

## **Terra Centre for Teen Parents: Position and Support for Early Learning and Care**

Terra Centre for Teen Parents is a non-profit organization helping pregnant and parenting teens develop the self-reliance and skills to be successful parents. As an organisation dedicated to supporting the well-being of young parents, it is essential that we also consider the next generation touched by our services, as they become strong, healthy and contributing members of our community. When we look to the future of our province, expanding opportunities for high quality early learning and care is critical to our commitment to the well-being of the children and families we serve.

Terra supports continued investment in the creation of a strong early learning and child care system for the province of Alberta. The quality of a child's first five years is increasingly acknowledged as critical to adult health and well-being. In recognition of this important time in a child's life, Terra calls on the Alberta Government to continue to position early childhood development as a key component of Alberta's investment and commitment toward the future health and well-being of Alberta's youngest citizens.

The significance of early childhood experience to societal well-being is well established in research and has garnered considerable attention in Alberta in recent years<sup>1</sup>. In the past decade, the Alberta Government has made significant investments in early learning and child care, namely the Early Learning and Care Curriculum Framework and the establishment of 122 new early learning and childcare centres providing affordable childcare at \$25/day. Although substantial gains have been made in the provision of childcare, there is still a long way to go in ensuring that early care environments for young children are of the high quality required to nurture child well-being. Government must be part of this effort.

In acknowledgment of our commitment to children and families, Terra has increasingly played a leadership role in the community through active participation in opportunities for research and innovation in practice, contributing to the broader field of knowledge in early learning and care. As an early childhood program specializing in infant and toddler care and learning and support for vulnerable families, Terra's Child and Family Support Centre contributed significantly as a research site for the development and implementation of *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework*.

Two of Terra's programs have been selected to participate in the Alberta Government Early Learning and Care initiative. Given the Child and Family Support Centre's extensive involvement in the research process for the development of Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework, Terra is well-positioned to support continued knowledge-building in the broader early childhood community.

At Terra, we understand that without quality, affordable and accessible child care, young parents and their children are less likely to be able to achieve the promising future they strive for, a future which includes breaking the cycle of poverty. Child care is identified as a missing puzzle piece in the elimination of child poverty in Canada<sup>2</sup>. Poverty reduction cannot be achieved or sustained without the critical set of

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<sup>1</sup> (Ref 1, 2 and 3)

<sup>2</sup> (Ref 4)

services to support parents and enhance child development provided by a well-developed program of early childhood education and care<sup>3</sup>.

Children who experience poverty, especially those exposed to it over long periods of time are at higher risk of health problems, developmental delays and behaviour disorders. They are more likely to struggle in school and are more likely to live in poverty as adults. Where high quality, accessible, inclusive and affordable child care is available to families who experience poverty, there are significant benefits to the health and development of their children.

Research on high quality early learning and child care programs clearly demonstrates that the greatest indicator of quality is the knowledge, education and capacity of the staff employed to work with young children and their families<sup>4</sup>. Helping to ensure the emotional, social and physical needs of infants and children are met are key to laying the foundation for rising out of poverty. Through the work of well-qualified early childhood educators, children are supported in achieving their potential. High quality early learning and care requires well-educated early childhood professionals whose practice is grounded in sound foundational knowledge of child development, play-based learning, healthy nutrition and physical activity, well-designed environments, meaningful routines and understanding of various family dynamics and relationships with children, families and coworkers.

Addressing and ending poverty should be a priority. Quality early childhood programs contribute to the health and well-being of both parent and child—a major contributor to ending poverty. Early childhood education can support a host of benefits, a healthier population, improved child development outcomes, improved labour force participation, poverty reduction, social inclusion, rights of the child and a range of economic benefits. Research into the benefits provided through high quality child care concludes the developmental benefits to children in high quality early childhood education and child care programs and the benefits of employment to parents significantly exceed the costs<sup>5</sup>.

Addressing issues related to affordability, accessibility and quality are all critical challenges in the development of early childhood systems and can sometimes seem in direct conflict with one another, however highly qualified early childhood educators are key to achieving positive outcomes for children and families and should be considered a priority for investment. Other Canadian provinces through their bi-lateral agreements with the federal government, have agreed to invest in their early learning and care workforce through increasing qualification requirements and increasing educational opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

Creating a comprehensive early learning and care system is a complex undertaking and requires collaboration amongst numerous stakeholders: government, post-secondary institutions and community organizations. Terra appreciates that the critical nature of early learning and care for Alberta's families and youngest citizens is finally receiving long-deserved attention and we look forward to supporting these efforts in collaboration with the Government of Alberta.

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<sup>3</sup> (Ref 5)

<sup>4</sup> (Ref 6)

<sup>5</sup> (Ref 7)

<sup>6</sup> (Ref 8)

## References

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