

Atkinson Centre

POLICY MONITOR #6

**Children with Special Educational Needs in Early Childhood:
Concept Paper prepared for the Atkinson Centre Early Years Task Force**

**Prepared by Kathryn Underwood and Rachel Langford
School of Early Childhood Education, Ryerson University**

June 2011

The Atkinson Centre Early Years Task Force brings together experts to develop a comprehensive approach to the implementation of the early years framework, including extended day programs and child and family centres in Ontario. Membership includes key partners in the early learning community whose primary role is to share knowledge, expertise and advice on the implementation of early learning programs for children and their families.

Document Citation:

Underwood, K. & Langford, R. (2011). *Child Development: A Comprehensive Approach*. Toronto, ON: Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development, OISE/University of Toronto

© Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development, 2011

The Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development is a research centre based at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and works to promote research on child development, and the development of early learning policy and practice that serve young children and their families.

For more information, please visit www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson

The current early intervention system in Ontario is highly fragmented; depending on where a child lives in the province affects the choices available to them and their families⁴. In a study of parent perspectives of early

The potential gains for all children in a regulated universal approach to both child care and early educational experiences are enormous, but are especially important for children who may not have had access to community-based programs in the past. Access to child care has critical economic implications for all families, but in families who may have disability associated expenses and time commitments, it is vital. Integrating child care, family supports, early intervention and school services will reduce transitions for all children⁷. This is a tremendous gain for children who have disabilities that make transitions particularly challenging. Key issues to be addressed at transition include information sharing and graduated transitions. Information sharing between early years services and schools, while maintaining confidentiality, needs to be addressed. Common assessments or coordination of assessment, and planning across the two systems is needed. In addition, if necessary, graduated transitions (giving more time for transition for some children) that meet the needs of the child but caution is warranted to ensure that this approach does not provide an excuse to keep children out of kindergarten programs.

A universal system, with educators who are trained to work with children with special educational needs, will also be a remarkable move forward. There needs to be investment in both increasing the knowledge base for understanding the experience of children, as well as knowledge transfer to ensure both teachers and ECEs have training in inclusive practice both at the pre-service and in-service stages.

Current funding strategies, such as the autism strategy and the mental health strategy, can put supports in place in universally accessible programs, such as schools, they may serve a broader range of children than those narrowly defined by the policy. For example, mental health supports should provide funding for staff. Staff should support all children in the full day kindergarten programs, including those with permanent mental health concerns, but also those who are at-risk for mental health issues.

In order to support children with special needs and their families, schools need to bring a range of professionals to the table in order to negotiate what an integrated system will look like. It is likely that not much will change unless there is a clear mandate to include all of the professionals who are working in early intervention in discussions of both Child and Family Centres and full day kindergarten. With municipalities

This is the time to design school based programs that meet the needs of all children and to attract these children to kindergarten programs in order to ease the transition into school and improve the school experience for children accessing early intervention. In order to ensure that children with special educational needs are fully included in the new full day kindergarten programs for 4 and 5 year olds, a number of things need to be in place. First it needs to be acknowledged that primary responsibility for all children rests with the early childhood educators and elementary teachers who are in the classrooms. While staff of the Child and Family Centres will play a critical role in early intervention, this role should also support those people who have primary responsibility for all children in the programs: the elementary teachers and ECEs. This is a fundamentally inclusive approach. Otherwise, early intervention services will serve to segregate children. In order for this model to work, ECEs and elementary teachers need to have enough support to meet the needs of all of the children in their programs. The current ratios in child care centres, defined in the Day Nursery's Act, are sometimes not adequate to meet the needs of diverse groups of children. This will inevitably be the case in classrooms of 4 and 5 year olds with a 1 to 13 ratio.

Early intervention supports that are co-located with kindergarten programs are more inclusive and support full participation in a child's community. Due to space constraints, many of the professionals working in early intervention will not have offices in schools. The physical separation of early intervention and schools will need to be addressed and a mechanism to ensure that children are not being taken out of their communities to get the supports that they have a right to receive must be addressed. The supports that are used by children with special educational needs are often beneficial to other children as well. This should also be considered in developing the relationships amongst staff in early intervention and staff in schools. In fact, many parents report learning about early intervention supports while being part of other programs¹⁰.

We need to seize the opportunity we have to design and implement a universally accessible system with the needs of children with disabilities considered at the outset. It is rare that an opportunity like this arises. For the most part as a society we end up retrofitting our policies and practices to meet the needs of people with disabilities. That approach is both more expensive and less desirable because it means changing attitudes and behaviours that are set in experience and these are often the most challenging changes to make. The importance of creating new norms from the outset cannot be stressed enough.

For more information on this topic, as well as about the Atkinson Centre, please visit: www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson

¹⁰ Underwood, K., et al. (2010).