



What can we do to foster children's development before they start school?

The importance of quality, stability and continuity in the environments of very young children

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Message from the Director

Last August, more than 95,000 young children in Québec began their educational journey. We are all well aware that they did not all start off on the same foot. According to the most recent *Québec Survey of Child Development in Kindergarten* (QSCDK), slightly more than one child out of four in kindergarten was vulnerable in at least one domain of development. That proportion rose to one out of three for children living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods¹.

What are the experiences and conditions that are the most crucial for early childhood development? What can we do to ensure that every child is able to fully benefit from everything school has to offer?

It was with those questions in mind that our team—with the support of several experts—turned their attention to the cross-analysis of two surveys published by the Institut de la statistique du Québec: the *Québec Survey of Child Development in Kindergarten* (QSCDK) and the *Québec Survey on the Preschool Path of Kindergarten Students* (QSPPKS)². The result was the identification of **three elements that play a key role in early childhood development**: the **quality** and **stability** of the environments in which young children grow up, and the **continuity** across those environments.

This report proposes many possible levers for action that could be implemented by governments, municipalities and communities to have a positive impact on the **quality of children's living environments**, including housing, neighbourhoods and educational childcare services. We have also suggested several possibilities for improving **stability** in those environments, such as reducing the number of changes in childcare arrangements or providing support for parents going through a separation. Finally, we have also looked at collaboration between environments as a way to ensure consistency and **continuity** in educational strategies, among other areas.

We hope this report will recognize and confirm the importance of the work that many of you have been doing over the past few years, while providing your teams with new ideas for reflection and action in the years to come. Let's make sure we can offer young children environments adapted to their needs where they can grow and flourish, regardless of where they were born or where they are growing up.



Fannie Dagenais
Director, Early Childhood Observatory

¹ Institut de la statistique du Québec, *Québec Survey of Child Development in Kindergarten*, 2012-2017.

² Institut de la statistique du Québec, *Québec Survey on the Preschool Path of Kindergarten Students*, 2017.

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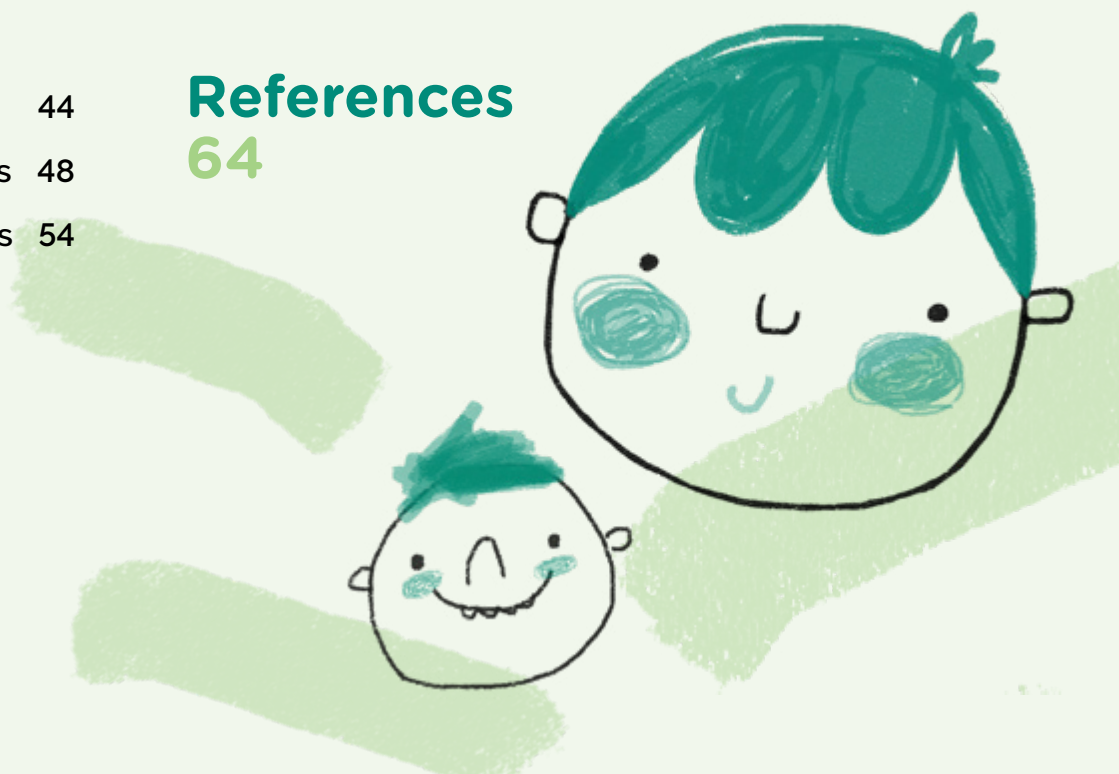
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Why do we need to talk about quality, stability and continuity?

In 2019, the Institut de la statistique du Québec published the results of the *Québec Survey on the Preschool Path of Kindergarten Students 2017* (QSPPTS)¹. A few months earlier, the results of the *Québec Survey of Child Development in Kindergarten 2017* (QSCDK) had also been made public².

The cross-analysis of these two studies brought to light certain aspects of children's preschool paths that can be linked to vulnerability in different domains of development when they enter kindergarten. These observations naturally attracted the attention of the Early Childhood Observatory.

To understand children's development at this point in their lives, we need to look at everything that has affected those lives—from their mother's pregnancy until their entry into kindergarten. Apart from biological factors, it is a child's experiences combined with the support and stimulation they receive from the various environments in their lives that influences their development³.

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The scientific literature has shown us that certain factors such as family income, parents' level of education, and the language spoken at home can affect a child's development⁴. The results of the QSPPKS also show, however, that children who attend several different childcare facilities or move twice or more before starting school are more likely to be vulnerable in certain domains of development. **Stability** ensures that children are exposed to repeated, predictable interactions that help them to build relationships with adults that are based on trust. Studies have also shown that other factors play a role in young children's development: the **quality** of their living environments and the **continuity** across those environments⁵. By "continuity" we mean consistency in terms of educational strategies⁶.

To clearly illustrate the importance of the latter, the Observatory team decided to highlight three elements that play a key role in early childhood development: the quality and stability of the environments in which a child is growing up, and the continuity between them. This document also emphasizes aspects to be improved and indicates levers available to decision-makers, focusing on collaboration between the adults who interact with young children and take care of them⁷.



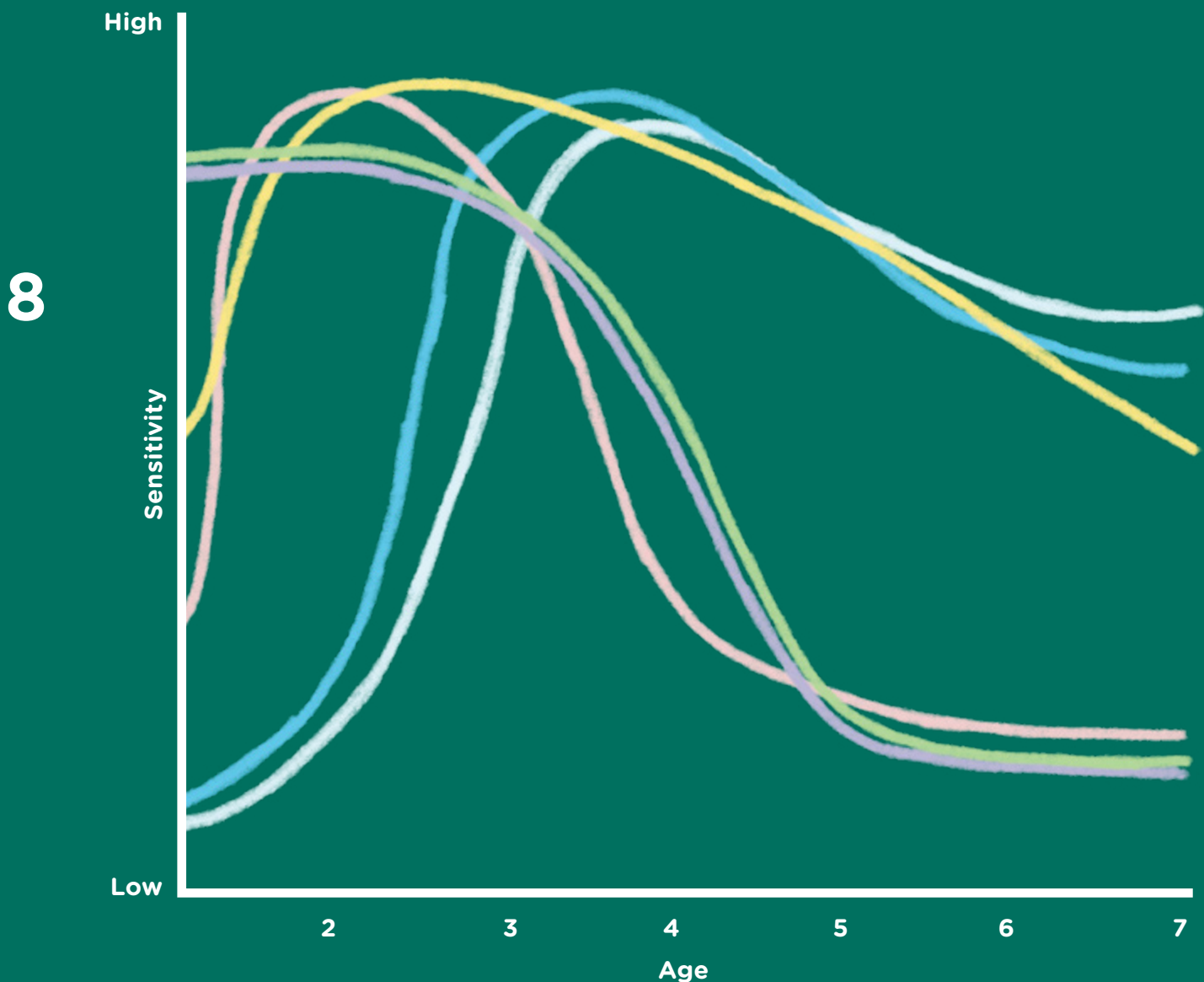
What do children need for healthy development?

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Early childhood: a critical period

Early childhood is a critical period in the life of a human being. Young children's brains are more sensitive and malleable than those of adults in reaction to their surroundings⁸. That is why they react so strongly to external influences, both positive and negative⁹. They are also highly adaptable to opportunities for learning and development offered to them.



Source: Adapted from the report of the *Québec Early Childhood Education Commission*, itself adapted from the *Council for Early Child Development*, 2010. "The Science of Early Child Development." CECD, Vancouver, Canada.

Events experienced in early childhood even produce functional and structural changes in certain areas of the brain¹⁰. During this stage of development, certain structures of the brain take shape to allow the child to develop skills and knowledge¹¹. That is why young children require an appropriate, sensitive response that is adapted to their needs.

