

Career Promotions and Recruitment Strategy Project

Executive Summary



**Child Care
Human Resources
Sector Council**

The Career Promotions and Recruitment Strategy project was created by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (CCHRSC) and funded by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

1.0 Introduction

Many studies, including the child care labour market update study, *Working for Change*, have documented the recruitment and retention challenges facing Canada's early learning and child care sector. The Career Promotions and Recruitment Strategy project is one part of the multi-pronged response needed to deal with these challenges. As the organization dedicated to addressing sectoral human resource issues, the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (CCHRSC) recognized the need for a strategy that would identify ways to:

- *promote early childhood education as a valuable and viable career option; and*
- *encourage the pursuit of skills development and enhanced training among the existing workforce.*

Blueprint Public Relations was engaged in early 2006 to research and create a strategy to meet those objectives. Research was conducted throughout 2006 in order to:

- identify the most appropriate *target audiences* for promotional activities;
- develop *viable messages* about the rewards and benefits of jobs in the sector; and
- create an *action plan* to promote careers in early childhood education.

This document features highlights of that research and the related recommendations.

2.0 Research Methodology

Specific research conducted to achieve the project's goals included the following:

A literature review

The purpose of the literature review was to gather information on existing career awareness tools for the sector and help identify target audiences for the strategy. The review looked at all literature relevant to career promotion, and recruitment and retention in the sector, including:

- reports such as *Working for Change and Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2004*; and
- print material, web sites, and strategies developed by individual provinces/territories and regions to promote awareness of careers in early childhood education.

Key informant/stakeholder interviews

The stakeholder interviews were designed to:

- identify the sector's human resource issues;

- uncover existing or past promotional efforts by government, non-profit organizations, and educational institutions;
- collect information on the benefits of working in the sector; and
- review career promotion strategies and programs used by other sectors.

The 23 stakeholders interviewed included employers, post-secondary educators, provincial/territorial government representatives, representatives of national and provincial child care and labour organizations, immigrant counsellors and researchers. Every province and territory was represented.

Focus groups

A total of 14 focus groups were held to:

- understand how jobs in the sector are perceived;
- identify benefits that would increase interest in the sector;
- understand the barriers to entry, including misperceptions about occupations in this sector;
- understand what causes workers to leave the field;
- validate the appeal of benefits/promotional themes; and
- confirm the appropriateness of the target audiences identified by the literature review and stakeholder interviews.

Focus group participants included key influencers and potential sources of recruitment for the sector. Specifically, focus groups were conducted with:

- early childhood educators working in the field less than 3 years, including students and those doing co-op placements or practicums;
- child care workers with at least 5 years experience, including administrators;
- former child care workers who had left the field, but were still in the labour force;
- career counsellors, such as employment counsellors, school or guidance counsellors, and counsellors at community colleges;
- recent immigrants with interest, experience or training in child care, education, or related fields; and
- “career changers” who were unemployed or underemployed, considering a new line of work, or re-entering the labour force after having children but without specific career plans and without post-secondary training.

What we found

The research findings paint a picture of the early learning and child care environment as it relates to recruitment, retention and professional development. When developing a career promotions plan, understanding the environment in which the plan will be implemented helps determine appropriate positioning, key messages, and how and when to communicate with target audiences.

This document summarizes the environment in a series of statements, and provides the communications implications behind each statement. The document focuses solely on aspects of the environment that have an impact on communications/promotions activity.

3.0 The current child care environment

There are a wide variety of child care arrangements and regulations governing staff qualifications in the child care sector.

Child care in Canada (for ages birth to 12) is largely a decentralized patchwork of services and programs, regulated by the provinces and territories. Despite federal/provincial/territorial investments, child care is funded primarily by parents. Child care arrangements vary across Canada and include licensed child care centres; regulated home care; and nursery, preschool and school age programs. Many children are also in unregulated child care arrangements in individuals' homes. The variety of child care arrangements means there are also a wide range of employment arrangements and requirements for those who work in the sector.

The regulations around staff qualifications vary by province and territory. For example:

- In New Brunswick, only one out of every four child care centre staff is required to have an early childhood educator (ECE) designation. This makes it possible for untrained individuals to work alongside ECEs.
- In Ontario, at least one staff person in each group of children must have their ECE.
- In Saskatchewan, all workers in child care centres¹ must have their level 1 ECE. (There are three ECE levels in Saskatchewan.²)
- In Quebec, centers can have «educators» with no educational qualifications who work alongside fully qualified éducatrices. Currently, provincial regulations require that two out of three educators have an ECE qualification.

