

# Early Years Community Plan Pandemic Report 2020

## A YEAR IN REVIEW

As we reflect on what has been a year filled with challenges and unprecedented changes to the way we live, work and play we wanted to take some time to acknowledge how the pandemic has impacted families and children and some of the incredible work that has taken place to respond to and maintain services for families and children in the Early Years system in Hamilton.

This pandemic has been the biggest challenge that many of us have faced in our lifetimes and yet despite it we continue to provide the care required to support families and children to manage their well-being and care needs. We are fortunate to have a well - established early years system in Hamilton that has been able to adapt and respond to the challenges of the pandemic working in collaboration with the City's Emergency Operations Centre and our local Public Health team. Together we have and will continue to navigate the everchanging pandemic landscape to meet the needs of all families and children in our community.

A tremendous amount of gratitude goes to early years staff and educators who have continued to do the work of maintaining service delivery requirements while managing additional duties required to implement COVID processes and protocols. This has included the adoption of enhanced cleaning and screening procedures as well as playing an important role in ensuring our families and children have access to the human connections that are critical to managing mental health during these difficult times. All this while balancing the needs of their own families and managing the risks of providing essential supports to our community. A heartfelt thank-you to our early years heroes you have and continue to make a positive impact on the families and children we serve.

### Report Highlights:

- Impacts of COVID -19 on Families & Children
- Early Years System response to COVID-19:
  - Equity, Engagement Advisory Group (EEAG)
  - Child Care
  - Emergency Child Care
  - EarlyON Child & Family Centre's
  - Special Needs Resourcing
  - Affiliated Services for Children and Youth (ASCY)
  - Early Years System Priorities 2021

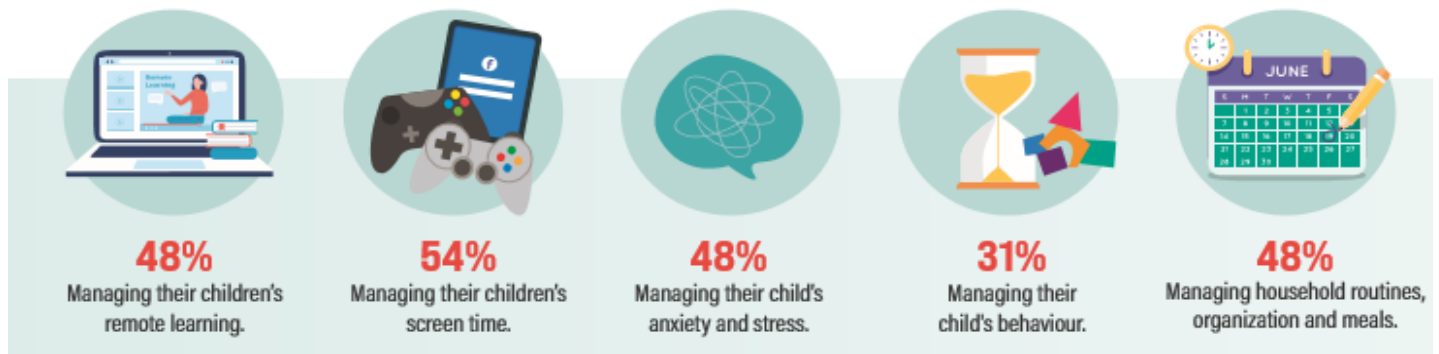




## Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Ontario Families with Children: Findings from Initial Lockdown (Sept 2020)

While our local and provincial Public Health teams have worked diligently to ensure public safety during the COVID-19 pandemic there have been some unintended consequences of the public health measures on families and children. A recent survey of 7434 caregivers/parents conducted by McMaster University’s Offord Centre revealed that 57% of caregivers met the criteria for depression, 1 out of 3 caregivers reported moderate to severe levels of anxiety and 37.5 % reported an increase in alcohol intake. In addition, one-half of caregivers reported resource issues, with 34 per cent indicating some loss of income and 48 per cent indicating that a household member had applied for financial help offered by the federal and provincial government. Parent’s top concerns were balancing child care, schooling and work while also managing to provide opportunities for children to socialize.

