housing reserved for families. The measure that appeals to the largest number of Quebecers (88%), however, is the idea of increasing the number of free activities offered to disadvantaged families by municipalities, followed closely by the setting up of a system for screening and early intervention (87%).

Apart from the actual possible solutions, the most significant takeaway from this process is the desire to see new types of public action taken in the interest of early childhood in Quebec. The areas in which there are consensus confirm the interest of the vast majority in seeing different actions being taken on issues affecting early childhood: actions that are firmly rooted in the community, not restricted to the specific milieus we automatically associate with early childhood.

# A FOUR-STEP PROCESS

In April 2016, the Early Childhood Observatory launched its very first special report on **the developmental gap between children in the most privileged environments and their counterparts in the most disadvantaged environments at the moment they start school.**

A month later, 700 stakeholders from diverse milieus across Quebec (elected municipal representatives, early childhood workers, representatives of professional orders, scientists, etc.) came together at the Observatory's first dialogue event to identify a series of measures that could reduce the developmental gap. Submitted proposals led to 15 potential solutions in the form of statements that were then prioritized electronically by 1,067 early childhood stakeholders. To open up the dialogue, the provincial population's opinion on the majority of the statements was also measured by a survey conducted by the Léger firm in July 2016<sup>1</sup>. This exercise enabled us to identify four main areas of action, each comprising a certain number of measures.

This document is a report on the measures that were considered to be high priority, both by the early childhood stakeholders and the general population. It establishes the basis of a consensus in Quebec society on the actions to focus on if we are to offer all Quebec children an equal chance of success.

The Early Childhood Observatory wishes to thank everyone who contributed to the contents of this document, whether as a participant in the dialogue event or a survey respondent. We also thank the members of our Scientific and Advisory Committees and the various experts we consulted for their expertise at various stages of the process.

## 1 APRIL 2016

Publication of special report on developmental gaps

## 2 MAY 2016

Dialogue event on potential solutions, bringing together some 700 participants

## 3 JUNE 2016

Prioritization survey of 1,067 early childhood stakeholders

## 4 JULY 2016

Population survey of 1,501 Quebecers 18 and over

<sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted by the Léger firm from July 12-16, 2016 on a representative sample of 1,501 Quebecers aged 18 or over.

# THE FACTS

The information and data presented here are taken from the Quebec Survey of Child Development in Kindergarten conducted by the *Institut de la statistique du Québec* and an analysis prepared by the *Institut national de santé publique du Québec* for the Early Childhood Observatory.



+600

THAT'S HOW MANY MORE  
WORDS A 3-YEAR-OLD  
IN A PRIVILEGED FAMILY  
KNOWS THAN HIS OR  
HER COUNTERPART IN A  
DISADVANTAGED FAMILY.



500

Number of words known by 3-year-olds in disadvantaged families

1,100

Number of words known by 3-year-olds in privileged families

9%

OF KINDERGARTEN-AGED CHILDREN ARE DEVELOPMENTALLY VULNERABLE IN SOCIAL SKILLS,

WHICH COULD AFFECT THEIR ABILITY TO RESPECT ROUTINES AND RULES AND PLAY AND WORK WITH OTHERS.



3/4

OF KINDERGARTEN-AGED CHILDREN MEET ALL EXPECTATIONS IN TERMS OF MOTOR SKILLS.



# WHY SHOULD WE BE WORRIED?

CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT DURING THE EARLIEST YEARS OF THEIR LIFE HAS AN INFLUENCE ON THEIR ABILITY TO LEARN AND SUCCEED IN SCHOOL

Studies have shown that...

0-5 YEARS

Children who experience **difficult or stressful living conditions** between the ages of 0 and 5 have fewer of the skills they need to enter kindergarten.

Children's success in kindergarten is likely to influence their academic success in primary school.

KINDERGARTEN

22 YEARS

Academic success in primary school is likely to influence a 22-year-old's level of education.