COMMUNICATIONS IMPLICATIONS: Diverse child care and employment arrangements and regulations around staff qualifications make it challenging to cohesively promote the sector as a career choice. The range of staffing rules for a regulated child care program must be considered when determining the target audiences for a career promotions strategy.

The training levels required to work in regulated child care vary widely by province and territory.

Regulated child care spaces require ECEs with certain levels of training; training requirements vary by province and territory. For example, in New Brunswick, students can obtain an ECE after one year of training. In Ontario, obtaining an ECE involves completing a two-year program at a community college. British Columbia has three categories of ECE; the most basic requires a year of formal training and 500 hours of supervised work experience.³

Training requirements can make it difficult for older workers such as career changers and new Canadians to consider entering the early childhood education sector. They often find it difficult to combine going to school with their current work and family obligations. (This issue is explored in more detail in Section 6.)

¹ Who work for 65 hours per month or more in the centre.

² Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2004, Martha Friendly and Jane Beach; pages 74 and 104.

³ Ibid, page 132.

COMMUNICATIONS IMPLICATIONS: A career promotions initiative must take regional training differences into account, and address the issue of access so as to set realistic expectations among target audiences about entering the profession.

4.0 The current child care workforce

Child care workers in Canada are as diverse as their work situations.

The child care labour market update study, *Working for Change*, provides a valuable snapshot of the regulated child care workforce. Most of those who work in child care (96 per cent) are women. Out of approximately 137,000 ECEs and assistants, 44,000 work at home while 93,000 work elsewhere (for example, in a child care centre or nursery school). ECEs and assistants have more education than the general population, but their wages are very low — about half the national average for all occupations. They are also ethnically diverse, reflecting general population and immigration trends.

COMMUNICATIONS IMPLICATIONS: Identifying the characteristics of the current workforce is critical to developing meaningful strategies and key messages.

Many child care workers are not part of a formal organizational structure.

Many child care workers do not belong to professional organizations or unions and are therefore difficult to reach.⁴ As an example, about 92,000 workers are considered babysitters, nannies or parents' helpers. This group is largely unregulated and very difficult to reach.

COMMUNICATIONS IMPLICATIONS: Many who work in the sector will be challenging to reach, an important consideration when creating strategies to promote professional development activities.

The generally low wages and poor benefits in the sector have a negative impact on every aspect of the working environment.

Difficulties in recruitment and retention are clearly linked to the low compensation levels in early childhood education.

The exception to this is in Quebec, where the early childhood education system receives strong financial and regulatory support from the provincial government, and workers are relatively well-paid.

COMMUNICATIONS IMPLICATIONS: There is no doubt that low wages and benefits detract from the sector's attractiveness as a career option. However, addressing the issues affecting compensation is outside the scope of a communications strategy for career promotion. Promotion activities for a career in early childhood education must therefore focus on the non-monetary rewards of working in the sector.

Because of the low wages there is a perception that the work is honourable but not a career.

Manager, child care advocacy organization

Low wages are a major discourager. After five years of working in the field, [workers] reconsider.

Early childhood education instructor

⁴ Working for Change, Canada's Child Care Workforce, November 2004, pp. 86-87.

I think the biggest misconception... the biggest thing we fight against daily, is that anyone, especially women, can do what we do.

Experienced child care worker

Low value means high turnover in child care centres.

Early childhood education instructor

You are helping educate and nurture the next generation, providing additional benefits to at-risk children and enabling parents to participate in the labour force or to get an education.

Manager, child care centre

The public's perceived lack of regard for the profession affects the child care working environment.

Generally, those who participated in the focus groups and the stakeholder interviews felt that the public does not understand the role of an early childhood educator and therefore does not see the need for specialized training or higher wages. Parents with children in a child care setting tend to have more of an appreciation for those who work in the sector, even if they do not have an entirely accurate view of the work involved. Interestingly, despite the investments that have been made in Quebec's child care system, those working within it have the same concerns around respect and appreciation as their counterparts in other provinces.

COMMUNICATIONS IMPLICATIONS: There is a lack of understanding about what the profession entails, although parents with children in child care are more appreciative of those who work in the sector. There is a definite need to increase understanding of what is involved in early childhood education and the specialized knowledge required.