### Parents/caregivers reported moderate to high levels of concern for:



## Equity & Engagement Advisory Group

Throughout 2020 the Equity & Engagement Advisory Group (EEAG) continued to meet and provide advisement on best practices for equity considerations during the pandemic. As Child Care programs reopened with decreased capacity and increased operational demands it was critical to ensure that families that were most in need were prioritized for care. In order to ensure that equity considerations remained a priority the EEAG developed guiding principle documents to support child care programs with allocating child care spaces and managing waitlists.

The EEAG is also in the process of developing an Early Years Workforce Diversity survey. Stay tuned to learn more about how you can support this important work.



## Child Care & Emergency Child Care

Maintaining the early years and child care sector during the pandemic has been a balancing act between supporting the care needs of families and children while maintaining safety and accessibility. Despite this we continue to prioritize the needs of families and children as we work together to navigate the uncertainty of the pandemic. Child care and early years operators have faced several challenges over the past year including the implementation of enhanced health and safety measures, reduced operating capacities, increased vacancy rates and managing waitlists while trying to anticipate the needs of families as the economy reopens.

A survey of child care operators conducted by the City's Performance, Planning & Evaluation team has provided us with a better understanding of the impacts of the pandemic on the local child care system. We know from this survey that the pandemic has many families reconsidering their need for care with 25% of families decreasing to part-time care and many choosing to defer care to a later date in 2021 when the situation with COVID-19 improves and parents care needs are better understood as they return to the workplace or in-class studies. The primary reasons that families have chosen not to return to child care at this time include concerns about COVID-19, working from home, loss of employment and alternate care arrangements.

As a result of the pandemic and the shutdown that occurred in March 2020, we have experienced decreased capacity, increased vacancy rates and a decrease in the number of children accessing fee subsidies. The chart below provides a snapshot of the number of children attending child care, before and after care and in receipt of fee subsidy pre and post shutdown:

<b>Child Care Service Levels 2020</b>			
<b>Program</b>	<b>Pre-shut down March 2020</b>	<b>Post- shut down December 2020</b>	<b>% Difference</b>
Child Care 0 to 4	5,982	5,568	-7%
School Age Child Care	8,481	7,029	-17%
Fee Subsidy	4,433	2848	-35%

While there have been obstacles to overcome, the City, in partnership with child care operators and the Ministry of Education, have responded to these challenges by:

- Providing ongoing communication updates in collaboration with Public Health through the facilitation of community meetings for child care operators to receive the most up to date information
- Working in partnership with licensed home child care operators to provide free emergency child care for 302 children of essential frontline workers per month from March to June and 155 children in 2021
- Supporting child development, the economy and the viability of licensed child care programs through flexible funding by providing \$590,000 to support operators with purchasing PPE and over \$1.5 million to support staffing needs
- Continuing the affordability grant for families with 5800 children benefiting from this funding

Although we know that there are still many unknowns and challenges that we will face in 2021, we are confident that our early years and child care community will continue to rise to the challenge and support families and children as they also adapt to a constantly evolving situation.



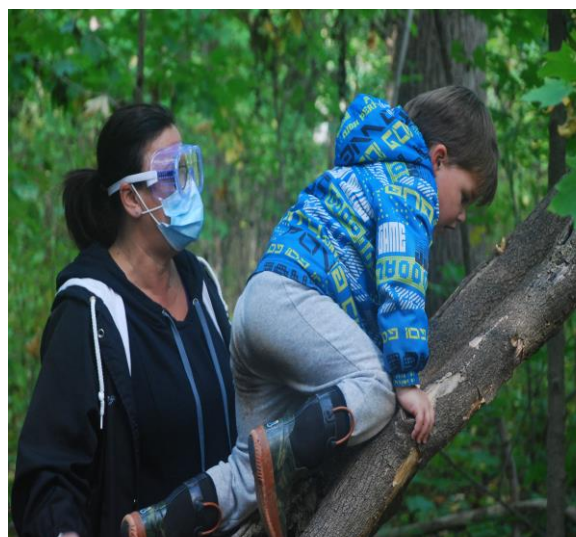
12  
Outdoor  
Program  
Locations

36, 628  
visits to  
EarlyON Child  
and Family  
Centres

255  
Virtual Events  
Hosted

The pandemic has most certainly created challenges to the way we connect with families and children in our EarlyON Child & Family Centre programs. Despite these challenges our EarlyON operators have responded by:

- Enhancing and expanding outdoor programming at 12 new locations with the inclusion of rubber boots and muddy buddies to encourage play during all types of weather and providing opportunities for families and children to explore nature together
- Virtual programming has also been developed to provide families and children with the opportunities to connect with EarlyON educators and participate in live events such as story, music and gathering times
- Videos and activities have been developed for families to access and complete at home with their children
- Telephone support services are being offered to assist families with maintaining support in navigating referrals to additional programs and services
- Indigenous and Francophone programming continues to be offered for families



## Special Needs Resourcing

Throughout the pandemic our Special Needs Resourcing partners have continued to find innovative ways to adapt and continue supports for families, children and our child care programs. Some of the highlights of this work include:

### Community Living Hamilton

- Developing 85 new resources to support all Licensed Child Care Programs
- Developing 51 site-specific resources to support the specific needs of individuals through the reopening process
- Publishing 17 Embracing Inclusion podcasts. The most popular being Compassion Fatigue, Redefining Inclusion, Engaging Families as Partners, and most recently, The Transition to School. To date, there have been 2034 unique downloads
- Eliminating the waitlist for Inclusion Facilitator Services and processing 99 new referrals in the last quarter of 2020

### Ron Joyce

- Providing in home supports for children who have not returned to licensed childcare amidst the pandemic
- Successfully transitioned 75 children to licensed child care over the course of the pandemic
- Utilizing Behaviour Therapy stream to support children in the community to successfully transition to Licensed Child Care and set them up for success with transitions to school in September

### Affiliated Services for Children & Youth

- Continuing the Tools for Life learning community sessions with an additional 133 participants
- Hosting Special Needs Resourcing learning opportunities including a book club on Inclusion featuring a 3-part series on Autism
- Creating a new workshop for classroom educators highlighting how consultants from Ron Joyce, Community Living Hamilton and ASCY work collaboratively together

1051  
Special Needs  
Children Served

133 Participants  
received  
Tools for Life  
training

17 Embracing  
Inclusion Podcasts  
published



Working collaboratively with the City and early years operators, ASCY continued to provide services during the pandemic by pivoting to virtual learning platforms. This allowed for the continuance of professional learning and support services and a connection to the early years community to monitor and respond to any emerging needs. Some of the highlights and accomplishments of ASCY during 2020 include:

- Transitioning to virtual learning platforms to continue professional learning and connections with early years partners and the child care community
- Adapting Professional Resource Library materials to a COVID friendly format and curbside pick-up for lending was implemented
- Playing a critical role in sourcing, ordering and coordinating distribution of PPE supplies for our child care and EarlyON Child & Family Centres
- Sourcing and distributing rubber boots and mud suits to support EarlyON outdoor programming
- Supporting the implementation and maintenance of a digital EarlyON program calendar to inform families what programs were being offered across the City during the pandemic
- Offered two learning series with Dr. Jean Clinton to support families and educators with building resilience and relationships during challenging times

## Looking Ahead Priorities for 2021

As we look ahead to 2021, we know that the priorities from our Early Years Community Plan are still as relevant as ever. Below are some of the high-level priorities that we will be focusing on in 2021:

- **Child Care and Early Years Stabilization**
  - Continuing to work collaboratively with child care and early years operators to ensure that the child care system can operate safely and remains viable and able to respond to the needs of families as the economy reopens
- **Technology**
  - Continuing to explore opportunities to utilize technology to support and improve service delivery
- **Equity, Diversity and Inclusion**
  - Continuing to address the needs of diverse families in our community to ensure all families and children have access to programs and services that meet their needs and support them in reaching their full potential



*~ We will get through this together ~*