What role do children's environments play in their life?

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Being exposed to different environments has an influence on children's development¹². The family is the first and primary source of a child's experiences¹³. From there, they go on other experiences in an educational environment (educational childcare facility and preschool) and their community (neighbourhood, city, region)¹⁴.

REFERENCES FOR THE DIAGRAM ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE

Stimulating experiences^{15, 16, 17}

Stable, caring relationships^{18, 19, 20, 21}

Support from adults in their environment, such as parents, educators and professionals²²

- Emotional control
- Social behaviour
- Numeracy
- Vision
- Language
- Hearing

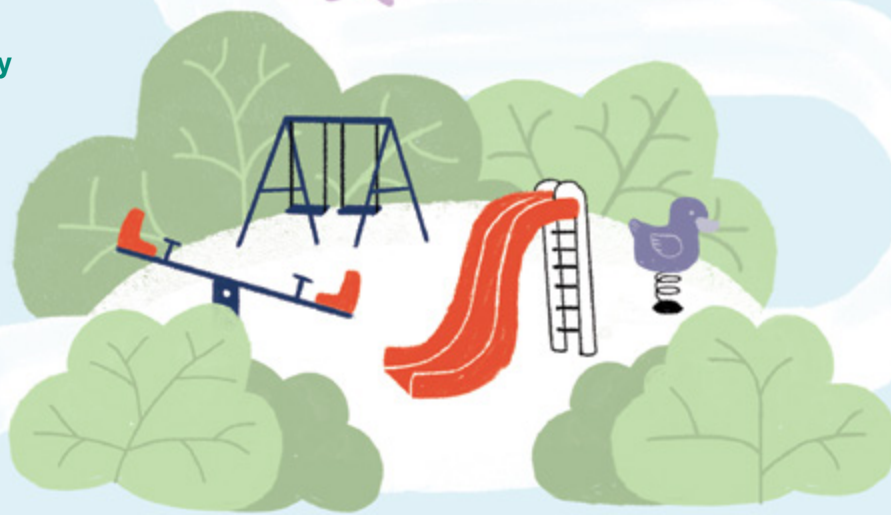
A significant emotional relationship with an educator at their daycare facility

The support of the adults in their life, such as their parents, educators and professionals

Their presence will help the child to feel secure and able to adapt to transitions as they arise.



Access to quality municipal infrastructures, such as libraries and parks



Access to health care and social services



Screening for problems related to health and well-being

Stable, caring relationships

Positive relationships help children to cope with changes in their environment. The quality of these interactions is essential for creating strong attachments and giving children the confidence to discover their environment. They also help children learn how to manage their emotions.

Stimulating experiences

The wealth and diversity of stimulating experiences play a crucial role in the development of the brain and the central nervous system. The presence of toys and books in the home, for example, foster children's development, as do interactions with parents and the other adults who take care of them.



Material
well-being
(food and
shelter)

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Protective factors in children's living environments can foster their development²³.

Developmental risk factors

Several factors in children's lives can combine to have an impact on their development²⁴. When that combination has negative repercussions, we talk about risk factors.

Young children are particularly vulnerable at conception, during their mother's pregnancy and throughout the first years of life²⁵. For example, stress experienced by a pregnant woman is considered a risk factor for her baby's development²⁶. Similarly, when infants are exposed to stress, the risk of serious repercussions increases because of the speed at which their brains and biological systems are developing and the plasticity of their brains²⁷.

Living in a situation of economic vulnerability during infancy also has negative consequences on a child's brain development, especially in the area of executive functions (self-monitoring, attention, emotional control and self-control)²⁸. The child will also be at greater risk of experiencing health problems throughout their entire life²⁹, such as cardiovascular disorders, obesity, diabetes, certain types of cancer and mental health problems³⁰.

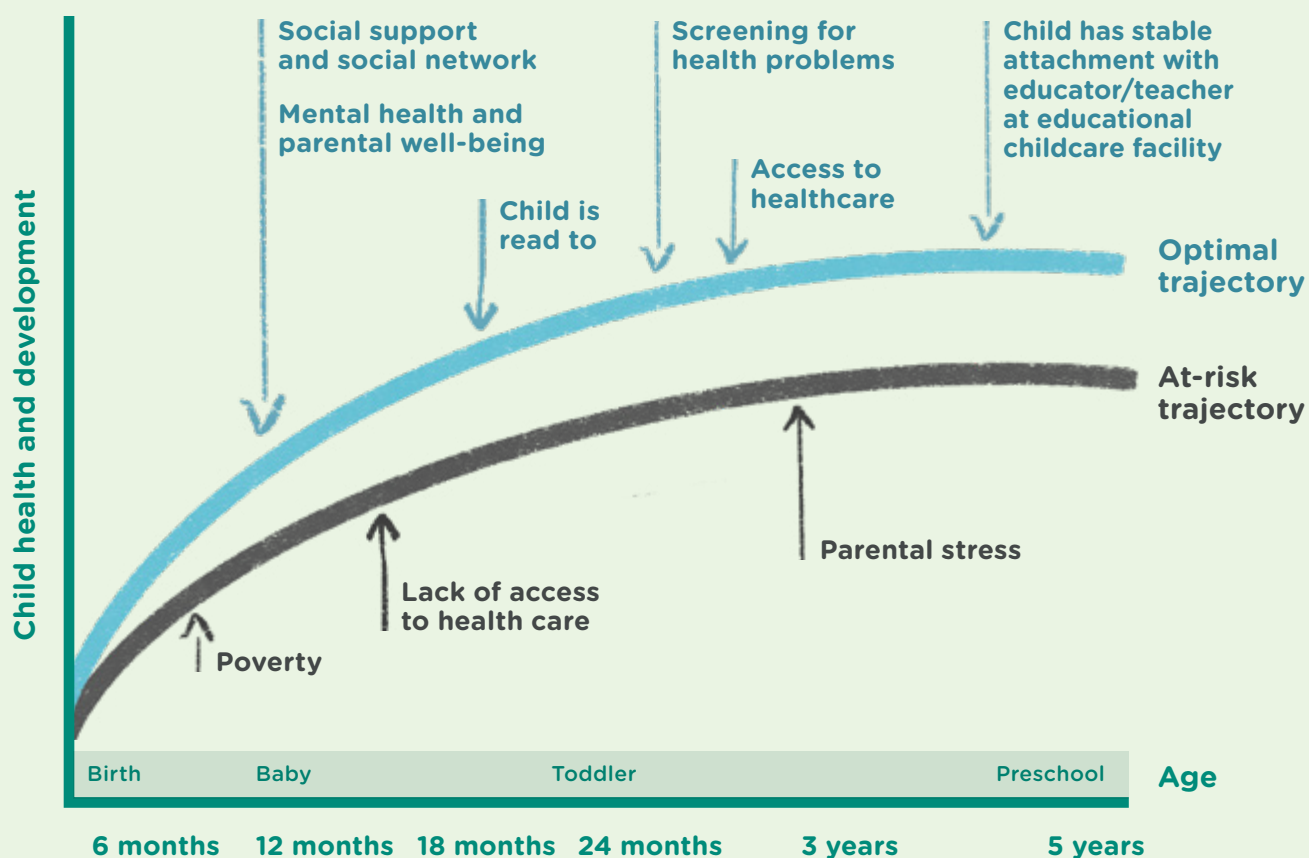
EXAMPLES OF RISK FACTORS

- > Parent or caregiver insensitive to child's needs
- > Maltreatment or neglect
- > Difficult relationships with peers (friends at daycare or in the neighbourhood)
- > High levels of parental stress
- > Coercive parenting
- > Recurring domestic conflict
- > Social and economic deprivation
- > Stressful events in the community

The more children are exposed to a high number of risk factors, the greater the consequences can be for their development³¹. This is what is meant when speaking of a state of “vulnerability caused by an accumulation of risk factors”.

A study conducted from 1995 to 1997 showed that experiencing numerous adverse childhood experiences (maltreatment, neglect, exposure to conjugal violence or family dysfunction) increases the risk of having health issues (both physical and mental). It also can decrease an adult’s level of well-being³². Experiencing poverty in early childhood seems to be a greater risk factor than if this occurs in adulthood³³.

Thankfully, protective factors can mitigate the impact of risk factors. These protective factors can favorably alter the developmental trajectory of children and sustain their long-term health.



Source: Inspired by Halfon et al (2014)³⁴.

Overall, it is the accumulation of risk factors and protective factors that influence a child's development trajectory.

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

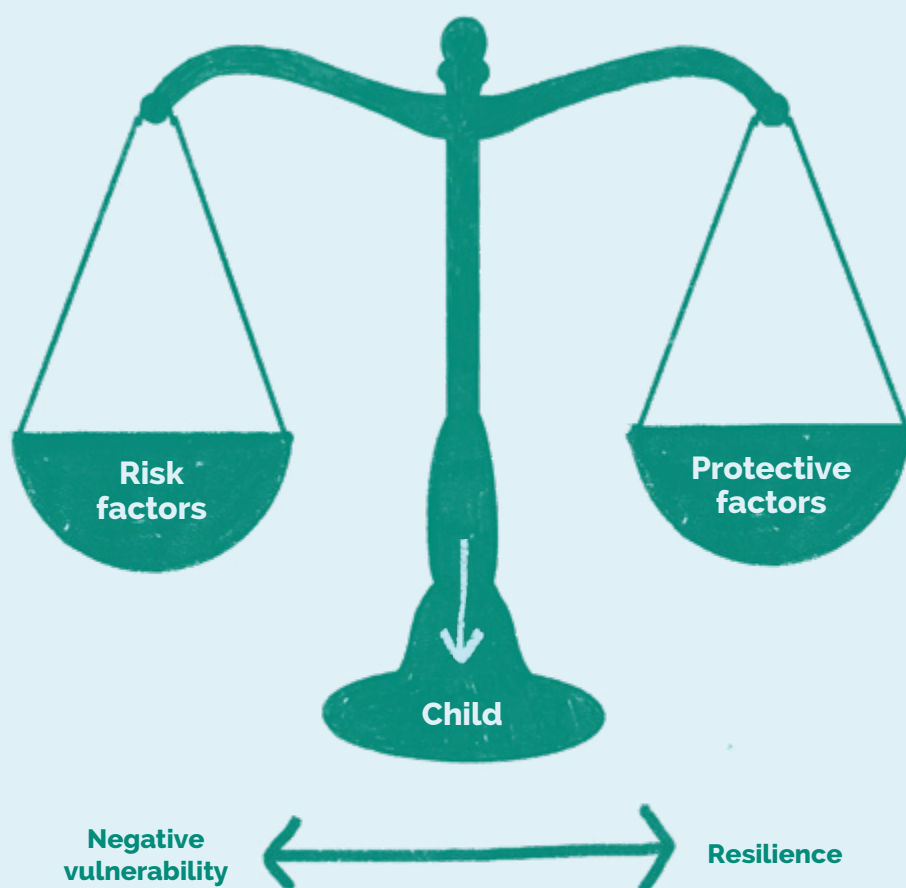


Diagram adapted from Halfon (2007)



Why is the quality and stability of children's environments so important for their development?

