

CSSE ANNUAL CONFERENCE – JUNE 1-5, 2013

Margaret McCain's Remarks – Getting It Right From The Start

Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to take part in this conference. Nowhere is there a more important gathering. Your contribution helps minds to soar.

Slide 1

The latest edition of the Early Years Study is the result of a collaborative effort between eight foundations from across Canada. We came together around a cause that is fundamentally progressive -- a game changer – to make early education available to all children from age 2. Early education for **all** would be publicly-funded, available, top-quality and voluntary. Parents would decide if, and how often, their children attend.

Early Years Study 3 builds on two other studies I co-chaired with the late Dr. Fraser Mustard. The first *Early Years Study* revealed how experiences in early childhood - from conception on - shape the architecture and function of the brain, with lifelong consequences for the individual and for society.

It changed perceptions of how the first years of human development were viewed and recruited new advocates from health, finance and science. In *Early Years Study 2* Fraser and I were joined by Dr. Stuart

Shanker to argue for a comprehensive policy framework to improve population health outcomes.

In *Early Years Study 3*, this time with Kerry McCuaig, we update the social, economic and scientific rationale for investing in early childhood education. This edition introduces the Early Childhood Education Report, a tool for monitoring progress in the funding, policy, quality and access to early education. And, as we will discuss later, the report has already become a tool for policy makers to guide their progress.

The evidence is now overwhelming. Good education, begun early, can improve every child's chance of success. It is fair. It works. It is affordable. It enjoys widespread popularity, and we are already on our way in Canada to making it a reality.

Slide 2

We of course began our study by looking at families. The Canadian family is changing. It is smaller and more diverse, and the parents are older. Today's first-time mother is now likely to be 29 and the average family has only one child. Although parents are older, and families are smaller; they are also poorer. Just having a child puts a family at risk of poverty.

We compared some of the Nordic countries with Canada, the UK and the United States. A robust policy package keeps family poverty low in the Nordic countries. Not so in Canada, where just having a child puts the

family at risk. Lone parent status has no effect in the Nordic countries, but is a major risk factor for poverty in the Anglo-America states. But senior poverty is different. Canada is **the** world leader in eliminating poverty among seniors. Focused efforts by governments at all levels have been highly successful. A similar approach is needed to support the well-being of families with children.

Slide 3

The biggest change for families is the growing presence of mothers in the workforce. Canadian women have a high level of participation in paid work, about 10 points higher than their counterparts in Europe. The financial well-being of families is highly dependent on the income of working mothers. The rate of poverty in one-income households is 21 percent, but drops to 4 percent for two income households.

The reality is Canada couldn't function without mothers' employment. A study by the Vanier Institute estimates \$35-billion in tax revenues would disappear annually if mothers stayed home.

Slide 4

Extensive research from many perspectives concurs that early human development is an intricate dance between nature and nurture, genes and the environment. Genes listen to the environment and the environment adapts the genetic blueprint. This is the important epigenetic story.

In early life, nurturing, stimulation and nutrition interact with genetic predispositions to sculpt the architecture of the brain and its neural pathways, influencing learning, behavior, and physical and mental health for life.

The young child's brain is acutely vulnerable to its environment. If the early experiences are fear and stress, especially if these are overwhelming and occur repeatedly, then these neurochemical responses become the primary architects of the brain. Trauma scrambles the neurotransmitter signals that play key roles in telling growing neurons where to go and what to connect to. Children exposed to chronic and unpredictable stress—including harsh and chaotic parenting, witnessing the abuse of other family members or the constant fighting between parents—will suffer deficits in their ability to learn. IQ will be lower—in itself another risk factor for conduct problems and mental illness.

Slide 5

Adversity in early childhood manifests itself almost immediately as aggression or withdrawal in preschoolers. Poor academic performance and greater school drop out rates; pregnancy; risky behaviour; substance abuse; and mental health problems are seen in adolescents and young adults. Obesity and type 2 diabetes; cancers and heart disease manifest during the middle years. Early onset dementia plagues seniors.

All these conditions come with substantial costs. It is clear that failing children during their early years is very, very expensive.

Slide 6

An analysis by the Canadian Council on Learning – unfortunately this organization no longer exists, leaving a great gap in the public discourse on life long learning. In 2008, the Council pegged the annual public cost of one high school dropout at \$7,500 annually. This figure is derived from a combination of lost tax revenue and increased spending on unemployment insurance and social assistance, in addition to greater costs to the criminal justice system.

The price paid by the individual is even higher, totaling \$11,500 in diminished health and income. The annual public costs for a cohort of early school leavers is \$2.62-billion. The lifetime cost is \$18-billion.