# AREAS OF ACTION

Four main areas of action were identified to reduce the developmental gap that exists between children in the most privileged environments and those in the most disadvantaged when they start school. The first is related to investments needed in the area of early childhood, the second looks at the issue of prevention, the third considers the importance of training and raising awareness, and the fourth recommends dialogue and collective action. The opinion of the Quebec population on the measures associated with two of the areas of action—investing in early childhood and focusing on prevention—was evaluated by survey. The following section presents the impressions of both the early childhood stakeholders and the general public on all of the measures identified, including a few related elements from the scientific literature.

## Investing in early childhood

Food security, early stimulation, access to health services and quality daycare: in Quebec, as elsewhere, the needs of very young children are many and diverse. During times of budget restrictions, taking sustainable action by offering services that respond to needs expressed and collective ambitions constitutes a real challenge for early childhood stakeholders.

When asked what actions they would take to further the well-being and development of the very young, stakeholders insisted on the importance of making this segment of the population a priority in public policy and investing more heavily in our children.

Quebec opinion has traditionally been mitigated on the amount of importance that should be given to early childhood, especially at a time when public investments are limited and choices have to be made between the very young, the elderly, health and education<sup>2</sup>. When asked specifically for their opinion on certain measures targeting early childhood development, however, respondents were positive:

**91%** of Quebecers consider it important that Quebec society give more priority to the well-being and development of children between the ages of 0 and 5.

Almost **9 out of 10 Quebecers** (86%) also believe that it is important for the government to increase investments to improve the well-being and development of this segment of the population.

## Daycares and community organizations

More specifically:

**95%** of early childhood stakeholders think there should be reinvestment in early childhood services, particularly child care centres (*Centres de la petite enfance*, or CPEs) and community organizations, to ensure sustainable access to quality services throughout Quebec<sup>3</sup>.

This idea, which is far from new, is also supported by a large proportion of the general population:

**87%** of Quebecers agree there should be an increase in funding for community organizations that offer services to families and young children: early stimulation, training in parenting skills, emergent literacy activities and respite services.

**77%** of Quebecers also think that the government should invest more in childcare services for young children, particularly CPEs.

### WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US?

- > It has been shown that children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods benefit from attending an educational daycare facility, particularly in the areas of vocabulary development and social interaction (Doherty, 2007; Laurin et coll., 2015; Mitchell, Wylie and Carr, 2008). These beneficial effects can last right through until adolescence (Vandenbroeck et Lazzari, 2014) and even adulthood (Schweinhart et coll., 2005).
- > Studies have shown that that preschool daycare attendance is lower in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Geoffroy et coll., 2012; Giguère and Desrosiers, 2010; Gingras, Audet and Nanhou, 2011; Japel, 2008.).

<sup>2</sup> See the results of the survey on Quebecers' aspirations in the area of social policy (*Sondage sur les aspirations des Québécois en matière de politiques sociales*) conducted by Léger for the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation published in September 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Since investment in childcare centres and community organizations were included in the same statement of prioritization submitted to early childhood stakeholders, it was not possible to differentiate between them.

## Social housing, public transportation and services offered by municipalities

On the other hand, since several factors can have a positive influence on children's development—such as living conditions, social interactions and access to recreational activities—a certain number of other areas were judged to be priorities for investment by early childhood stakeholders.

### In concrete terms

**79%** of early childhood stakeholders would prioritize investment in social housing, ensuring that low-income families had access to affordable living spaces of an appropriate size.

### An equal proportion (79%)

consider the financial support of public transportation development outside of major urban centres to be an crucial factor in fighting the social isolation of many low-income families.

### Similar concerns also resulted in

**76%**

of early childhood stakeholders giving priority to municipalities offered free services to underprivileged families, especially recreational activities.

### WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US?

- > There is an implied connection between housing and dwelling characteristics and a child's well-being and development. Although study results are somewhat contradictory, preschool children living in inadequate conditions (high density dwellings and unaffordable rent) could be at greater risk of developing cognitive, linguistic and socio-affective developmental delays throughout their lives (Artani et coll., 2011; Becker et coll., 2011; Coley et coll., 2013; Evans et coll., 2010; Leventhal and Newman, 2010).
- > Studies have shown that parents in disadvantaged neighbourhoods who take advantage of their community resources (community banks, reading clubs, etc.) expand their social support network, which subsequently has a positive effect on their children's development (Duval and Bouchard, 2013).