Early childhood education is not well understood.

Part of the issue around respect has to do with the fact that those working in the sector feel that early childhood education itself is not well understood. Interviewees and focus group participants highlighted the fact that child care programs benefit the economy by allowing parents to remain in the workforce, and help young children develop to their full potential.

Some respondents said that any recruitment initiative should include messages around the value of child care and its role in society, building on a growing awareness stemming from the media's focus on these issues over the past few years.

COMMUNICATIONS IMPLICATIONS: Whether or not to include messages about the importance of early childhood education itself is a key consideration when developing a career promotions initiative.

Those working in the sector find the work highly rewarding.

Those who work in the child care sector feel their jobs carry significant non-monetary benefits. Many who participated in the stakeholder interviews and focus groups said their work provided an almost daily sense of accomplishment. They spoke movingly about having a positive impact on individual lives, making the world a better place, and helping people who were disadvantaged.

Even those who have left the field remain positive about the work itself, and said they found tremendous satisfaction in their day-to-day interaction with the children and their families.

COMMUNICATIONS IMPLICATIONS: Clearly, those who work in the sector feel that child care is a meaningful occupation. The work itself and the daily interactions with children were viewed as important benefits and valued more highly than monetary rewards. These findings should be taken into account as key messages are developed.

Professional development activities are valued but not formally recognized.

Child care workers and administrators feel strongly about the value of professional development. However, taking professional development courses is not recognized in a formal manner through increased pay or career advancement. Overall, the lack of resources for professional development or increased pay for increased training is generally attributed to budget constraints. Several focus group participants noted that their employers required staff to take professional training at their own expense and on their own time.

Respondents said that when resources are available, professional development is a priority and provides multiple benefits — for the staff member who takes the training, and for other staff who often benefit when the trainee returns to work and shares the learning.

Professional development was also seen as necessary to improve the skills and knowledge of child care managers. Managers tend to know a great deal about early childhood development, but often lack training in leadership skills.

COMMUNICATIONS IMPLICATIONS: Sharing knowledge, being a member of a recognized professional group, and contributing to a united voice that can promote the value of the education and the profession are key values linked to taking professional development/pursuing an ECE.

Child care is a very rewarding field and the rewards are immediate, concrete and life-long.

Director, child care centre

I loved how wherever I went ...with each new community, every new population, there was something new to learn from the people and you just connected with all these kids. I loved that and that's what kept me going.

Worker who has left the field

Lack of leadership skills in management is a challenge for the whole sector. People rise up the ranks in child care and then become administrators, but they do not have significant training in leadership, so there is less skill in program development, for example.

Director, early childhood education department

Most of us [who] enter the child care field want to make a difference, and have an impact particularly on those at-risk children and children with special needs.

Director, child care centre

I had two young cousins that were going to a preschool and I started doing some volunteer work there, just trying to get a bit of an idea of where I wanted to end up. I just really, really enjoyed that experience and found out about the ECE program...

Experienced child care worker

5.0 Entering the field

Child care workers see their profession as a vocation.

Many respondents said they saw their work as a “calling” or vocation, while others were drawn to the sector thanks to previous positive experiences with children. Their decision to enter the field was not influenced by information on working conditions, pay, benefits or career progression. They simply enjoyed working with children, were good at it as evidenced by their previous experience and felt this was the role for them. Many had not been aware of child care as a formal occupation, with college training programs and certification.

COMMUNICATIONS IMPLICATIONS: The depth of feeling that child care workers have for their profession, and the fact that many see their work as vital and important, should influence messaging in a career promotions plan.

These findings also point to the need to increase understanding of child care as a formal occupation with college training programs and certification. In addition, the importance of hands-on experience as a catalyst to choosing child care as a career should be a consideration as career promotions strategies are developed.

Child care workers, like workers in other sectors, rely primarily on family and friends for career information.

Most participants indicated they turned to their friends and family when deciding on their career direction, and relied less on formal career information programs. This finding is similar to research findings in other sectors.⁵ Career searchers also use the Internet, print materials and career counsellors, but it is family and friends who have the most influence and credibility, even if they don’t always have accurate information.

⁵ Please see section five for more information on career promotions campaigns run by other sectors.

The level of education required to become an ECE is not well understood, even by guidance counsellors.