The importance of the quality of children's environments

What science tells us

When we talk about the quality of a child's environment, our first concern is their emotional and physical security. The adults in a child's environment must be caring and able to respond quickly and appropriately to the child's needs³⁵. The child must be protected from injury—both physical and psychological—and be able to grow up in complete security. The quality of an environment is also related to its capacity to provide stimulation that is appropriate to the child's stage of development.

The quality of a child's experiences with their family is a critical factor in their development³⁶. The diversity and wealth of experiences they are exposed to play a vital role in the development of the brain and central nervous system³⁷. A safe and stimulating environment, including interactions with the adults around them and the quality of care they receive, allows children to feel confident in exploring the world around them³⁸.

Several studies have also shown that attending a quality educational childcare facility can be a protective factor during early childhood³⁹, particularly for children living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods⁴⁰.

The quality of an educational childcare facility is usually evaluated based on two dimensions:

- > Structural quality: educator-child ratio, group size, level of personnel training, organization of space and furnishings, available material and equipment, educational program
- > Process quality: quality of interactions between educators and children, diversity of activities, role of educational personnel in supporting children's overall development, relationship with parents⁴¹.

Lastly, children's experiences in their neighbourhoods also have an impact on their development⁴². Community quality includes access to local resources and services and the parents' perception of how safe their neighbourhood is.



Examples where quality is linked to child development

QUALITY OF HOUSING

Children who live in suitable housing do better at school than their peers whose housing is inadequate⁴³.

Studies have also shown that there is a connection between poor housing conditions (noise, overcrowding, excessive comings and goings) and a poorer quality of parent-child verbal interactions, less parental sensitivity, and a lower sense of parenting competence⁴⁴.

In Québec in 2016, many children between the ages of 0 and 5 were living in housing that was inadequate for their family.

In 2016, among families with at least one child between the ages of 0 and 5:

13.6%
were living in
unaffordable
housing.

12%
were living in
housing of
inadequate size.

7.9%
were living in
housing in major
need of repair.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2016 Census, adapted by the Institut de la statistique du Québec.

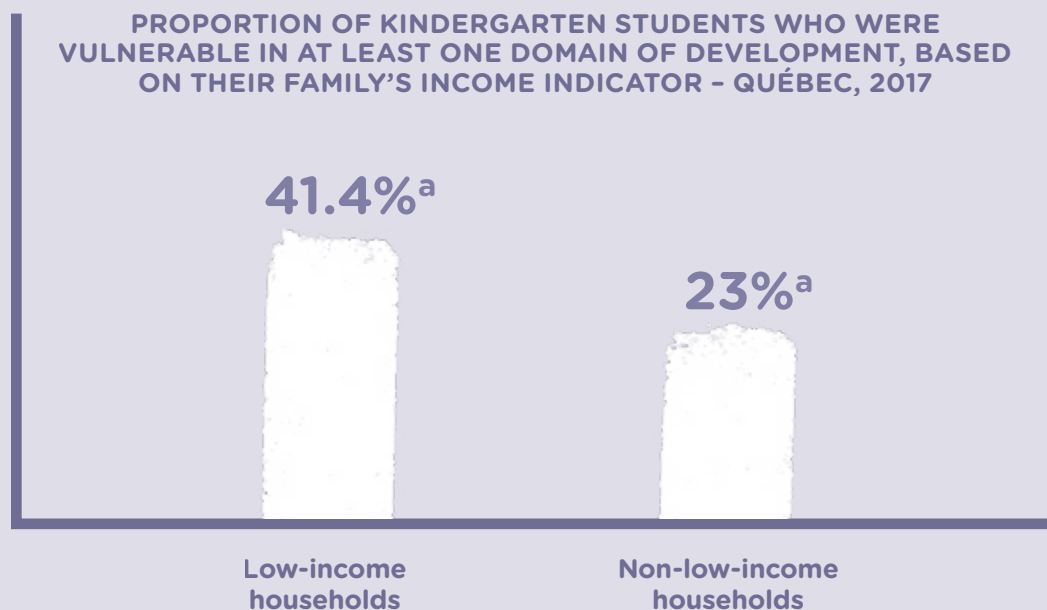


HOUSEHOLD INCOME AND THE QUALITY OF THE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

The link between low family income and early childhood development has been clearly demonstrated in the scientific literature. For example, a 2016 study revealed that living in severe poverty has a cumulative effect on cognitive development at 7 years of age⁴⁵. The brain structures of children living in situations of economic vulnerability are also generally less developed than those of more privileged children⁴⁶.

Since their parents have more difficulties to overcome and more sources of stress than higher-income parents, children living in low-income families may be deprived of a certain amount of diversity and wealth of experiences⁴⁷. They may have access to fewer toys and books in the home, for example. Parents who have financial worries may also be less available for their children⁴⁸.

In 2018 in Québec, 12.6% of children between the ages of 0 and 5 were living in low-income families, accounting for approximately 66,800 children⁴⁹. According to the QSPPKS, the proportion of children who were vulnerable in at least one domain of development was higher among children living in households considered to be low-income (41%), as compared to children living in households that were not low-income⁵⁰.



The exponent ^a expresses a significant difference between proportions with 0.05 statistical difference.

Source: Institut de la statistique du Québec, *Québec Survey on the Preschool Path of Kindergarten Students*, 2017.

QUALITY OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

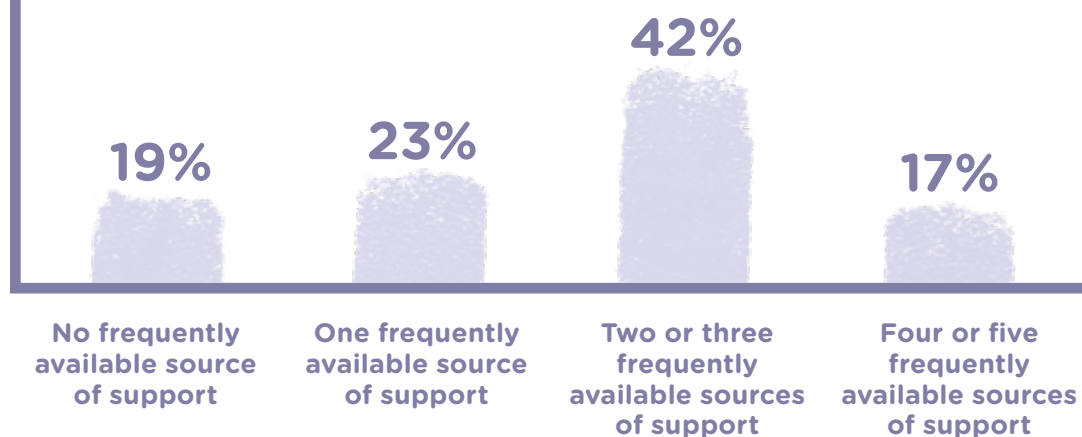
Parents who have a stronger support network than others have proportionally fewer children who are vulnerable in at least one domain of development than parents without as reliable a support system⁵¹.

Social support, or people the family can count on, contribute to the quality of the family environment⁵². Studies have shown that social support decreases the children's risk of developing anxiety, depression or behavioural problems. The presence of a support network reduces parental stress, which decreases the use of unsuitable parenting practices⁵³. Reliable social support also provides additional opportunities for stimulation and exposure to varied, diversified models.

In 2015, almost 1 out of 5 parents of young children said they had no form of support they could regularly count on⁵⁴.

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DISTRIBUTION OF PARENTS OF CHILDREN BETWEEN THE AGES OF 0 AND 5 BASED ON AVAILABILITY OF SUPPORT FROM SOCIAL NETWORK (2015)



Source: Institut de la statistique du Québec, *Québec Survey on the Experience of Parents of Children Aged 0 to 5 - 2015*

FAMILY-WORK-STUDY BALANCE AND THE QUALITY OF THE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

Family-work conflict arises when an individual experiences incompatible demands between their work and family roles. When tasks and responsibilities accumulate, the risk of conflict is greater as individuals have a limited amount of time, energy and concentration to devote of each of their roles⁵⁵.

Family-work-study conflicts can be a major source of stress for parents, who are more likely to raise their voice or become angry on a daily basis, lose patience when their child asks for attention, and feel less effective and satisfied in their parental role⁵⁶. The proportion of parents who played with their children at least once during the two weeks preceding the survey declines when the level of family-work-study conflict increases⁵⁷.



In Québec, close to **40% of mothers** and **23% of fathers** of children between the ages of 6 months and 5 years report high levels of stress related to their efforts to balance their responsibilities inside and outside the family⁵⁸.



Source: Institut de la statistique du Québec. *La violence familiale dans la vie des enfants du Québec, 2012 et 2018 : Les attitudes parentales et les pratiques familiales.*

According to the Québec Survey on the Experience of Parents of Children aged 0 to 5 (QSEPC), parents with children in this age group report higher levels of family-work conflict in the following categories:

- > Mothers
- > Parents who have very high expectations of themselves in their parenting role
- > Parents who feel their income is insufficient
- > Parents who work more than 35 hours a week
- > Parents who do not have access to a flexible schedule
- > Parents who do not have access to paid leave for family responsibilities.

Parents who say they are “not very” or “not at all” satisfied with the division of household tasks related to childcare and education are the most at risk of experiencing greater family-work conflict⁵⁹.

According to a 2018 Leger survey for the organization *Réseau pour un Québec Famille*, the proportion of parents for whom family-work balance is a major source of stress is higher among

- > Mothers
- > Parents who spend more than 60-180 minutes a day in transport
- > Parents who have a university degree (because of the types of positions and the long hours associated with higher levels of education)
- > Parents whose annual income is less than \$40,000.

Family-work balance in Québec was the subject of an Early Childhood Observatory report in 2018⁶⁰.

