

Child care expansion in Ontario's Niagara Region

Having access to high quality child care is crucial for many Canadian families. In Canada, more than half of children under 6 years of age are registered in a child care arrangement outside of the family (Charters, 2023). This statistic highlights the widespread reliance on child care services across the country. However, there are not enough child care spaces for all children under 6 in Canada to attend a licensed child care centre. While the government has addressed affordability for child care, there is an urgent need to expand spaces and particularly in specific communities such as the Niagara Region.

How can early learning professionals support the expansion of child care spaces in the Niagara Region? Before addressing this question, it is essential to consider the Canadian child care context, child care design elements, and the challenges with increasing child care spaces in priority neighbourhoods specific to the Niagara Region.

How Early Learning and Child Care is shaped by various levels of government in Canada

- **Federal**

The Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) System was first introduced by the federal government in 2021 with the aim of improving child care accessibility and compensation for qualified child care staff (Niagara Region, n.d). In 2024, the Canada Early Learning and Child Care Act (Bill-C35) was passed, which is a long-term commitment to high-quality, affordable, and inclusive early learning and child care in Canada.

- **Provincial and Territorial**

In Canada, provinces and territories have the primary responsibility for overseeing child care policy, regulation, funding, and administration of child care services within their jurisdictions.

- **Municipal**

Few municipalities in Canada have much control regarding child care. Ontario, however, is a notable exception. In 2014, Ontario passed the Child Care and Early Years Act, which mandated municipal governments to serve as "service system managers" for child care and early childhood education services. There are 47 system managers in Ontario (Friendly et al., 2024) and Niagara is one of them. Subsequently, municipalities in Ontario are responsible for planning, managing, and funding all the daily operations of their early learning and child care sector. However, it is important to note that municipalities are still delegated by the province, which makes them creatures of the province, meaning even if municipalities are responsible for child care which cater to specific local needs, the provincial government can step in and make other suggestions that are not as favourable.

Let's talk about expansion

Driven by the recognition of its importance for families and the economy, Canada's expansion of child care services carries important implications for municipalities (Cleveland, 2022). Through public management and provision of services, municipal governments play an important role in increasing access to early learning and child care. Expansion is crucial in the Niagara region as the need for childcare has increased by 104% since 2021 (Benner, 2024).

Challenges specific to the Niagara Region

Jane Cervi has lived in the Niagara Region her entire life, having both studied and practiced as a registered early childhood educator for 25 years. Niagara Region has been given a mandate to create 4,067 child care spaces for children under 5 years of age in priority neighbourhoods (i.e., regions with socially and economically vulnerable populations) by 2026 (Niagara Region, n.d). Twelve priority neighbourhoods have been identified from Grimsby heading east all the way to Fort Erie. These areas are considered "child care deserts," where child care is proposed for expansion. Nearly half of Canada's children under 5 are competing for one child care space. A child care desert refers to a postal code in which more than three children compete for one preschool child care spot (Friendly et al., 2024b). The following hyperlink will show your postal code's child care desert: [*Is my community a child care desert? New map shows availability across Canada - CCPA.*](#)

Available child care spaces are limited in the Niagara Region, with 66% of children without childcare (Niagara Region, n.d). While there has been growth in licensed home child care centres (Benner, 2024), this hasn't addressed the systemic lack of child care spaces for children in the Niagara Region. Challenges in expansion include funding, staff recruitment, location, insufficient involvement of local authorities, and keeping up with the demand of a growing region. In creating child care spaces, it is important to talk to the families in these neighbourhoods about their needs (Patel et al., 2008) related to child care expansion, along with considering children's perspectives.

Implications for practice

Designing high-quality child care spaces in an existing or new facility requires a thoughtful approach that prioritizes children's needs, inclusion, equity, safety, staff, and families. Below is a list of important factors to consider:

- Collaboration with experts in the field of children's early learning and development
- Adopting inclusive architectural design, which is a participatory and collaborative approach that incorporates the input of children, families, educators, administrators, and other stakeholders in addition to taking into consideration social dimensions such as gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, age, and ability (Morrow, 2002)

- Coordination with all levels of government
- Engaging with children and families to gain input on child care expansion in their neighbourhoods
- Involvement of local municipalities in the community work related to expansion
- Increasing accessibility and quality of data for small regions
- Continued growth of non-profit child care spaces (Cleveland, 2024)

About Martha Friendly

We would like to acknowledge Martha Friendly, who has been a leading member in the child care movement since the 1960's, recently becoming an appointee to the Order of Canada and receiving a Key to the City of Toronto. Martha is the founder and executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit in Toronto, where Jane Cervi was a graduate student intern in Winter 2024.

Martha has led the child care movement in Canada advocating for an equitable, universal, high-quality child care sector. A social science researcher by education, she started working on early childhood education and child care research in the late 1960s and became a part of grassroots child care activism in the 1970s. Martha founded the Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU) at the University of Toronto's Centre for Urban and Community Studies in the early 1980s, which has a mandate to work towards a universal child care system. The CRRU is now an independent non-profit organization continuing to do this work. Martha is the author of numerous publications and the recipient of many awards, including an honorary doctorate from Trent University.

On behalf of Jane Cervi and the School of Early Childhood Studies at Toronto Metropolitan University, we wish to personally congratulate Martha on her tremendous accomplishments.

During Jane Cervi's time at the CRRU, Martha taught her many valuable lessons about leading the way and advocating for children and families, and the role of research and policy in the early learning and child care sector.

Martha and the CRRU team inspired Jane Cervi to continue with this important work and to be an advocate for a universal child care sector that we can all be proud of. *"Having spent significant time listening, reading and learning throughout my time as an intern with the CRRU team I soon began to realize there was a major piece of the early learning and child care puzzle missing. This piece is to look deeper at prioritizing expansion for children and their families through the lens of a professional who understands and cares deeply for the early learning and child care sector."* - Jane Cervi

[Martha Friendly's Biography](#)

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Appendix

Elements of child care design

In thinking about increasing early learning and child care spaces in the Niagara Region, a helpful resource is the “*Child Care by Design Resource guide*”, which outlines 5 principles that are key to a successful child care design (Schmidt, 1995).

5 principles of Child Care Design (Schmidt, 1995)

Principle	Key Elements
1. Pre-design	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Location• Size of the centre• Neighbourhood connection
2. Building design	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Home away from home a cozy environment, yet serves the purpose of early learning• Village approach, when a child care centre needs to be bigger, it is smart to design “small houses”, to keep it at residential scale/personable• A common gathering area
3. Site planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accommodating more than just the site centre, but all elements of the centre• Open green space, parking lot with safe areas for overflow. <p>There are two elements that are most important:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive orientation-taking full advantage of natural sunlight, blocking wind, utilizing trees/planting trees• Safe circulation-safe pedestrian access to and from, separate parking area, sidewalks
4. Interior design	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Open for free movement however closed enough for quiet times and low distraction• Areas for home like routine to take place with cubbies, toileting/diapering, eating, activities, sensory, age group appropriate areas, all while encouraging autonomy.• Areas for other forms of day-to-day activities, like dramatic play• Pathways clear of obstacles for children to move about freely• Areas for play- calm and quiet play areas• Opportunity for more gross-motor development and play
5. Outdoor space	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Connection to the indoors-all indoor spaces (age groups) individually, have access to and from the outdoor area• Designed methodically to foster connection with the natural world

Incorporating these five principles can create opportunities for children to develop social skills, cognitive skills, and motor skills while ensuring that the environment is inclusive and equitable to all children and families. After all, research shows that the physical environment plays an important role in children's development (Berti et al., 2019).