The general public's point of view on priority investment sectors is generally similar to that of early childhood stakeholders. This confirms Quebecers' openness to less traditional measures aimed at improving the well-being and development of the very young.

**The figures:**

**82%** of Quebecers would like to see more government investment in social housing for families.



**Slightly more than 8 out of 10 Quebecers** (85%) are also favourable to the idea of public financial support to help municipalities improve their early childhood service offering (parks, day camps, recreational activities, etc.).

When asked how important they thought services offered to families in choosing their place of residence were, 49% of Quebecers said they considered these services to be fairly or very important. This figure increases to 63% among respondents with children.

**Still at the local level,**

**76%** of respondents of the population survey supported the injection of new funds into developing public transportation outside of the major urban centres to fight social isolation.

**The measure that received the support of the largest number of Quebecers, or**

**88%** was the idea of increasing the number of free activities offered by municipalities to underprivileged families.

**WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US?**

- > Investment in early childhood is money in the bank. According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, every dollar invested in giving a child a better start in life represents a return of between \$4 and \$9 throughout that child's life (Center on the Developing Child, 2007).

# Focusing on prevention

How many times have we heard that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure? A very large proportion of early childhood stakeholders firmly agree with that proverb, reiterating the importance of acting early in children's lives. This objective would entail various forms of action, the most popular being action by the first people involved in children's lives: their parents. Collective engagement is also a major factor.

## The figures:

90%

**of early childhood stakeholders** feel it is crucial to strengthen the support offered to parents, working with them to ensure the well-being of their young children. Stakeholders see this support as a way of promoting the involvement of both parents in their children's development and preventing certain problems.

## WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US?

- > Social support has been shown to be a factor in preventing the development of behavioural problems in children and countering the effects of parents' psychological distress and poor parenting skills (Desrosiers, 2013; Hamelin-Brabant et coll., 2015; Heberle et coll., 2015; Leahy Warren et coll., 2011).

## Screening, early intervention and transition to kindergarten

**84%** of early childhood stakeholders are convinced of the importance of encouraging screening and early intervention, i.e., acting as early as possible in a child's life, regardless of his or her environment.

**87%** of Quebecers are favourable to this idea.

Early childhood stakeholders also insist on the importance of how children experience their entry into kindergarten. They would like to see Quebec-wide implementation of such initiatives as specialized activities and facilitation tools to support children during this key transition period.

Setting up a structured plan for transition to kindergarten received the support of **70% of early childhood stakeholders** and **close to 8 out of 10 Quebecers** (76%).

Slightly less than one out of two Quebecers (48%) said they supported the idea of starting kindergarten at age 4 (junior kindergarten).

## WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US?

- > Studies have shown that the transition to kindergarten is experienced less favourably by children from disadvantaged environments and demand that something be done to help (Rimm-Kaufman et coll., 2000; Canton et coll., 2011).

# Training and raising awareness

Knowledge is power. Early childhood stakeholders have recognized the importance of not only providing childcare workers with adequate training, but also raising the awareness of the general public. Their goal is to be able to take more effective action by improving knowledge and awareness of child development between the ages of 0 and 5. The profiles, training and experience of individuals working in early childhood are extremely diverse. Although there is a certain similarity among workers in childcare centres and schools, the profiles of those who are active in other milieus—the community sector, for example—are much more varied. According to early childhood stakeholders, however, childcare practitioners, educators and members of the teaching profession have something in common: very few of them have an in-depth knowledge of child development between the ages of 0 and 5, especially when specific problems are involved.

## Training

79%

**of early childhood stakeholders** would like to see community workers, educators and preschool teachers get more training in early childhood development and situations related to specific clientele or problems. Early childhood stakeholders also insist that experience and shared expertise are important sources of knowledge and must be encouraged.

