

CHILDREN HAVE A RIGHT TO A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

and elected officials have a responsibility to make it happen

Researchers and practitioners agree: there is an urgency to act for the future of our children and our planet, and the chance to do so is now.

There is an environmental crisis. It will determine the survival of humanity, not in the distant future, but during the lifetimes of children now attending early childhood programs. While the crisis affects our entire planet and its population, young children are disproportionately impacted. As with all trials, the more racialized, the more socially and economically disadvantaged, the greater the negative outcomes.

Tackling the crisis is everyone's responsibility and the challenge is greater than any one stakeholder.

The early childhood sector is especially tasked to incorporate environmental responsibility into children's earliest environments and now has the tools to do it.

National, Indigenous, and international participants with a wide range of expertise discussed how to incorporate environmental stewardship into early childhood programs at a [symposium](#) organized by the Atkinson Centre at the University of Toronto, in partnership with the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development at the University of Montreal.

In their [presentations](#), speakers didn't minimize the challenges, but they did provide hope. There are many made-in-Canada resources to help plan, build, and operate child care more sustainably. As the workforce grows there are training guides and trend-setting examples of land and nature-based programming to equip educators to become environmentalists, as they guide the children in their care to climate knowledge and activism. For policy makers, there are steps to take now that will change outcomes for generations to come.

The stars are aligned to create healthy spaces for children while contributing to the attainment of Canada's sustainable development goals for 2030.

The Canada-Wide [Early Learning and Child Care Agreements](#) (CWELCC) signed between provinces

and territories and the Government of Canada provide an unparalleled opportunity to incorporate green solutions into the building of a new social program. The agreements bring \$27 billion over the next 5 years to establish a national early learning and child care system. This investment is combined with funds targeted to [Indigenous early learning and child care](#), a \$625 million [Infrastructure Fund](#), and money to improve access to child care facilities.

The CWELCC investment is an opportunity to think green within the child care sector, reevaluate the status quo, and reset the sector to ensure sustainability and climate goals are incorporated both at policy and program/classroom levels.

It represents an opportunity for governments at all levels to position themselves as leaders for equity and sustainability in early learning and child care. [Canada's climate](#) targets must be incorporated into all sectors and within all investments and expenditures and embedded in developing child care legislation.

Children are the least responsible, but bear the greatest impact of the climate crisis.

What is bad for people is worse for women and children, and what is bad for children is worse for children in their earliest years, particularly those living in marginalized and vulnerable communities.

Children are the least responsible for climate change, yet they are the [most affected by its impacts](#).

- Close to 90 per cent of the burden of disease attributable to climate change is borne by children under the age of five.
- Every year, over half a million children under the age of five die from air-pollution-related causes.
- Approximately two billion children live in areas where air pollution levels exceed standards set by the World Health Organization—putting their health and brain development at risk.

[UNICEF's Report Card 17](#) released in May 2022 specifically addressed environmental stressors, and ranks Canada 28 among 39 wealthy countries in the overall environmental well-being of children and youth.

CWELCC funding **is an opportunity to elevate Canada's poor ranking.** Improving access to natural playgrounds and green buildings, current and new, could be a win-win situation to improve the well-being of children, and place Canada among the world's environment leaders, instead of with the laggards. There are tangible positive offshoots. At a minimum, reducing pollution reduces health costs. Scientists estimate that the [economic cost of health impacts from air pollution per year is \\$120 billion; the equivalent of 6% of Canada's real gross domestic product.](#)

A healthy environment is now recognized as a human and a child right.

Environmental quality received a new and immediate level of recognition when a UK coroner ruled that [air pollution led to the 2013 death of 9-year-old Ella Kissi-Debrah](#) and [called](#) for changes to environmental policy.

On [October 8, 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council](#) recognized that a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is a human right. Further to this, [a historical ruling](#) by the United Nations Child Rights Committee decided a country can be held accountable for the negative impact of its carbon emissions on children both within and beyond its territory.

Turning to the courts to compel governments and businesses to respect and accelerate commitments on climate change.

People, including children and Indigenous communities, are turning to the courts to compel governments and businesses to respect and accelerate commitments on climate change.