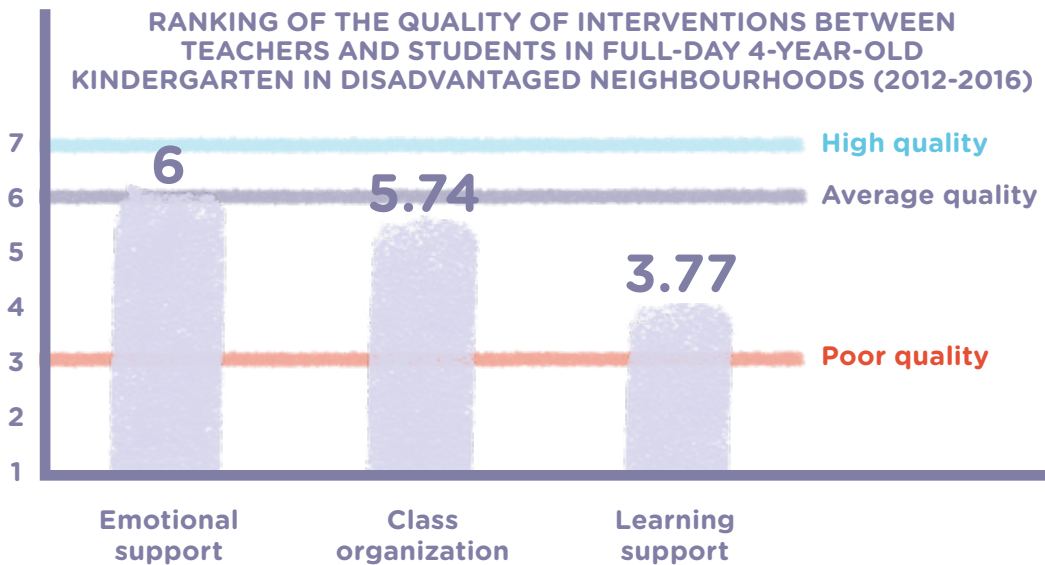
THE QUALITY OF INTERACTIONS BETWEEN CHILDREN AND THEIR EDUCATOR OR TEACHER AT THEIR EDUCATIONAL CHILDCARE FACILITY

The quality of educator-child interactions is a predictor of better social skills and fewer behavioural problems⁶¹.

Several studies have shown that "quality" interactions between a child and their educator or teacher are beneficial for cognitive, language and socio-emotional development in early childhood⁶². These interactions allow educators to provide children with emotional support, ensure a predictable daily routine, and support their learning process⁶³. Under these conditions, children are more favourably disposed to learn. They also develop better language and social skills and have fewer behavioural problems⁶⁴.

In Québec, according to the most recent data available to us (2014), the quality of interactions between educators and children is generally ranked "acceptable," with the exception of nurseries in CPEs, which are ranked "good"⁶⁵. The most recent data on the quality of interactions between teachers and students in 4-year-old kindergarten are taken from an implementation evaluation study of full-day 4-year-old kindergartens (2012-2016) in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Here are the main observations:





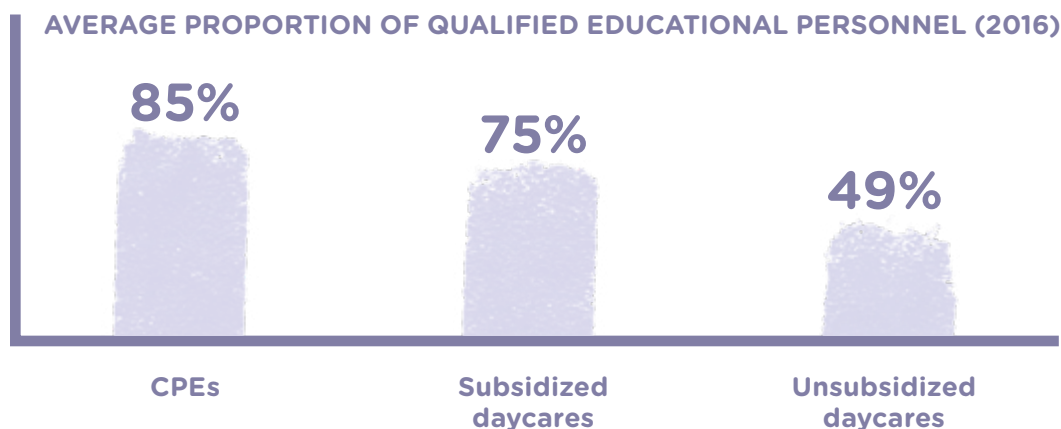
- > The quality of emotional support ranks high.
- > The quality of support for learning ranks lowest.

Note: Since these results are based on a single implementation evaluation study of a small number of classes, they may not be representative of all full-day 4-year-old kindergarten classes between 2012 and 2016.

Source: April, Johanne et al. *Conditions d'implantation de la maternelle 4 ans à temps plein en milieu défavorisé : sommaire du rapport de recherche*, Université du Québec en Outaouais et ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur.

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There is a link between the quality of these interactions and the educator's training. Educators with a higher level of initial training are more sensitive to children's needs, interact more with them and provide better personal care (changing diapers, helping children to wash their hands and change their clothes, etc.)⁶⁶. Educator training varies across Québec, however, depending on the type of educational services.



Source: Ministère de la Famille du Québec, *Situation des centres de la petite enfance, des garderies et de la garde en milieu familial au Québec en 2016*.

QUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL CHILDCARE SERVICES AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

The first years of a child's life—especially from birth to 3 years of age—are particularly critical for their development. By acting during this important phase, early childcare services benefit children's health and development, complementing the role played by their parents.

According to a portrait prepared by the *Direction générale de santé publique de Montréal*, Montréal children in low-income families who attended an educational childcare facility or a 4-year-old kindergarten during their preschool years were less likely to be vulnerable in two or more domains of development than those who did not attend any educational facility before starting school⁶⁷. Although no studies exist that have evaluated the exact link between quality of environment and the effect on early childhood development, it has been recognized that a secure, caring environment is needed to ensure children's healthy development⁶⁸. Studies done in Québec since the early 2000s, however, have revealed problems regarding the quality of all types of educational childcare services in the province. A significant proportion of young children attend educational childcare facilities of poor or very poor quality. The quality of educational childcare services in Québec was examined in an Early Childhood Observatory report in 2018⁶⁹.

This issue is also presented in one of the chapters of the Observatory's **Portrait of Public Policies** that benefit the very young. In this chapter, we learn that not all children have access to an educational childcare facility at a very young age, starting with those growing up in more disadvantaged neighbourhoods (based on the Material Deprivation Index) which offer fewer services⁷⁰. It is also more difficult for children with special needs to have access to quality educational childcare services because of a lack of specialized resources and physical environments that are unsuitable for children with a disability or learning difficulty⁷¹.

PERCEIVED NEIGHBOURHOOD SAFETY

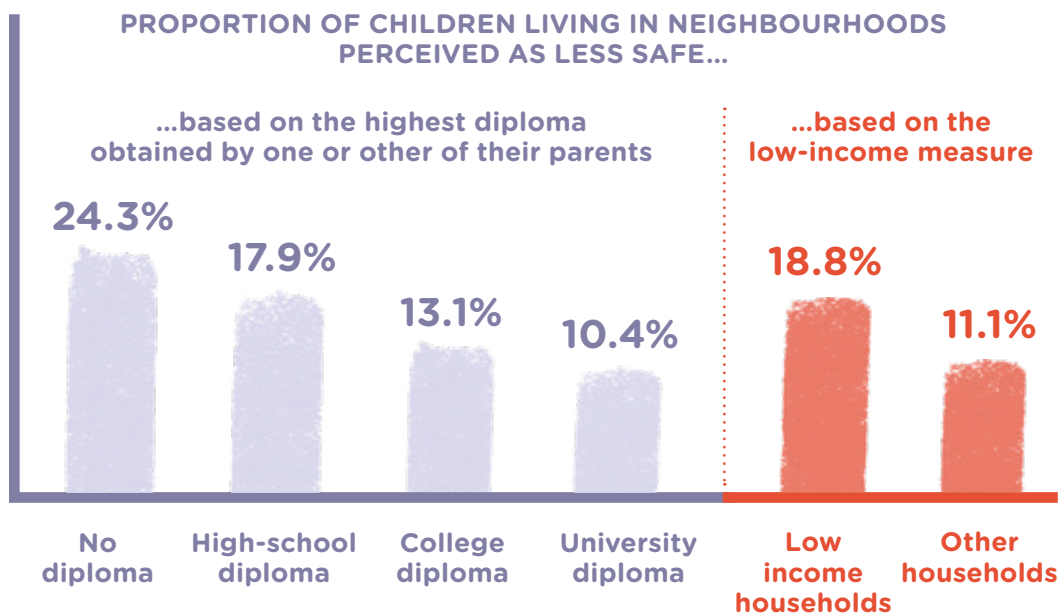
Children whose parents consider their neighbourhood to be less safe are more likely to be vulnerable than those whose parents consider their neighbourhood to be safe⁷².



Parents' concerns regarding the safety of the environment in which their children are growing up can affect their parenting practices and their child's experiences. Parents who perceive their neighbourhood as unsafe, for example, could restrict their young child's participation in neighbourhood activities, thus limiting their opportunities for socialization and stimulation⁷³. Such restrictions could also reduce children's opportunities for joining in outside activities^{74,75}.

In Québec in 2017, about 13% of kindergarten students were living in neighbourhoods perceived as less safe by their parents. This figure varied, however, depending on the parents' level of education and household income⁷⁶.

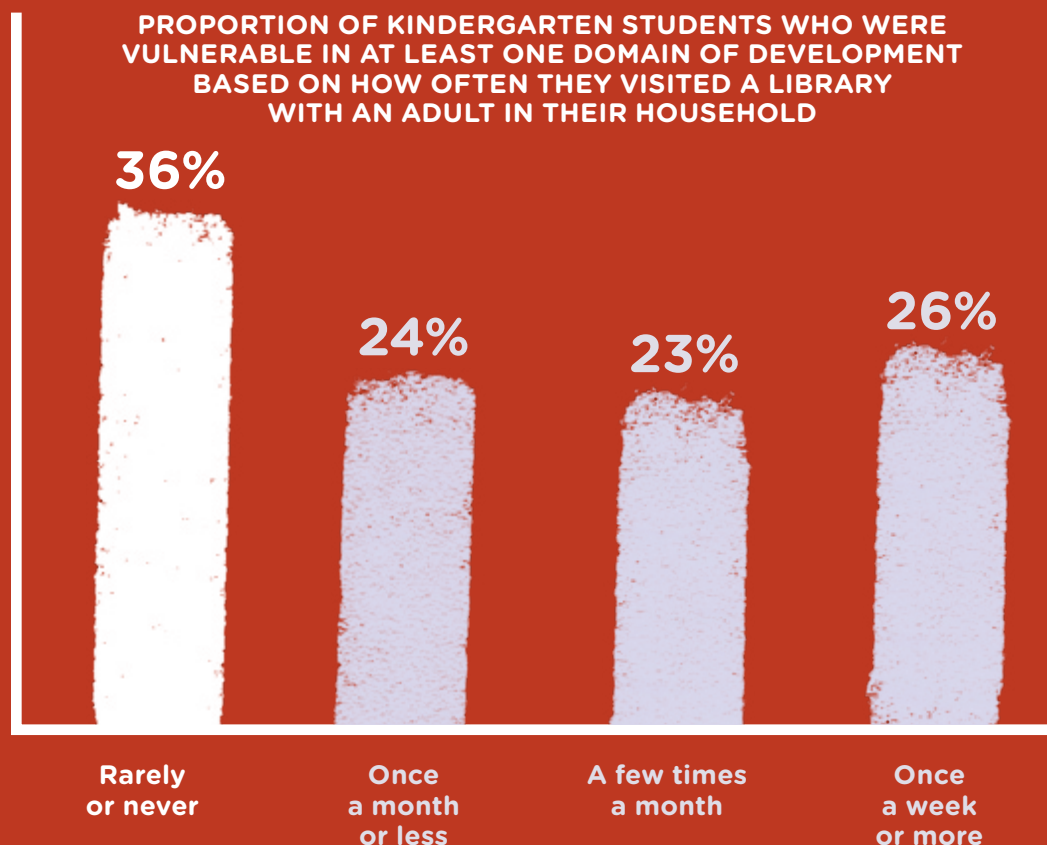
25



Source: Québec Survey on the Preschool Path of Kindergarten Students, 2017.