There is a widespread lack of understanding about the specialized knowledge required to work as an ECE — even on the part of guidance and career counsellors.

Many guidance and career counsellors were surprised at the training and education that ECEs have. Counsellors are also among those who are generally unaware of the level of training required in each province/territory, and of the academic requirements and demands of ECE programs.

However, counsellors are aware of the low pay and difficult working conditions in the sector.

COMMUNICATIONS IMPLICATIONS: Career counsellors are key influencers for high school students, and for the career changers and immigrants they counsel. Efforts should be made to ensure that counsellors have an accurate understanding of child care, the role of an ECE, and the education required to obtain the designation.

There is no clear career ladder in child care.

Career planning is not helped by the fact that there is no consistent system of training and remuneration across the country. This is because child care is regulated by the provinces and territories and there is no pan-Canadian approach. In addition, there is no direct correlation between education levels and career progression. Taken together, these factors make it difficult to clearly explain the benefits of an ECE designation to someone considering a career in the sector, particularly since one can work in the sector without it.

However, given the specialized training behind an ECE diploma, those with the designation find themselves with many career options. Unfortunately, some of those options take them outside the child care field.

The exception to this situation seems to be where wages have increased. For example, in Saskatchewan the provincial government has provided funding to increase starting salaries and pay back pay to existing workers. This has had an impact on how the sector is being perceived.

COMMUNICATIONS IMPLICATIONS: It is difficult for those considering early childhood education as a profession to understand what the opportunities for career progression might be and therefore to picture themselves working in the sector. Creating tools and activities that illustrate opportunities for career growth and progression in the sector should be considered when developing career promotions initiatives.

Sometimes those going in the diploma program are a bit naive and think it's going to be easy and simple when actually it's one of the highest course loads.

Manager, child care association

Guidance counsellors don't recognize the academic requirements. The program has long class hours, reading, academic assignments.

Early childhood education instructor

Counsellors steer students who are not passing academically, but are “good with children” into the ECE program.

Leader, child care association

I don't think many people see child care as a “career”. They understand that it can be rewarding work but don't see that it could lead to other options, i.e. [becoming] a director.

Manager, child care advocacy organization

There is not much of a career ladder [in child care, since] organizational charts are quite flat. There is no recognition for extra education or training with higher pay.

Early childhood education instructor

Whether you work with a diploma or a PhD [in child care] you get paid the same, but in nursing the pay scale goes up as credentials go up. ECE doesn't have that because of the complex funding structure.

Child care advocate

Those who are diploma students go into the field and in a graduating class of 40, 25 will go to work in licensed child care. The others use it as a stepping stone for further study, others work in other provinces where higher wages are available.

Provincial/territorial director of child care

The child care profession has recruitment competition from other “helping” professions such as teaching, social work and nursing.

As is the case for child care, teaching, social work and nursing generally attract women, require post-secondary education, are regulated at the provincial/territorial level and are considered “helping” professions that involve providing support and caring for others. Too many times, according to respondents, early childhood education comes up short when compared to these three sectors.

Other helping professions have undertaken recruitment campaigns and made information available on various websites about the benefits of entering their fields. For example, nursing licensing bodies and associations offer information on why one should consider becoming a nurse. Key messages focus on making a difference (“Save a life. Touch a heart. Make a difference.”⁶); the value of the work (“Never let anyone tell you it’ll be easy... just worth it.”⁷); and the variety of career options (“Whatever your interest, nursing has something for you!”⁸).

A recruitment campaign booklet for the social work profession⁹ addressed the issues that trouble career changers with topics such as “I’m too old to start again”, “I’ve been out of school for too long”, and “What will it be like when I begin my job as a social worker?”. Complementing the booklet was a self-assessment quiz to determine readiness for the profession and profiles of those already in the sector as examples of work variety.

Every provincial and territorial government has information on its web site about becoming a child care worker. Many child care associations, and some colleges, have run campaigns promoting careers in the sector. For example:

- The Government of Manitoba ran a radio campaign about increases in provincial funding for ECE salaries. The campaign encouraged listeners to consider studying for an ECE.
- The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador produced a brochure outlining what is involved in early childhood education and how to become an educator.
- Aurora College in the Northwest Territories produced a poster and brochure promoting its ECE programs.

COMMUNICATIONS IMPLICATIONS: A career promotions campaign for child care will need to stand out from those of other, similar professions. The campaign should take into account work already done and build on messages already created, where appropriate.

