

PRESS RELEASE

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**A new portrait of the youngest Quebecers from the
Early Childhood Observatory**

Ongoing issues of concern and inequality

Montréal, November 19, 2019 – This morning, to coincide with Early Childhood Week, the Early Childhood Observatory (*Observatoire des tout-petits*) made public its most recent portrait of young children in Québec, entitled *What kind of environments are Québec's youngest children growing up in?* Although it includes some good news, this year's portrait also contains some worrying information on young children's situations in their families, neighbourhoods and early childcare facilities. In certain cases, these situations can create inequalities and have negative repercussions on early childhood development.

Living conditions are a determining factor in development

In 2018, there were 530,091 children between the ages of 0 and 5 living in Québec. A little more than one out of four children enrolled in kindergarten at that time showed signs of developmental vulnerability. In disadvantaged neighbourhoods, this figure was one out of three. "The conditions in which very young children are growing up have a deciding influence on their development. For example, at age 3, children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods know 600 fewer words than their counterparts in more privileged communities. Such developmental gaps can have an influence on their academic results in primary school and high school—even in studies at an adult age," explained Fannie Dagenais, Director of the Early Childhood Observatory.

Issues of concern and inequalities

"As a society, it is essential that we concern ourselves with the environments in which young children are growing up," she added. Although there has been improvement in several indicators, the 2019 portrait shows that one family out of ten with at least one young child is still experiencing food insecurity. In addition, 13.9% of children—75,000 of them—between 0 and 5 are living in low-income families. The level of stress experienced by their parents in connection with work-family balance is also cause for concern, particularly among mothers (39% as compared to 23% among fathers). Finally, many very young children are attending educational daycare facilities that still do not comply with government requirements in terms of qualified personnel.

Possibilities for collective action

In addition to painting a rigorous picture of young children's living conditions in Québec, the Observatory's portrait offers solutions drawn from scientific literature and experience on the ground. "Here in Québec, we have many possibilities for collective action that could improve young children's living conditions in the province. All sectors of society can take action!" said Fannie Dagenais.

Economic conditions and food insecurity

Action can be taken to improve the unfavourable economic conditions of some young children's families by providing financial support for financially disadvantaged families, focusing on regions or neighbourhoods with large populations of low-income households. Investment in affordable housing is another measure that has been shown to be effective in improving young children's living conditions. Both these measures also fight food insecurity.

Work-life balance

Certain measures can also help to reduce parental stress related to reconciling work and family responsibilities: allowing more flexibility in returning to work after parental leave, or offering work-family balance measures to accommodate parents who work atypical hours, for example. Another possibility would be to encourage mothers and fathers to share parental leave, or to adopt strategies to integrate fathers into all policies, services and programs aimed at improving the lives of families with young children.

Quality of educational childcare services

Finally, to ensure there are a sufficient number of qualified personnel in educational childcare facilities, we need to better understand the obstacles to change and support childcare services in looking for solutions. This would help to make sure that two out of every three educators have the required qualifications in all childcare facilities, which is the goal established by the Ministère de la Famille. Recognizing and facilitating educators' access to training and providing them with the tools they need in their work environment would improve the quality of all educational childcare services.

"If we work together, we can give our youngest Quebecers a better start, but we need all sectors of society on board. Our futures depend on it!" concluded Fannie Dagenais.

ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD WEEK (touspourlestoutpetits.com)

Running from November 17-23, 2019, Early Childhood Week provides an opportunity for communicating and inciting dialogue on the subject of early childhood development, highlighting local and regional initiatives that support very young children, and mobilizing Quebec society as a whole. Several activities and events are planned throughout the province during the entire week.

ABOUT THE EARLY CHILDHOOD OBSERVATORY (tout-petits.org)

The mission of the Early Childhood Observatory (*Observatoire des tout-petits*), a project of the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation, is to help ensure that the development and well-being of Québec's very youngest children has a place at the heart of the province's social priorities. To achieve this, the Observatory compiles the most reliable and relevant data on 0-5 year-olds, which it then disseminates to incite dialogue on possible collective actions in this area.

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Source: Early Childhood Observatory/*Observatoire des tout-petits*

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FACT SHEET

2019 edition of the Annual portrait of young children in Québec

In addition to presenting a rigorous status report on the living conditions of young children in Québec, the Observatory's 2019 portrait also proposes potential solutions drawn from a recent review of the scientific literature and experience on the ground. A few of these solutions are listed below.

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

Data

The employment situation of Québec families with at least one child under the age of 5 improved between 2001 and 2016, with maternal employment rates showing the most increase during that period. Families are nonetheless required to deal with several sources of stress. One out of ten families with at least one child under 5 is experiencing food insecurity. In addition, 13.9% of all children between 0 and 5 are living in low-income families, which represents 75,000 young children. Finally, 39% of mothers of children between 6 months and 5 years present high levels of stress related to the pressure of balancing work and family responsibilities. This percentage has been rising since 2012. In comparison, the corresponding figure for fathers, which has remained stable since 2012, is 23%. Important to note, parents who are very satisfied with the way

household tasks are shared with their spouse report lower stress levels with respect to work-family balance.

Possible solutions

Other measures could also contribute to reducing parents' stress related to work-family balance: allowing more flexible arrangements for returning to work following a parental leave, or offering adapted measures to facilitate work-family balance, especially to parents with atypical working hours. Another possibility would be to encourage parents to share parental leave or to adopt strategies to integrate fathers into all policies, services and programs aimed at improving the lives of families with young children.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Data

In Québec, 92.4% of children who were attending kindergarten in 2016-2017 were living in neighbourhoods where there were safe places to play outside during the day, and 90.8% lived in neighbourhoods with parks, playgrounds and other safe places to play. However, 13.6% of families with at least one child between the ages of 0 and 5 live in unaffordable housing, and 12% live in dwellings that are unsuitable in size. The portrait also shows varying levels of material deprivation among regions across Québec (calculated based on the average personal income, proportion of individuals without a high school diploma, and the employment/population ratio).

Possible solutions

Action could be taken against the unfavourable economic conditions of some young children's families by providing financial support for financially disadvantaged families, focusing on regions or neighbourhoods with large populations of low-income families. Investment in affordable housing is another measure that has been shown to be effective in improving young children's living conditions. Both these measures also fight food insecurity.

Creating safe, accessible playgrounds in municipalities of all sizes would be an effective way to improve the quality of the physical environments in which young children are growing up.

EDUCATIONAL CHILDCARE SERVICES

Data

A large proportion of educational childcare services offer activities designed to facilitate children's transition to school. The proportion of educational personnel considered to be qualified in educational daycares increased between 2005 and 2015, going from 72.1% to 84.2% in CPEs and from 46.8% to 73.5% in subsidized daycares. We are getting close to the objective set by the Ministère de la Famille for all childcare facilities, requiring two out of every three educators to the necessary qualifications. Unsubsidized daycares seem to be having more difficulty reaching this

objective, with only 18.7% managing to do so. It is important to specify, however, that the regulation was changed in 2012 and that establishments were given five years to comply.

Possible solutions

Since having a sufficient number of qualified personnel in educational childcare facilities is a documented criterion of service quality, we need to better understand the obstacles to change and support childcare services in looking for solutions. This would help reach the goals set by the Ministère de la Famille. Recognizing and facilitating educators' access to training and providing them with the tools they need in their work environment would improve the quality of all educational childcare services. These measures would contribute to improving the quality of all educational childcare services and further promote young children's development.