According to the [Global Climate Litigation Report—2020 Status Review](#) published in January 2021, the number of climate change litigation cases has surged in the last four years and now stands at 1,550 in 39 countries including the courts of the European Union.

In the first lawsuit of its kind in Canada, [ENvironnement JEUnesse launched a class action suit](#) on behalf of all young Quebecers 35 years and younger against the Government of Canada, alleging that it is infringing on the fundamental rights of a generation. Filed in [November 2018](#), the suit claims the Canadian government's behaviour violates several rights protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms. Consequently, young

people are entitled to ask the government to take the necessary measures to stop this infringement.

Legislation makes a difference.

Some U.S. states have adopted legislation to protect children from the most immediate impacts of pollution. California's [Senate Bill No 352](#) (2003) prohibits school districts from locating schools within 500 feet from the edge of the closest traffic lane of a freeway or other busy traffic corridor.

A similar [Bill](#), which prohibits the construction of new schools within 600 feet of a major roadway is [currently in Committee at the New York State Senate](#). This type of legislation can act as a model for Canadian policy-makers.

WHAT SHOULD GOVERNMENTS DO?

Incorporate climate goals in all sectors and within all public investments and expenditures.

[The Federal government is investing \\$27 billion over the next five years to expand access to affordable child care.](#) The spending of any public dollar requires a sustainability lens. Where new child care programs are located, how they are designed, constructed, and resourced, can either add to the problem of climate change or help mitigate it. This is an opportunity to ensure sustainability and climate action are incorporated both at policy and program/classroom levels through legislative changes.

Incorporate sustainability and pro-environmental learning into the early years' curriculum.

Pro-environmental attitudes [develop by age seven](#) and are critical and foundational in supporting behaviours to address climate awareness and activism. [Early years curriculum must include sustainability education and action](#); and these must be reflected in what happens in the classroom. Changing attitudes and beliefs towards climate change and sustainability requires turning beliefs into actions and habits.

Indigenous worldviews include developing relationships of gratitude and reciprocity with the land ([Wall Kimmerer, 2013](#)). Children are attuned to Indigenous perspectives such as gratitude, care, and reciprocal relationships with the natural world, and if supported, are likely to grow up to advocate for a just and sustainable treatment of the earth ([McGlynn-Stewart, 2022](#)).

Developing a reciprocal and respectful relationship with the land is now critical to our survival. Early years curriculum must not only support knowledge [about the environment, but activism for the environment](#). These elements should be extended to family engagement to support not only the next generations, but to create behavioural change today.

Build reciprocal relationships and partnerships with Indigenous leaders and knowledge keepers and incorporate land-based learning into all aspects of the early years.

While climate change continues to pose an increasing threat to the survival of Indigenous peoples, they continue to be excluded from policy decisions and climate negotiations and their wisdoms ignored.

[Climate experts](#) agree that a critical way to address the climate crisis is to empower Indigenous communities, and to support meaningful dialogue with Indigenous knowledge holders to determine sustainable and co-operative steps forward. Indigenous community-based and collectively-held knowledge offers valuable insights, complementing scientific data with chronological and landscape-specific precision and detail that is critical for verifying climate models and evaluating climate change scenarios developed by scientists.

Keep climate action and sustainability as a top priority in community and urban planning.

Where child care centres are located is as important as how they are built and what happens inside them. The federal government's refusal to allow its funding to be used to support early learning and child care programs offered by schools curtails efforts to create [15-minute neighbourhoods](#). Walkable communities are critical to reducing carbon footprints. Existing public infrastructure in schools, parks, and libraries should be [leveraged to maximize their functions](#).

Use an equity lens in all policy decisions.

The climate crisis builds on the rampant inequities in our society. With racialized, marginalized, and [Indigenous and Northern communities](#) bearing much of the negative impact of climate change. How we plan and develop policies and neighbourhoods around climate change mitigation can either add to the inequity crisis or help ease it. For example, low-income neighbourhoods are [much less likely to have green spaces and canopies](#) and are more likely to be [exposed to air-pollution](#).

Incorporating the notion that a child has a human right to have a sustainable, clean, and healthy environment was recognized by the [United Nations Human Rights Council](#) on October 8, 2021 and must be incorporated into legislation and policies.

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