Slide 7

Many factors influence outcomes for children. The child's health is primary; followed by the home environment, including the socioeconomic status of the family, the educational attainment of the parents and the family's income. Preschool and primary school are important outside influencers.

It is difficult to intervene to influence family dynamics. Early education however has a long and proven track record in reducing vulnerabilities

in children and breaking intergenerational cycles of illiteracy and poverty.

Slide 8

When we say “getting under the skin to change trajectories,” results from a large, ongoing study in the UK and Northern Ireland provide a good illustration. Edward Melhuish and his team studied changes in children’s numeracy knowledge from age three through to grade six. Some children started out poorly and continued to perform below expectations. Others started out well and continued to do so. Still others had a good start but their performance declined. Others were below expectations when first assessed but showed marked improvement.

What do you notice about the movement in this graph? Yes, it all takes place before children reach formal schooling.

We thought Dr. Melhuish’s work was so important that we recently brought him to Canada to meet with officials in Ontario and Atlantic Canada.

Slide 9

To influence educational achievement, both the quality of early education and the amount of time children attend preschool are important. The UK study found developmental benefits even for children who had attended lower quality programs. This is the

advantage children derive just from being around other children. But the children who profited most, attended good programs for two or more years – so duration is also a factor. Fifteen hours a week appears to be the tipping point.

Based on the research it would appear that provinces providing full day kindergarten are ahead of those offering part-time. Those offering programming for two or three years before grade one are ahead of those offering one year.

Slide 10

Research tells us that emotional and cognitive self-regulation has the same neural roots. Self-regulation reflects the state of our limbic system and its ability to attend to tasks, to focus—to learn.

Self-regulation may be far more important than IQ in determining not only what kind of grades a child earns, but how often she goes to class, how much time she spends on homework, how vulnerable she is to risky behavior; even things as simple as how much time she spends watching TV or playing video games. Self-regulation is often misinterpreted as behaviour management – it is not about regulating the child – it is about the child’s ability to regulate her own behaviour.

While all early education programs appear to provide a social boost, good early education has enduring effects on self-regulation. This is supported by research out of the University of British Columbia linking

vulnerability in kindergarten with poorer performance on provincial testing in grades 4 and 7. Manitoba research links vulnerability in kindergarten with poor academic results in grades 10 and 12 -- an indication of the lasting effects of early childhood experiences.

Slide 11

Educators are the key to quality in early childhood settings. The Accord by the Canadian Deans of Education, to be launched later today, identifies critical features of quality preschool:

- The quality of the adult-child verbal interaction
- Knowledge and understanding of curriculum
- Knowledge of how young children learn
- Adults skilled in helping children resolve conflicts
- And, helping parents to support children's learning at home

Slide 12

Social class and parents' educational attainment does influence literacy outcomes. There is a gradient in reading competencies between children from lower income and affluent families. Preschool raises the bar for all children, but for children from disadvantaged families it can be a life changer.

Slide 13

Vocabulary skills in preschool are closely related to later academic competency. Language is a telling indicator since it provides the foundation for conceptual thinking. As we have seen in other

competencies, children from low-income families are more likely to experience language delays, but income is not determinist. Most low-income children are doing just fine and many are excelling. Good parenting and good preschool can inoculate children from the effects of low income. But it is not only children from low-income families who are having problems. Note that the vulnerability gap between children from moderate and affluent families is just as large as the gap between middle class and poor families.

Slide 14

Because children from low-income families are more likely to experience difficulties, it is often assumed that scarce resources should be directed to them. But although the *percentage* of children with delayed vocabulary is indeed more prevalent in low-income families, poor children form a relatively small group in the overall **number** of children having difficulty.

Based on the findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Children and Youth we see that more than twice as many children who do not live in poor families have language delays. This would indicate that changing outcomes at a population level, requires a universal approach to early education.

Slide 15

Low literacy levels create problems well beyond the classroom. Literacy skills are essential to participation in a democratic, pluralistic

society. It is difficult for citizens to participate in decision-making without the skills necessary to understand the complex issues. Analyses of the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey conducted by Statistics Canada in partnership with the OECD, suggest that the higher the literacy level, the more likely it is that a respondent will engage in various forms of civic activities.

Low literacy levels are dangerous, particularly during times of social and economic instability. Illiteracy can leave people vulnerable to the simplistic solutions offer by extremist groups.

Slide 16

Another advantage of early education is its high economic return. It is a job creator in its own right, while it supports parents to work. It provides immediate-to-long term social and health savings; as it prepares the next generation of workers.