QUALITY OF COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Access to community resources and services, such as libraries, contributes to the quality of the environment in which a child is growing up, which has an impact on healthy child development⁷⁷.



Source: Québec Survey on the Preschool Path of Kindergarten Students, 2017⁷⁸.

The cost, hours and lack of information for these kinds of services, however, are all barriers to their use by parents of low-income families—who would be the first to benefit from them⁷⁹. The report entitled *Agir pour que chaque tout-petit développe son plein potentiel* examines the issue of barriers to accessing services for young children and families in situations of vulnerability⁸⁰.



The importance of stability

What science tells us

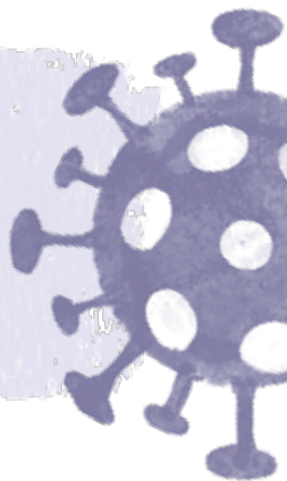
Environmental stability refers to the constancy and predictability of a child's social, emotional and physical environment⁸¹. It goes without saying that changes are a part of life. It can be hard for young children to adapt quickly to unexpected change, however, which can create stress and require a period of adaptation⁸².

When most children encounter a stressful situation, their nervous and hormonal systems step up to deal with the situation and enable them to react appropriately. If a child receives support from the adults around them, they can manage their stress and adapt to the new situation⁸³. The situation could even be a learning opportunity for the child.

If the stress is too great, however, the child's adaptation mechanisms may be insufficient, creating a severe psychological imbalance⁸⁴. That is why situations involving frequent change and unforeseen events can affect children's equilibrium, especially if the changes also affect the adults who care for them⁸⁵. Research has shown that the most stressful situations share the following characteristics:

- > the newness of the situation as compared to previous experiences
- > the unpredictability of the situation
- > the impression of having little control over the situation
- > a feeling of insecurity and inability to act⁸⁶

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the cause of many unexpected changes in the lives of young children, who have had to deal with a lack of interaction with their usual playmates, their parents' loss of employment and income, and even food insecurity in some cases⁸⁷.



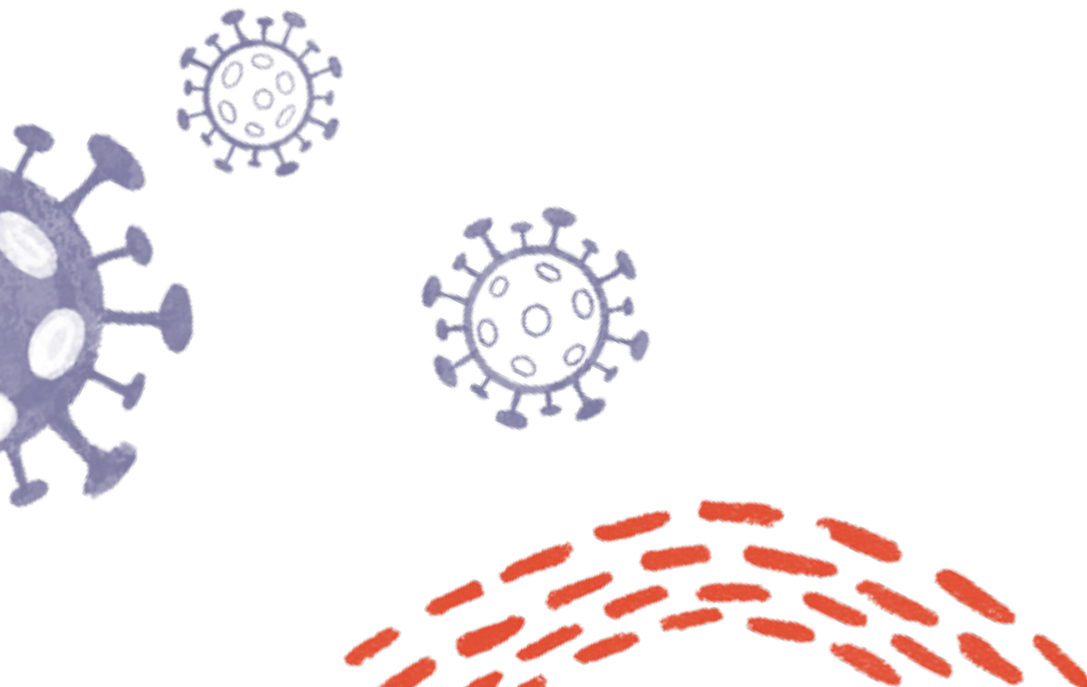
The instability caused by new situations can also compromise families' well-being. It can lead to:

- > depletion of personal resources
- > an increase in parental stress, which can negatively affect the stimulation required for children's development
- > disruption of access to health care in the wake of a necessary move⁸⁸

In the case of educational environments, stability is fostered by limiting staff turnover and the number of facilities attended by the child. Research has shown that improved stability exposes children to recurrent, predictable interactions that help them build trusting relationships with adults⁸⁹.

Frequent changes in educators caused by high staff turnover make it more difficult to establish the stable, caring relationships that lead to stimulating interactions with children. Stimulating interactions lead to greater engagement in children, which is a predictor for better development⁹⁰.

It also seems that unforeseen changes in childcare settings are more harmful than changes that are the result of a choice or concerted decision, such as obtaining a space in a superior childcare environment that is better adapted to the child's developmental needs⁹¹.



Examples of situations of instability that could be harmful to a child's development

CHANGES RESULTING FROM PARENTS' SEPARATION

Children in kindergarten who lived through a separation are more likely to be vulnerable in at least one domain of development than are their peers whose parents have stayed together⁹².

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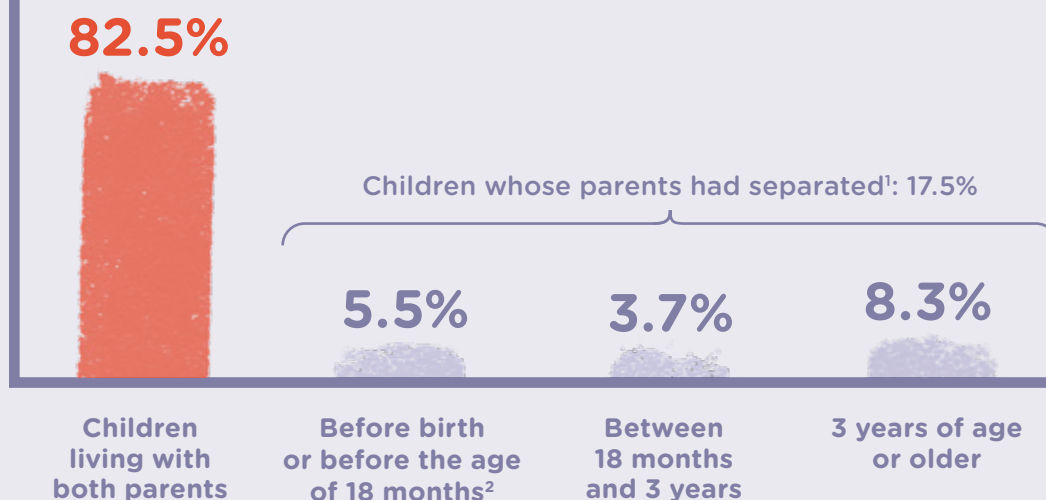
It is important to state from the outset that a parental separation can be positive for a child if the separation removes them from a dysfunctional environment⁹³. Otherwise, the many changes resulting from a separation (parental stress, reduced financial resources) can have negative short-term effects on a child, particularly during the preschool years⁹⁴.

Research has shown that repercussions are more pronounced when parental conflict continues after the separation. Poor cooperation between parents is linked to a greater risk of difficulties for their children^{95, 96, 97}. There is more risk of conflicts arising if the parents' relationship is already strained or if the family's economic situation is precarious⁹⁸. Although family transitions can be a source of stress for children, they can ultimately be positive experiences if children are able to benefit from a conflict-free environment.



In Québec in 2017,
17.5% of
kindergarten students
had lived through their
parents'
separation.

DISTRIBUTION OF KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS BASED ON WHETHER THEY WERE LIVING WITH BOTH THEIR PARENTS OR HOW OLD THEY WERE WHEN THEIR PARENTS SEPARATED (QUÉBEC, 2017)



¹ These figures include children of whom one of the parents died.

² This figure includes children whose parent was a single parent when they were born or adopted.

Source: Institut de la statistique du Québec, *Québec Survey on the Preschool Path of Kindergarten Students - 2017*.

MOVING

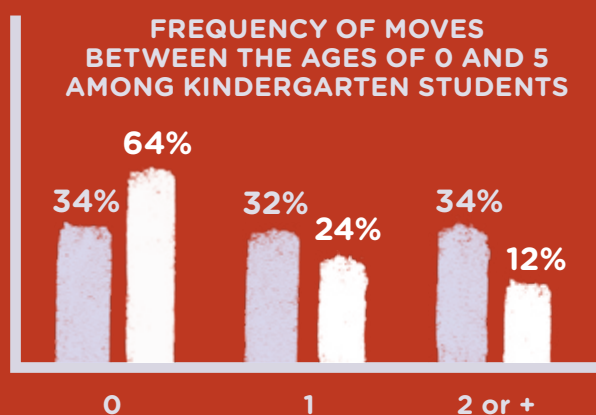
According to the QSPPKS, kindergarten students whose parents moved twice or more during their early childhood are more likely to be vulnerable in at least one domain of development than children whose parents moved only once or not at all.

Moves that are particularly difficult

Greater residential instability is generally associated with various difficulties in young children: socio-emotional (regulating emotions, anxiety), behavioural (impulsiveness, opposition), and academic (learning difficulties, academic delays)⁹⁹. Studies have shown that some moves are particularly detrimental to young children's development. Moves resulting from a separation or loss of employment, for example, can sometimes leave families living in lower-quality housing or in less advantaged neighbourhoods with fewer resources or public services¹⁰⁰.