The figures:

75%

**of this group** strongly recommend the sharing of winning childcare practices through knowledge transfer activities or sharing events—with the rest of Canada as well.

## Awareness

The general public also has an important role to play. In order to raise popular awareness of children's overall development and the gaps that exist between privileged and disadvantaged environments, early childhood stakeholders insist on the importance of setting up programs and services that promote social mixing, or the bringing together of people from different economic milieus. The added value of such an approach has been widely recognized in the early childhood sector.

### The proof:

**79%** of stakeholders in the field identify this as a priority action.

**68%** also believe that it would be important to conduct an awareness campaign on the overall child development aimed at the general public, parents and decision-makers.

The significance of training and raising the awareness of stakeholders and the general population was not directly measured by population survey. Respondents' knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of the developmental gap that exists between children from privileged and disadvantaged environments when they start school sheds some light on the necessity of such a measure, however.

When questioned on this point, a majority of Quebecers underestimated or admitted they had no knowledge of the proportion of kindergartners who were vulnerable in at least one area of development (physical health and well-being, social skills, emotional maturity, cognitive and language development, communication skills and general knowledge).

When informed that one child out of four in Quebec, one out of three in the most disadvantaged environments and one out of five in the most privileged environments were developmentally vulnerable, **81% of Quebecers** said this was unacceptable.

### WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US?

- > Studies have confirmed that initial training (Bigras et coll., 2010; Doherty et coll., 2006; Drouin et coll., 2004; Goelman et coll., 2006; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002) and ongoing training (Pianta et coll., 2015) for adults interacting with children are indispensable prerequisites for establishing a high-quality educational setting.

# 4 Acting collectively

Pooling expertise, sharing resources, establishing joint targets and finding ways to reach them together: for early childhood stakeholders, these are the essential ingredients of any successful action aimed at improving the development and well-being of very young children.

## The figures:

**89%** of early childhood stakeholders consider it important to encourage dialogue and collaboration between preschools, schools, communities, municipalities and the health and social service network.

## More specifically,

**86%** say we should encourage the sharing of specialized resources (speech therapy, psychoeducation, psychology, social work, etc.) among educational and health and social service milieus.

## While

**76%** consider it essential to encourage the sharing of infrastructures and programs among municipalities and community organizations.

## WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US?

Studies have demonstrated the benefits of aligned, coordinated actions between preschools and kindergartens, especially for children from disadvantaged environments (Bogard and Takanishi, 2005; Cantin et coll, 2011; LoCasale-Crouch et coll., 2008; Pianta, Cox and Snow, 2007).

# AREAS OF AGREEMENT

Early childhood stakeholders and the Quebec population are in agreement not only on the idea of increasing investment to improve the well-being and development of children between the ages of 0 and 5, but also on which investment sectors should be targeted, for the most part.

Prioritizing certain investment sectors is compatible with the idea of acting early in children's lives. It is not surprising, therefore, that prevention has also been identified as a promising solution. Two measures earmarked by early childhood stakeholders were received with particular enthusiasm by the general public: first, setting up a system of screening and early intervention and, second, creating a structured transition plan for children entering kindergarten.

Although these potential solutions must be studied to ensure they are scientifically relevant and feasible in Quebec, the Observatory hopes they will inform decision-makers' reflections on actions to take. One thing is certain: these areas of agreement confirm that the vast majority of Quebecers are interested in seeing different measures being taken to benefit the very young—actions that are firmly rooted in the community, not limited to the specific milieus we automatically associate with children between 0 and 5. Most important, the results obtained paint a picture of a Quebec that is in favour of social action in the area of early childhood: a Quebec ready to act together to offer all children an equal chance of success, starting right at birth.