⁶ College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta.

⁷ College of Registered Nurses of Manitoba.

⁸ Association of Registered Nurses of Newfoundland and Labrador.

⁹ Government of NWT, Health and Social Services.

6.0 Potential sources of recruitment for the sector

There are several potential sources of recruitment for the sector.

Immigrants with an interest in the “helping” professions could be good candidates to enter the sector. The research indicates that those already working in child care would be supportive. Current Canadian immigration policies work in favour of those with professional training and advanced education. However, new Canadians face a number of challenges in terms of entering the child care sector, including language and cultural barriers, job search skills, and recognition of their prior work experience and education.

Currently no national system exists for recognizing and assessing the prior work and learning experiences of new immigrants who want to work in child care. However, at a regional level various organizations have undertaken their own work in helping to integrate new Canadians into the profession.

It should be noted that immigrant men did not respond well to the idea of a job in the child care sector, largely because of cultural norms. In addition, the education requirements linked to regulated spaces in some jurisdictions would make it very difficult for immigrants living in those areas to enter the sector. Unfortunately, those jurisdictions (British Columbia and Ontario) are also where the largest number of new Canadians live.

“**Career changers**” were also identified as a logical source of recruitment. They include women returning to the workforce, retirees from other professions, and adults considering a career change. Career changers face similar challenges to those faced by immigrants, given that provinces such as Ontario require two years of post-secondary education in order to work in child care. This can be difficult for someone with limited resources or already employed. However, this challenge can be eased in part when regulations permit child care workers to work in the sector before they get their designation. This allows them to get some job experience and earnings before committing to post-secondary education. In some college programs, credits are given for work experience in the field, which can further shorten the course requirements for mature students.

Young people are the traditional — and most successful — source of recruitment for the sector. Many have had first-hand experience with child care workers, and therefore have a good idea about what is involved.

There is a **growing demand for First Nations, Métis and Inuit child care professionals**, particularly in Western Canada; significant cultural characteristics would need to be taken into account when promoting the profession.

Many interviewees and focus group participants said they would like to see more **men** working in the sector. However, there are a number of cultural barriers working against this group, including salary expectations, societal concerns, and the cultural stereotype of women as the primary caregivers for children.

George Brown has a program that supports new Canadians entering the sector, which is a good thing because child care facilities should reflect society and the families that are being served by the facilities.

Director, early childhood education department

For people working in day homes [who] want to go on to [early childhood] teaching, for example, it's a logical step. A lot of them go in and apply to university as mature students, and they use that mature-student status and the fact that they have had this experience as way to open the door and replace the academic requirements.

Career counsellor

For the first time, this generation of new parents has grown up in the child care system. As we are attempting to recruit them into the sector, they've had some first-hand experience... this is the first time that we've been able to say that.

Child care researcher

7.0 Benefits message

A number of messages were tested during the focus groups to determine which had the most impact. Regardless of target audience, the benefits message that resonated focused on the impact one can have on children. The theme with the strongest appeal across all focus group participants was the following:

Working in child care is very rewarding. I am contributing to the healthy development of children and I know I am making a real difference in their lives.

As noted in the focus group report, this theme highlights the intrinsic rewards of child care jobs, and the fact that one could positively affect the lives of others. Many participants pointed out that there are a lot of jobs that do not offer personal satisfaction. This statement positions child care workers in the same space as other “helping professions”. Developed further, it could become a unique message that resonates with target audiences.

8.0 Career promotions and professional development strategy

A full strategy and action plan has been developed based on the research. The plan extends over four years, and recommends *promoting child care as a professional endeavour*, and the *ECE designation as important and meaningful*. It reflects a phased-in approach and involves reaching out to high school students, guidance counsellors, parents, immigrants, and settlement and career counsellors. The plan also emphasizes the importance of communicating with “internal” audiences such as ECE educators, child care centre administrators, child care leaders, child care associations and child care workers.

A note to reviewers about wording: During project research, the phrase child care “worker” was used to describe those working in the child care sector, regardless of education or work environment. However those working in the field and those who had done so in the past, expressed a strong preference for the terms “educator” in English or “éducatrice”, in French. The authors acknowledge that child care “worker” is a problematic phrase however it is seen as more neutral than “early childhood educator” which in certain jurisdictions has a distinct regulatory meaning and could not be accurately used in all parts of the project report.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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