More favourable moves

Moving can also be positive for young children's development, however, if the new place of residence better meets the family's needs, such as a move to a safer or less disadvantaged neighbourhood¹⁰¹.



In Québec in 2017,
44% of kindergarten
students had moved
at least once
before the age of 5.
Family income is linked
to frequency of moves.

- Families whose income is below the low-income cutoff
- Families whose income is equal to or above the low-income cutoff

Source: Québec Survey on the Preschool Path of Kindergarten Students, 2017¹⁰²

GENTRIFICATION

Neighbourhood gentrification is what occurs when the progressive arrival of a new social class of residents gradually alters the physical environment and raises the local standard of living¹⁰³. This process can have the advantage of transforming the way children socialize by offering them more possibilities¹⁰⁴ and exposing them to less poverty¹⁰⁵.

Certain experts, however, fear that gentrification leads to the exclusion of the former residents¹⁰⁶. Resources that are specifically devoted to the needs of more vulnerable children may then disappear when the arrival of a wealthier population masks the needs of those who are less well-off¹⁰⁷. In Québec, this phenomenon occurs when a neighbourhood school loses its deprivation rating after wealthier families take the place of lower-income families who have been living in the neighbourhood for a long time¹⁰⁸.



IMMIGRATION AND INSTABILITY

Coming to live in a new country is not always easy; immigrant families may find themselves living in precarious conditions. For example, one-quarter of two-parent families with children under 5 years of age who recently immigrated to Canada have a before-tax annual household income of under \$30,000¹⁰⁹. Newcomers may also have difficulty finding suitable housing: 92% of recent arrivals move regularly¹¹⁰ and their housing is often substandard¹¹¹. Finally, access to health care is difficult, partly because of the lack of information offered to immigrants about the healthcare system and language barriers. The Early Childhood Observatory published a special report on this subject in 2019¹¹².

Such unexpected and entirely new situations can create a feeling of generalized instability. For all these reasons, immigration can be linked to certain difficulties experienced by very young children, as it disrupts the stability of their life path. Immigration can also place young children in situations of social and economic vulnerability.

Among kindergarten-aged children living in Québec, a larger proportion of children who were born outside of Canada present vulnerability in at least one domain of development than do children who were born in Canada¹¹³.

12,275 children
between the ages of 0 and 5
living in Québec in 2016 were
born outside of Canada¹¹⁴.
The immigration process
these children have to
undergo demands significant
psychological and
socio-cultural adaptation.



CHANGES IN EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES

In 2017, a little under a quarter of kindergarten students had attended at least three different daycare facilities in the previous five years.



According to the QSPPKS, the proportion of children who are vulnerable in at least one domain of development is greater among children who attended three or more childcare facilities before starting school than their peers who attended one or two.

Other studies have shown that attending a larger number of childcare facilities is linked to a higher frequency of behavioural problems and fewer prosocial behaviours in young children¹¹⁶. Repercussions are more significant when changes are unexpected and unforeseen¹¹⁷.

The reasons for a change in childcare arrangements can help to predict its effects on a child. For example, if the change is the result of a calculated decision, such as obtaining a place in a higher quality environment that is better suited to the child's needs, there will be fewer negative effects¹¹⁸. On the other hand, effects may be negative if the change is the result of daycare costs, loss of employment or transport difficulties^{119, 120}. Such changes are often the result of a difficult family situation and a less suitable daycare arrangement for the child.

STAFF TURNOVER IN EDUCATIONAL CHILDCARE SERVICES

Research has shown that regular changes in educators make it difficult for a child to establish the kind of stable, caring relationships that lead to stimulating interactions¹²¹. Frequent changes in educators can cause temporary distress, especially in very young children¹²², as they force them to constantly engage in a new process of building a significant affective relationship¹²³. Children who are exposed to more changes in educators engage less with adults, spend more time doing nothing, and score less well on language evaluations¹²⁴.





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**Why is continuity
across environments
important for early
childhood development?**

What science tells us

To maximize the positive effects that different environments can have on a child, it is important to ensure a certain amount of continuity between them, in the form of routines, disciplinary practices and adults' expectations of children. A lack of consistency between environments has a negative effect on childhood development, and can explain certain behavioural problems in children, as well as weaker social, language or motor skills¹²⁵.

Partnerships between the various environments in which children grow up are important to ensure harmonious transitions¹²⁶, which foster not only academic success in later years, but also health and well-being throughout a child's entire life¹²⁷.

When we talk about “transitions” in this document, we are referring to a child’s transfer from their home to an educational childcare facility at the end of a parental leave, a change in childcare facilities, or starting kindergarten, for example. Also included are changes in daycare arrangements during a child’s preschool path or switching groups in a daycare situation.

The question of continuity is especially pertinent during the transition to kindergarten. Certain factors can make this transition more difficult for young children, interrupting the continuity between a child's environments:

- > changes in physical environment
- > differences in the organization of the premises
- > inconsistencies in education program content and educational strategies
- > differences in the nature of the adult-child relationship¹²⁸.

Finally, continuity between environments is very important for children with special needs. A lack of continuity may complicate access to specialized services during transitions, which can be very difficult for these young children¹²⁹. A lack of communication between early childhood educators and the various professionals in the health and social services network may also be an issue¹³⁰.

Examples of how continuity can foster development

PARENT-EDUCATOR INTERACTION

A positive relationship between a child's parent(s) and their educator fosters continuity between the home and childcare environments. The quality of the parent-educator relationship as perceived by the parent is strongly linked to positive repercussions for the child. Moreover, the positive perception of this relationship by the educator is strongly linked to their assessment of the child's behavior within the group¹³¹.

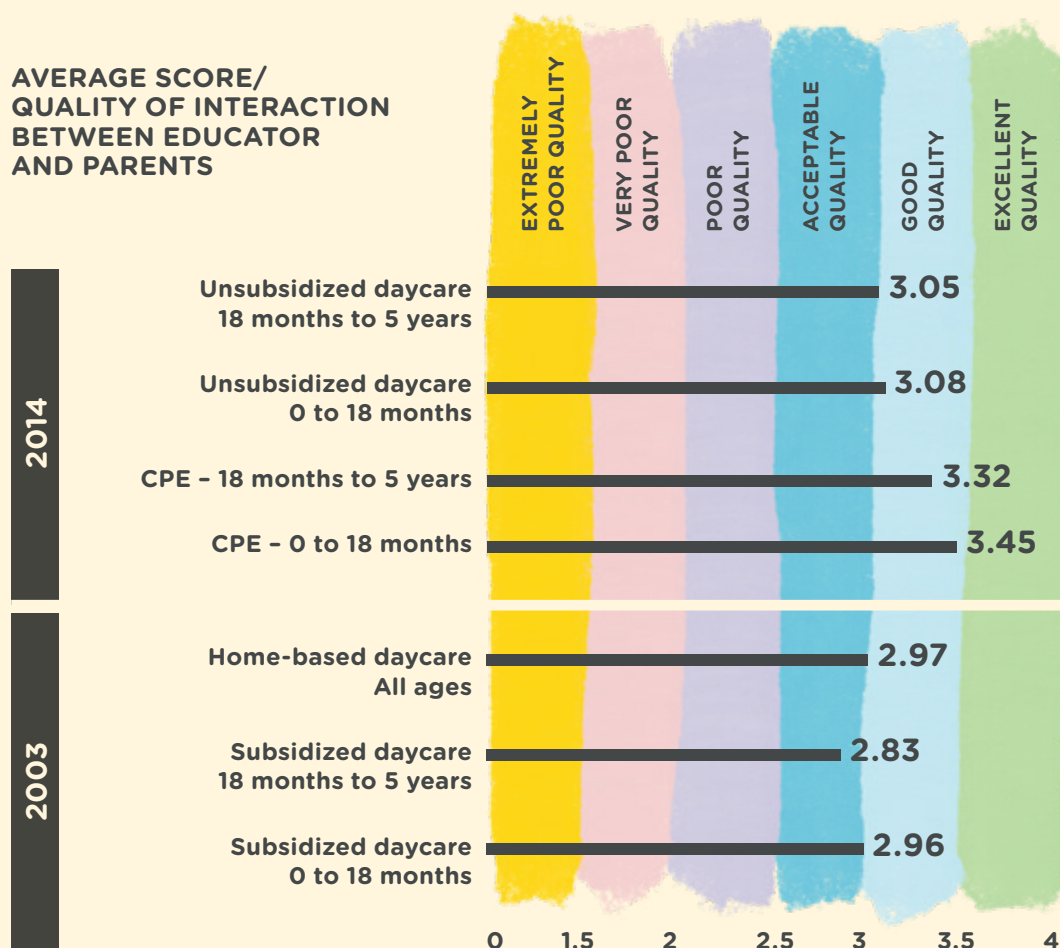
Effective communication between parents and educational personnel gives the latter a better understanding of educational practices being used at home, which strengthens the consistency between what happens at home and at the child's educational facility. Establishing effective cooperation between parents and educators fosters better continuity between the two environments¹³².

Children with behavioural problems are more likely to have parents and educators who do not share the same disciplinary approach and beliefs. Similarly, children with better social and language skills are more likely to have parents who cooperate with their educators¹³³.

In Québec, according to the Grandir en qualité surveys, the quality of interactions between a child's educator and their parents—based on the educator's perception—is ranked between “good” and “acceptable”¹³⁴.

Source: *Grandir en qualité* surveys – 2003, 2014.





Source: *Grandir en qualité* surveys-2003, 2014.

The 2014 *Grandir en qualité* survey measured educators' interactions with parents based on various criteria, including the following:

- > The educator provides the family with support integrating into the daycare environment.
- > When welcoming children in the morning, the educator establishes constructive interpersonal relationships with their parents.
- > At the end of the day, parents have access to a means of communication that allows them to receive and share information¹³⁵.

The results of a study conducted in a CPE (early childcare centre) on parent-educator interactions when children arrive in the morning and leave at the end of the day showed that both parents and educators considered their communication to be positive. The study showed that parents particularly appreciated their relationship with their child's educators, their ability to transmit and share information about their child, and their desire to consult and involve them. It is obvious that exchanges between parents and educators are far from inconsequential or superficial, involving the transmission of information in one out of two cases¹³⁶.