# 1

## Investing in early childhood

### Increased investment in:

- > Daycare services
- > Community organizations that offer services to families and very young children
- > Social housing reserved for families
- > Public transportation outside of major urban centres
- > Support for municipalities in offering better early childhood services
- > Free activities for disadvantaged families in municipalities

# 2

## Focusing on prevention

- > Set up screening system for developmental problems and early intervention measures
- > Create structured transition plan for children starting kindergarten

**OFFERING CHILDREN  
IN QUEBEC  
AN EQUAL CHANCE  
OF SUCCESS**

# 3

## Training and raising awareness

- > Improve training for workers in community organizations, daycare educators and preschool teachers
- > Share winning early childhood practices
- > Conduct an awareness campaign on children's overall development

# 4

## Acting collectively

- > Encourage dialogue and collaboration among preschools, schools, communities, municipalities and the health and social service network
- > Share specialized resources among educational and health and social service milieus
- > Encourage the sharing of infrastructures and programs among municipalities and community organizations

# SUMMARY TABLE OF SURVEYED MEASURES

Measures	Early childhood stakeholders Rate of agreement	Quebec population Rate of agreement
Increase investment in community organizations that offer services to families and very young children	95%	87%
Increase investment in educational daycare	95% <sup>4</sup>	77%
Increase investment in social housing reserved for families	79%	82%
Increase investment in public transportation outside of major urban centres to fight family isolation	79%	76%
Increase support for municipalities to help them offer more/better services for young children (such as parks, recreational activities, etc.)	76%	85%
Offer more free activities to families in disadvantaged municipalities (such as day camps, recreational activities, etc.)	76%	88%
Set up a screening system for developmental problems and early intervention	84%	87%
Create a structured transition plan for children starting kindergarten	70%	76%

<sup>4</sup> Since investment in early childhood daycare services and community organizations were included in the same statement of prioritization submitted to early childhood stakeholders, it was not possible to differentiate between them.



# RATE OF AGREEMENT WITH SURVEYED MEASURES BY REGION

Measures	All of Quebec	Montréal	Capitale-Nationale	Saguenay	Abitibi	Mauricie	Outaouais	Others
Increase investment in fostering the well-being and development of children between the ages of 0 and 5	86%	85%	84%	93%	92%	93%	90%	87%
Increase investment in community organizations that offer services to families and very young children	87%	87%	85%	85%	87%	88%	86%	87%
Increase investment in educational daycare	77%	78%	72%	76%	83%	77%	84%	77%
Increase investment in social housing reserved for families	82%	84%	77%	81%	84%	75%	86%	82%
Increase investment in public transportation outside of major urban centres to fight family isolation	76%	79%	70%	72%	80%	73%	78%	74%
Increase support for municipalities to help them offer more/better services for young children (such as parks, recreational activities, etc.)	85%	84%	85%	86%	86%	89%	90%	85%
Offer more free activities to families in disadvantaged municipalities (such as day camps, recreational activities, etc.)	88%	88%	87%	90%	93%	87%	84%	89%
Set up a screening system for developmental problems and early intervention	87%	87%	86%	90%	91%	88%	90%	87%
Create a structured transition plan for children starting kindergarten	76%	76%	66%	82%	82%	80%	82%	76%
Junior kindergarten (at 4 years old)	48%	53%	45%	35%	40%	43%	42%	44%

# TO FIND OUT +

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## CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN KINDERGARTEN:

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Consult the *Data* section of the *Observatoire des tout-petits* website.

## WHAT RESEARCH HAS TO SAY ABOUT...

### > Effectiveness of investments in early childhood

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**> Social support as a protective factor for child development**

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**THE HEALTH, WELL-BEING AND DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN FROM 0-5 IN QUEBEC AND THE ENVIRONMENTS THEY ARE GROWING UP IN:**

Consult the *Data* section of the *Early Childhood Observatory* website.

# OBSERVATOIRE des tout-petits

The mission of the Early Childhood Observatory is to help ensure that the development and well-being of our very youngest children has a place at the top of Quebec's list of social priorities. To achieve this goal, the Observatory compiles the most rigorous data on 0-5 year-olds, produces special reports and encourages dialogue on the necessary collective actions.

[Tout-petits.org](http://Tout-petits.org)



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