Early Childhood Services:  
A Programme for co-ordinating the Educational, Health and Social Services for Young Children and their families

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In Canada, responsibility for the organization and administration of public education has been assigned by the constitution to the provincial governments. For numerous reasons such as historical, religious, ethnic, linguistic, and economic differences, a considerable amount of diversity occurs in the autonomous educational system in each of the ten provinces.

An innovative programme was introduced by the provincial government of Alberta in 1973 to meet the special needs of children from birth to eight years of age and their parents. Essentially the plan is to co-ordinate the agencies which provide services to young children and their families. Individually and collectively, it includes, in addition to the children and their families, teachers, administrators, para-professional educators, nurses, medical-dental personnel, nutritionists, recreation leaders, social workers, psychologists, and other community workers and resource people.

A separate branch of the Department of Education was established, called Early Childhood Services, to co-ordinate the activities of various government departments related to young children. The organization appears to be complex (Séguin, 1976), but it is designed to make efficient use of the specialized resources through integration. To that end it is hoped that duplication of services will be reduced and that the learning experiences and the services that nurture the young child and the family will be closely related. Simply stated the purposes are as follows:

1. to co-ordinate at the provincial policy level the services offered by the government to meet the needs of young children and their families.
2. to develop and maintain needed services throughout the province.
3. to facilitate a co-ordinated approach for the delivery of services for young children and their families.
4. to encourage interagency co-operation among all local agencies which provide these services.
5. to provide grants and consultative services to community groups and to schools for the establishment and maintenance of comprehensive programs. (Government of Alberta, 1973).

Central to the philosophy of Early Childhood Services is the development and enhancement of dignity and self-worth in the child. A positive self-concept is believed to be of great importance to the development of the child. Specifically programmes should include opportunities for the children to develop personal qualities such as self-reliance and initiative, an awareness of self and others, the ability to give and follow directions, the power to control impulsive behaviour, the ability to
handle successes and failures, and the stimulation of aesthetic awareness. Since language bears such an important relationship to thinking which in turn can influence self-concept, this aspect of development is also critical. Children who gain increased competency in the use of the senses and motor skills, another emphasis, develop a greater awareness of the capabilities of the body. To encompass the variety of needs and interests among children many direct experiences are recommended so that the breadth and depth of their concepts are extended.

Another major facet of the programme is concern for the home and community environment in which the child is being reared. Demographic factors such as housing, income, and ethnic backgrounds; cognitive factors such as language models and opportunities for learning from daily experiences; and emotional factors such as the emotional security and self-esteem of the adults responsible for the child are recognized to be influential in the child’s development.

For each programme there are three levels of involvement: provincial, regional, and local.

At the provincial government level leadership is provided in co-ordinating, advising, evaluating, and funding. A co-ordinating committee meets regularly to form policy. Another specific task is the evaluation of all proposals for funding by the Proposal Review Committee. Funds are allocated each year and, as an example, in 1976-77 they were provided at the rates of $470 for each “normal” child, $630 for each “disadvantaged” child, and $960 to $1,200 for each “handicapped” child in an approved programme. (The amounts are stated in Canadian dollars). Reports are also received and evaluated on the implementation of the plans. In the fourth year that Early Childhood Services was in operation over 90% of the children aged 4½ to 5½ were enrolled in this voluntary programme. Increasing numbers of younger children are included and all children above the age 5½ on September 1st are in schools.

At the regional level consultants are made available to assist in programme development. In addition to general consultants there are now special full-time parent development resource leaders. Recreation, social services, nutrition, and medical consultants are available on a part-time basis.

At the local level a decision must first be made on which organizational model the community wants. Initiation may be exercised by any one of the following: a school board, a community agency, a licensed private institution, or an individual operator. Next, a local advisory committee is established consisting of representatives from all the stakeholder groups, but there is an important stipulation that the majority of representatives on the committee must be parents of the children enrolled in the programme.

The basic responsibilities of the local advisory committee are outlined.

1. Throughout the year, the committee must be involved in the planning, development, and operation of the programme.
2. They must appoint a project co-ordinator who will be a teacher with a four year university degree and a specialist diploma in Early Childhood Education.
3. The programme will be supported by recruiting and organising the parent volunteers. Participation by many parents is a mandatory part of the programme although the kind of involvement may vary considerably.
4. Assessing the needs of the participants in the programme is a part of the initial planning and includes discussion of the organizational structure, decision making, using and improving human resources, and the instructional support services. Local advisory committees are encouraged to seek the answers to the following kinds of questions:
   1. What are the general needs of the children?
   2. What are the related needs of the parents and other members of the families?
   3. What are the needs of the community if it is to meet the needs of the children and the related needs of their families?
   4. Are there children and their families in the community who have specific needs?
   5. Are there children with handicaps who