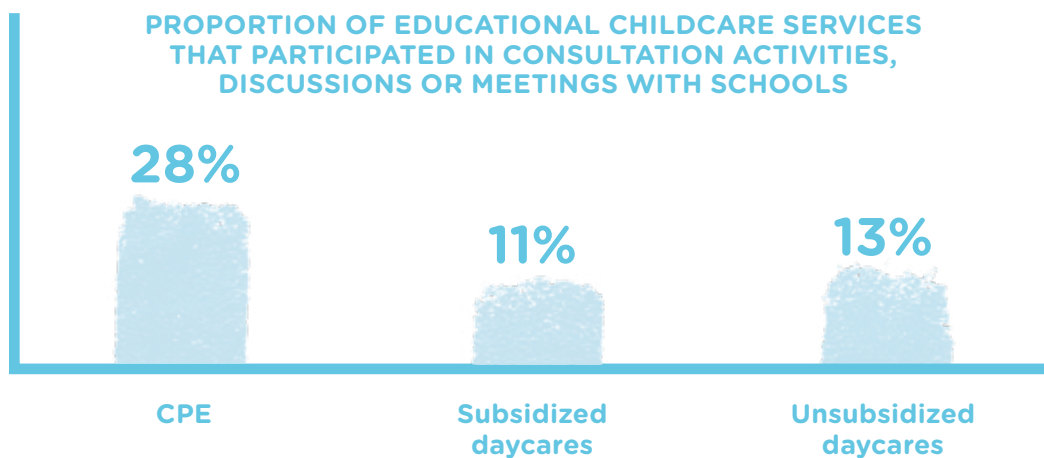
PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN DAYCARE AND SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

Setting up practices for facilitating the transition between daycare and school – and the joint planning of these practices – fosters continuity between children’s different living environments, especially in the case of those with special needs.

Source: Ruel *et al.*, 2015¹³⁷.

According to a survey of early childhood educators, continuity of practices between environments makes it easier for children to transition from one to another, which ultimately furthers their development and learning process. Consistency between environments is also beneficial for children’s emotional and social development. Finally, partnerships between personnel in different environments allows them to better understand their respective roles and expectations, to recognize the learning experiences to which a child has already been exposed, and to encourage the transfer of knowledge¹³⁸.

Based on 2016 data from the Québec *ministère de la Famille*, however, just 18% of subsidized and unsubsidized CPEs and daycares had taken part in consultation activities, discussions or meetings with schools¹³⁹.



Source: Ministère de la Famille. *Situation des centres de la petite enfance, des garderies et de la garde en milieu familial au Québec en 2016.*





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**Something
can be done:
Examples of
inspiring
initiatives**

Levers for federal and provincial governments

Promoting family stability through family mediation and parenting coordination programs

In Québec, family mediation is offered to parents to help them resolve their conflicts without having to go through the court system¹⁴⁰. This process allows families to focus on the needs of their children¹⁴¹.

In the United States and some Canadian provinces (Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia), parenting coordination programs take over when mediation is unsuccessful. This type of intervention uses the services of mental health professionals and lawyers¹⁴², which lightens the caseload in the courts and improves the psychological well-being of both parents and their children¹⁴³. A pilot project is currently in operation in the province of Québec under the coordination of Francine Cyr, a researcher specialized in the field of family mediation¹⁴⁴.

Improving the quality of housing and alleviating residential instability through measures that facilitate access to healthy, affordable housing

The *Government Action Plan to Foster Economic Inclusion and Social Participation (2017-2023)* provides for investments in social housing and improving the living conditions and social participation of people who live in social housing.

In October 2020, the governments of Canada and Québec announced an investment of \$3.7 billion over 10 years to improve social and affordable housing in Québec. These funds were earmarked for the construction of new social housing units, renovating existing buildings and providing rental assistance payments for low-income families. The investment will be spread over three different projects: *Priorités du Québec*, the Federal Community Housing Initiative and the Canada Housing Benefit¹⁴⁵.

The *AccèsLogis Québec* program is a good example of a measure that has the potential to reduce residential instability through the services it offers in connection with low-cost or subsidized housing¹⁴⁶. The objective of *AccèsLogis* is to enable housing bureaus (*offices d'habitation* or *OH*), *housing cooperatives*, *non-profit organizations* and *non-profit purchasing groups* to build and offer quality, affordable rental housing to low-income families or people with special housing needs¹⁴⁷. In 2016, *AccèsLogis Québec* came to the aid of a total of 16,421 households¹⁴⁸.

EXAMPLES OF HOUSING PROJECTS FINANCED BY ACCÈSLOGIS QUÉBEC

AccèsLogis Québec also helps the realization of community housing projects like *Mimosa du Quartier*. Since 2015, in Gatineau in the Outaouais region of Québec, *Mimosa du Quartier* has been offering rental housing to women who have been victims of conjugal violence or are living in poverty. On-site support staff help residents to improve their families' living habits and foster their children's psychosocial development.

In Montreal North, *AccèsLogis Québec* also helped to make possible the construction of *Îlot Pelletier*, a **200-unit** social housing project that includes a CPE with space for 80 children. *Îlot Pelletier* transformed parking spaces into vegetable gardens and urban cool islands, and created a public seasonal market set up and run by citizens with the assistance of the *Paroles d'ExcluEs* program. This market was the starting point of a search for a sustainable solution: a food distribution cooperative.



Reducing the number of changes in childcare environments by creating more spaces in quality educational childcare facilities

The lack of available spaces in quality educational childcare facilities sometimes obliges parents to settle for an establishment of lesser quality while waiting for a space to become available elsewhere. This kind of situation increases the number of times a child has to switch daycare environments, reducing the amount of stability in their life.

Adding spaces in quality educational childcare facilities is therefore one solution that can foster stability in young children's preschool paths. It can also help to give priority to children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods¹⁴⁹. Montréal's early educational intervention program (*Interventions éducatives précoces* or IEP) works to enable children who are socio-economically or developmentally vulnerable to access and attend a quality educational childcare facility. The program also supports the neighbourhoods in which it is active. As part of this program, an agreement between the CISSS/CIUSSS and educational childcare services allows spaces to be reserved for these children. The IEP staff encourages eligible families to take advantage of the program and its available spaces and supports them through the integration process. This helps to ensure that vulnerable children who would not have gotten a space without the program's intervention can access a childcare facility¹⁵⁰.



Promoting continuity when starting school with a tool that shares information on individual children

The Eastern Townships region (the *Estrie* region of Québec) has developed a tool for transmitting information about children's development. The tool, which is completed by daycare educators just before the summer, contains information on each child's development, strengths, challenges and strategies that work for that child. With the parents' consent, this tool is forwarded to the school personnel who will be working with the child when they start school the following September¹⁵¹.

In 2020, the *ministère de la Famille* introduced the "child's education record," a document that contains periodic portraits of every child's development in the following four domains of development: physical/motor, cognitive, language and social/emotional. The three objectives of this program are to keep parents informed of their child's development, support early detection of any difficulties in conjunction with the *Agir tôt* process, and facilitate transitions, particularly when starting school. The first records were originally scheduled to be sent out to parents in May 2020, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the date was postponed to May 2021. This decision was made to enable childcare personnel to concentrate their efforts on applying preventive health measures and providing a reassuring presence to the children in their care¹⁵².

Fostering continuity for children starting school by providing families in the SIPPE program with the services of a specialized educator

The *CIUSSS de l'Estrie*, in cooperation with the *Centre de services scolaire de la Région-de-Sherbrooke*, has enriched the *Services intégrés en périnatalité et pour la petite enfance* program (SIPPE). Children with special needs who are starting school can now be followed by a specialized educator until the beginning of October. Since this resource person is very familiar with the child and their family, they will help to ensure that information on the child is transferred effectively to facilitate their integration into the primary school environment¹⁵³.

Levers for municipalities

Improving the quality of housing to reduce residential instability by imposing penalties on landlords who fail to respect housing sanitation by-laws

This type of measure is particularly effective in providing vulnerable families with material assistance. One of the reasons cited by families who have had to move more than three times during the past 20 years is poor quality and unsanitary housing. The *Direction régionale de la santé publique de Montréal* has been encouraging municipalities to adopt housing sanitation by-laws and to mobilize the necessary resources to ensure they are respected¹⁵⁴.

Social housing is one way to fight gentrification¹⁵⁵. The city of Vienna, Austria, is a world model for public policies that ensure families have access to affordable quality housing. Vienna has been able to preserve 220,000 social housing units for low-income households¹⁵⁶ and is one of the rare European capitals not to have experienced a major housing crisis¹⁵⁷.

Fighting gentrification to lessen residential instability

Another way to improve residential stability is to fight neighbourhood gentrification, which can force families to have to move against their will. For example, municipalities can:

- > impose a moratorium on the construction of luxury condominiums and encourage the construction of social housing
- > exercise better control over the type of establishments and businesses moving into the neighbourhood
- > provide funding for community organizations to enable them to buy their own premises¹⁵⁸.



There are other ways that municipalities can improve families' access to quality housing, thus reducing the likelihood of their having to move:

- > Invest in affordable housing programs for families to provide children with safe, supportive living environments while fighting poverty and food insecurity.
- > Set up financial assistance programs for families with children in the form of interest-free loans to improve access to homeownership.
- > Improve housing subsidies and financial support for the creation of housing cooperatives.
- > Introduce traffic calming measures, including reduced speed limits across the entire road network.

Improving the quality of neighbourhoods by enhancing the safety of public spaces

Certain urban features can improve citizens' impression of the safety of their neighbourhood. For example, creating culs-de-sac reduces traffic around citizens' homes^{159, 160, 161}. Initiatives like green alleys can also have a positive effect. Several other actions can also be implemented by municipalities:

- > Encourage the creation of private spaces in neighbourhoods that are shared among all residents' children (spaces for outdoor games, sunny locations for collective gardens, etc.).
- > Organize neighbourhoods to increase housing density to ensure that children can easily access services and resources.
- > Set up active transportation corridors that include landscape markers, play installations and road markings.
- > Make sure pedestrian and cycling routes are interconnected in areas used by children (services, schools, businesses, sports centres, parks, libraries, etc.).
- > Reorganize and reduce the number of traffic lanes, routes and parking spaces to reduce vehicle traffic volume.



There are already many examples throughout Québec of municipal initiatives that make it easier for families with young children to have access to safe neighbourhoods that encourage outdoor play.

BELLECHASSE

Four municipalities in the MRC of Bellechasse set up a policy to share sports infrastructure. This initiative allowed them to offer more athletic activities to the young families who tend to leave the regions for urban centres that offer more services. The four municipalities also developed a network of interconnected footpaths and established an intermunicipal hockey league. A common day camp for children from all four municipalities was also created¹⁶².





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BELŒIL

In 2016, the city of Belœil in the Montérégie region developed a project called "*Dans ma rue, on joue*" (playing in my street) which encourages free play in safe conditions in residential streets. Once a street has been officially designated as an area for free play, new signage is installed to reduce the speed limit to 30 km/h. Residents must also agree to respect a code of conduct (play permitted between the hours of 7 am and 9 pm only, parental supervision required, children must play safely, etc.)¹⁶³.



VICTORIAVILLE

In 2016, the city of Victoriaville created "*parcours ludiques*" ("play on the way" pedestrian routes) that provide students with an opportunity to have fun while walking to school. The objective of this pilot project was to clearly identify children's routes to school and help ensure their safety¹⁶⁴.