We see many signs for the federal government's *Economic Action Plan*. More of them should be on schools. Robert Fairholm's work reveals child care and education as the biggest job creators, almost twice as effective as stimulus spending on construction. The tax revenue generated from public spending on early education sends back about 90 cents in taxes to federal and provincial governments for every dollar invested.

Slide 17

But the big economic story is from Quebec and its real life experiment in providing low cost early education and care. Some policy makers have been scared off early education, pointing to Quebec as an example of a program out of control. But a recent study by a group of economists from the University of Sherbrooke tells a different story:

- Between 2000 and 2008, 70,000 more Quebec mothers entered the workforce because of low cost child care. These are mothers who would have been unable to work without this support.
- They pay \$1.5-billion in taxes
- And draw \$340-million less in social transfers
- Boosting Quebec's GDP by \$5-billion

Slide 18

Quebec mothers have:

- Moved Quebec from the bottom to the top in female labour force participation in Canada
- Halved child poverty rates in their province
- Halved the number of lone-parent families on social assistance
- Boosted fertility - More Quebec moms are having their second, third and more children
- Meanwhile, Quebec student test scores have moved from below, to above, the national average

Slide 19

When early education is organized so that it also supports parents' labour force participation, it more than pays for itself. The economists found that:

For every dollar Quebec spends on early education and care, it collects \$1.05 in increased taxes and reduced family payments, while the federal government gets 44 cents.

This is a highly important study. These are real numbers, based on real experiences, not a simulated economic model.

Slide 20

Unfortunately the policy framework for early childhood is still very fragmented. At both federal and provincial levels several departments claim responsibility for some aspects of early childhood programming but rarely is there a lead ministry. This schism is replicated at the local level. Split governance - legislation, funding, and delivery structures - makes it challenging to deliver effective programs.

While there are great organizations doing great things for kids, they accommodate only a few fortunate children. Parents are left to the service chaos. Navigating the quagmire is difficult for families with resources, and almost impossible for disadvantaged families.

Slide 21

A comprehensive, multi-year review of 20 early childhood services systems conducted by the OECD concludes that jurisdictions which split oversight for their preschool, child care and education services have weaker services – less access, poorer quality, less accountability.

Research in Canada and abroad including Better Beginnings/Better Futures; Toronto First Duty; findings from the Atlantic Early Childhood Development Centres; Sure Start in the UK and Australia's Doveton example, tells us that integrated early childhood services, delivered from the school's platform are more effective, particularly when it comes to reaching hard to serve families.

Slide 22

Many jurisdictions are now taking steps to reduce the adverse effects of split systems by merging their early education, child care and family support frameworks. Integrating systems takes high-level political commitment, stakeholder buy-in, the need to align programs with older children, and adequate funding.

A vision is required which reconciles early education as a child development program that also supports parents' participation in the workplace. It needs to address the whole child and family to smooth transitions as children and families grow and change.

It recognizes the importance of a trained and resourced early childhood workforce and a curriculum grounded in children's natural exuberance for learning.

It respects parents as their children's first and most important teachers and removes barriers to access with free or low cost programs.

Slide 23

The provinces and territories have heard the message and are responding. More provinces are merging their early childhood and early intervention services into their departments of education. In 2006 no jurisdiction had merged departments – today five have.

Slide 24

Schools are playing a greater role in early education. Half the provinces and territories now offer full day kindergarten and more schools are directly delivering pre-k programs.

Slide 25

In developing the first Early Years studies we met kindergarten teachers who told us they could only have plasticine in their classrooms if it was used to mold letters. "Play" was literally a band word. In 2012 the Council of Ministers of Education cited the psychological and neurological research, to "endorse a sustainable pedagogy for the future that does not separate play from learning, but brings them together to promote creativity in future generations."

Other progress should be noted:

- Some jurisdictions have extended experiential learning approaches to children in grades two and three.
- Steps are being taken to raise the qualifications, compensation and professional recognition of early childhood educators.
- Population based assessment such as the Early Development Instrument are being used to support planning.
- And the public is being kept informed through regular reporting on investments and outcomes.

Slide 26

In 2006, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development revealed that Canada had the lowest rate of spending on early childhood programs among OECD countries.

Since then, the provinces have upped their contribution from about 3.5-billion annually to \$7.5-billion. This is only half way to the \$15-billion, which would bring us in line with OECD recommendations; nevertheless the increase represents significant progress.

We are also pleased to report that a review of 2013 provincial and territorial budgets showed all jurisdictions held the line or increased their spending for early education despite financial challenges.

Slide 27

Increased spending has brought increased access. Over 52 percent of children aged 2-4 years regularly attended an early education program in 2011, up from the 20 percent of children under age 6 identified by the OECD in 2006. Expanded access to school-operated programs accounts for most of the increase.