Improving the quality of local educational childcare services

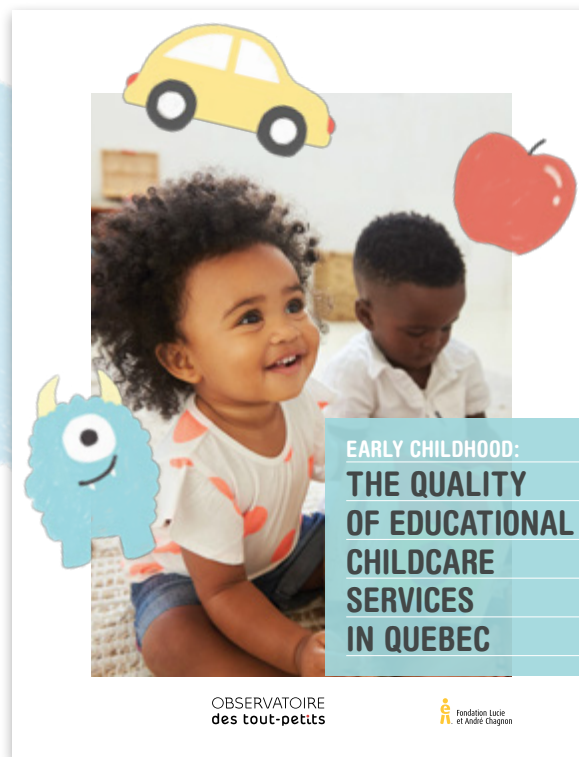
Municipalities also have the necessary authority and competence to improve access to educational childcare services and the quality of those services.

They can:

- promote educational childcare projects that offer the most advantages for the community
- adopt a by-law to protect the quality of educational childcare services
- ensure that information on available educational childcare services is widely known throughout the community.

In 2018, the Early Childhood Observatory published a **special report** on the quality of early childhood educational services in Québec.

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Improving the quality of social support through activities that strengthen community cohesion

Municipalities have the power to promote informal meetings and get-togethers among families by organizing recreational neighbourhood events. This type of activity helps to break families' isolation and supports parents by giving them an opportunity to share their experiences with other families in similar situations¹⁶⁵. Good relationships among neighbours can also improve access to useful resources for children.

In Québec, Neighbours' Day (*la fête des voisins*) is an initiative of *Espace MUNI* (formerly the *Carrefour action municipale et famille*). Since 2006, 8,000 events of this type have been organized. Every year, over 30 million people in 36 countries take part in a Neighbours' Day festival¹⁶⁶.

There are many other ways that municipalities can bolster community cohesion. A few examples:

- > Organize activities in the streets throughout the year (special activities, events, etc.).
- > Encourage residents to get outside and meet friends in public by improving the design of urban spaces, focusing on rest areas, benches, trees, landscaping, lighting, architecture, storefronts and signage, public art, etc.
- > Create public spaces in the community for different sorts of games — spontaneous or organized, individual or group.
- > Create teaching gardens in cooperation with schools.
- > Create a public space that is managed by children (community garden, greenhouse, etc.).

Levers for communities



Improving the quality of social support by creating welcoming organizations for newcomers

Community organizations involved in helping immigrant families when they arrive in a new country can play an important role in strengthening their social support networks. For example, volunteers can accompany isolated families to neighbourhood activities, such as block parties or parent-child workshops¹⁶⁷.

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Strengthening family stability by creating shelters for families going through a difficult separation



In Québec, there are many transition houses that provide shelter for a parent and their children in the event of a separation due to domestic violence. These community resources are an important safety net that help children regain a certain degree of stability in their lives¹⁶⁸.



Improving perceived neighbourhood safety through the Block Parent Program

The Block Parent Program (*Parents-Secours*) is a volunteer-run community organization with over 5,000 volunteers and 2,404 safe homes for children and seniors. Participants place a sign in a front window to show that their home is a safe, welcoming place for community members in distress, especially children¹⁶⁹.

Improving the quality of educational childcare services through student placements in drop-in daycare centres



The *Maison de la famille* in Saint-Hyacinthe and the *Grand Galop* Social pediatrics centre collaborated with the *CLSC des Maskoutains*, the Montérégie Director of Youth Protection and the Cégep de Saint-Hyacinthe to develop the *Halte-Garderie du cœur* project. This daycare centre welcomes families and children who are living in a situation of neglect or maltreatment, have lived in a refugee camp or who have special needs. The *Halte-Garderie du cœur* is also a student placement site for third-year students in the early childcare program at the Saint-Hyacinthe Cégep, providing the opportunity to improve their reflective practice* and supervision from experienced educators¹⁷⁰.

* Reflective practice is a practice based on the integration of theory and practice..

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Promoting continuity when starting school using a tool that encourages communication between different environments

Several organizations in the MRCs of Memphrémagog, Les Sources, Granit, Haut-Saint-François and Coaticook have created a tool for sharing information on individual children's development. The tool is completed every spring by daycare educators and other personnel members who play an important role in the life of the child, whose parents also contribute to the process. With the parents' consent, the document is transmitted to the staff of their child's new school to ensure continuity between the different educational services¹⁷¹.





Improving
collaboration
across
environments
to make
a difference

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Collaboration between parents and educational services

Several studies have shown the importance of parents' involvement in their children's educational environments¹⁷². In fact, collaborating with parents is the basis of the *Accueillir la petite enfance* education program¹⁷³. There are many possible forms of collaboration¹⁷⁴:

- > Frequent communication between parents and their child's educator
- > Joint decision-making
- > Emotional or instrumental support offered to parents by the daycare facility (listening and assistance in difficult situations, helping out in unexpected situations, sharing documentation, material and equipment)
- > Parents' participation in activities (accompanying on outings, attending information meetings, participating in holiday parties and special events)
- > Parents' participation at the management level (sitting on the board of directors or parents' committee, for example).

Certain factors can hinder collaboration between parents and their child's daycare environment, however.

LIVING IN A DISADVANTAGED FAMILY

It is more difficult for families living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods to be involved in their children's education. Time constraints due to work schedules, having other children to look after, and a lack of knowledge and tools can limit their collaboration¹⁷⁵.

SPEAKING ANOTHER LANGUAGE AT HOME

It is more difficult for parents to collaborate with their child's educational environment if they do not speak the language. According to educators, language differences constitute the main barrier to communication¹⁷⁶.

PARENTS' MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Mothers with many symptoms of depression participate in fewer of the activities proposed by their child's school and interact less frequently with educators and teachers. According to a study done in a school environment, these mothers find it difficult to reconcile the management of their mental health with involvement at their child's school¹⁷⁷.

LACK OF STABILITY IN DAYCARE PERSONNEL

A study in Iceland showed that parents recognized that high staff turnover had a negative effect on their involvement at their child's daycare facility, as they felt they were constantly having to get to know new educators¹⁷⁸.

Collaboration between daycare/ preschool and primary school environments and health and social services networks

Collaboration between the various networks involved is crucial to ensuring that young children receive all the resources and support they need for healthy development. Social pediatrics is an excellent example of this type of cooperation, as it is based on intersectoral and interdisciplinary action. Having access to services in the neighbourhood promotes healthy living habits and encourages the community to play an active role in education by supporting families and strengthening parents' power to act¹⁷⁹.

In the case of transitioning to school, all of a child's living environments need to work together to foster continuity. Better collaboration relies on mutual understanding of the environments concerned, however. Ensuring a smooth transition between the pedagogical approaches in daycares/preschools and primary school is also important¹⁸⁰.

Experts recommend that communities:

- > encourage interactions by setting up different communication channels (agenda, discussion forums, etc.)
- > develop a consistent approach to transitioning to school
- > help parents with administrative processes, starting by registering their child in school¹⁸¹.



Collaboration within the community

School-family-community collaboration is at the heart of Québec's public policies and programs. Putting this principle into action helps to compensate for socio-economic deprivation and social inequality in education¹⁸³.

Promoting activities offered in the community to offer a smooth transition to primary school will help to ensure their success. For example, employees working in public and retail services used by parents—from convenience stores, hospitals, libraries and pharmacies to big box stores—could be recruited to distribute important information to families¹⁸⁴.

Certain community strategies could also foster parents' collaboration with the child's educational environment. For example, primary schools and parent committees could provide parents with information on extracurricular or summer activities, cultural activities or health care. Schools could also look after coordinating family services with community groups and private businesses¹⁸⁵.

Setting up this kind of collaboration with community organizations can be a challenge, however. There are human factors (like the quality of relationships between stakeholders) and organizational factors (such as different organizational cultures and intervention philosophies) to be considered. Nonetheless, over the past ten years or so, relationships between networks have become increasingly egalitarian and community organizations have been receiving greater recognition from the public system¹⁸⁶.

In Québec, 89% of early childhood actors think that dialogue and collaboration should be encouraged between daycares/ preschools, primary schools, communities, municipalities and the health and social services network¹⁸².





Conclusion

Based on a cross-analysis of two major Québec studies on the preschool path and child development in kindergarten, this report focuses on the role and influence of the environments that young children grow up in.

Several factors in children's lives come together to influence their development. Stable, caring relationships, stimulating experiences, and access to health care and quality municipal infrastructures are all protective factors that can attenuate the impact of risk factors and have a positive effect on a child's development path. Risk factors such as parental stress, social and economic deprivation and neglect can have negative repercussions.

The analysis concludes that three key elements are critical to healthy child development:

- > The **quality** of a child's living environments: the emotional and physical security they provide, as well as their ability to provide a rapid, appropriate response to the child's needs.
- > The **stability** of those environments: the constancy and predictability of the child's social, emotional and physical environments.
- > **Continuity** across a child's different environments: routines, disciplinary practices and adults' expectations.

Fortunately, we have access to various forms of collective leverage to act at all levels of society. For example, federal and provincial **governments** have the power to improve the quality of housing and reduce residential instability through the application of measures designed to facilitate access to affordable, healthy housing. They can also reduce changes in daycare environments by creating additional spaces in educational childcare services. **Municipalities** can play a key role in reducing residential instability by fighting gentrification in certain neighbourhoods or improving the quality of others by implementing additional safety features. Last but far from least, **communities** can foster continuity during children's transition to primary school by introducing tools that facilitate communication between the different environments. They can also strengthen family stability by offering shelter and support to families in the process of separation because of domestic violence.

By working together, we can offer young children environments that are adapted to their needs where they can flourish, regardless of where they were born or where they are growing up.

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OBSERVATOIRE des tout-petits

The mission of the Early Childhood Observatory, a project of the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation, is to communicate the current state of knowledge in order to promote informed decision-making on the subject of early childhood in Québec. Our goal is to ensure that every young child living in the province has access to conditions that will enable them to develop their full potential, regardless of where they were born or where they are growing up.

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