Slide 28

Accountability for public investments has also improved. Most provinces determine children's readiness for school learning during kindergarten using the Early Development Instrument. Kindergarten teachers use the EDI to assess children on scales related to their social, emotional, cognitive and physical development. It is in effect a measure of how well children spent their earliest years. The EDI was a recommendation of the first Early Years Study in 1999. Today it is in use in most regions across Canada, and has been adapted for international use.

The latest results from Ontario will include the first cohort of children in full day 4-and-5- year-old kindergarten. We understand that there has been a drop in vulnerability that can be attributed to full day K.

Slide 29

The Early Childhood Education Report 2011 is a snapshot of emerging early childhood education systems. Five categories reflect the policy lessons that emerged from the OECD's review of the early education and care in its member states.

Category 1 is Governance. It asks: Is oversight for ECE split between multiple departments, or does it have coherent direction and sound service delivery?

Funding – Is it adequate to support program quality and reasonable access?

Access – Full day kindergarten is becoming the norm – is it offered? Do at least half of children 2 to 4 years regularly attend an ECE program? Is the accommodation of children with special needs a condition of public funding?

Learning Environment – Here we look at the density of ECE qualifications and the professionalization of the workforce. Has a provincial curriculum been developed, and are ECE salaries reflective of the value of the work?

Accountability – Are provinces meeting their reporting requirements? Is program quality assessed in all ECE settings and is the EDI or similar tool used at entry to kindergarten?

The benchmarks in each category were adapted to Canadian circumstances.

The ECE Report findings are actually positive. They reflect the progress that had been made across Canada since the dismantling of the federal – provincial child care agreements. In 2006, only three jurisdictions offered full-day kindergarten; today seven do. Province-wide curriculum anchored in learning through play was the exception rather than the norm. No province had merged oversight for education and child care. Today, five provinces have combined their departments, and the monitoring and reporting of vulnerability using the EDI is no longer a rarity.

Investments in early education and care have doubled – still below the OECD average but good progress -- and over half of all children regularly attend preschool.

There are many made-in-Canada examples of good practice and the steps jurisdictions took to achieve their results. Their experiences can serve as a guide to others. The Report does not suggest that there is only one route to a comprehensive system. Prince Edward Island and Quebec reached their destinations using very different methods.

Slide 30

Early education advocates can be rightly suspicious of schools for their rigidity and focus on a few narrow outcomes, rather than looking at the whole child and family. However children will spend the majority of their childhood in school and parents want their children to succeed. Schools can be a place where children both learn and are happy.

The trend is towards locating early education programs in schools. It has been found that the presence of ECE programs benefits the school environment, making it more welcoming to children and families alike. This is more likely to occur when schools are responsible for the ECE program – where ECE is not viewed a tenant in the school but a ‘first tier’ in learning.

Slide 31

Excellent ECE programs do exist, but as excellent as they are, these programs are few, and the numbers of families they serve is small. No jurisdiction - anywhere - provides preschool for the majority of children solely through the community sector.

In asking education to take the lead we are not denigrating the contributions of the family support or child care sectors to children and families. Rather, we start from the considerable international evidence in choosing education as the base upon which to grow an early childhood system. Education is unambiguous. It is about children—all children. From this universal and well-established platform, we can

develop a modern understanding that learning begins at birth, continues throughout life and involves the whole family, the whole community.

With education there is no need to reinvent the wheel— schools are in every neighbourhood -- not just some. And education already comes with a strong infrastructure -- financing, training, curriculum, data collection, evaluation and research.

Slide 32

The Accord on Early Learning and Early Childhood Education, which you will hear more about this afternoon at its official launch, reminds us that expanding education's mandate to include young children isn't about pushing academic demands down and abandoning the care and nurturance which is the domain of early childhood education; rather it draws on research showing that incorporating early childhood education into schools can have a transformative impact, turning them into vibrant family centres that welcome children and families before, during and after the school bell rings.

Early education for all is not a utopian fantasy, particularly if it built on the existing asset we have in public education. With less effort than starting a whole new social program from scratch, education can expand to bridge the gap between parental leave and formal schooling. By including the option of extended-day, year-round activities, Canada can have its long-demanded early learning and child care program.

I would like to conclude this morning by extending my congratulations to the Deans of Education of Canada for their Accord on Early Learning. This wonderful resource was developed under the thoughtful direction of Deans Kimberly Franklin, James McNinch and Ann Sherman.

To those of you working in the front lines of early education programming, research, administration and educator training, this is a great toolbox for action. It is certainly going to become a permanent fixture in my kit. Thank you.