2006 SURVEY OF CANADIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD LEARNING

Skill begets skill, and that process begins early.
—James J. Heckman, Nobel Laureate

DETAILED REPORT: EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING

In the context of lifelong learning, the importance of early childhood learning cannot be overstated. In their first few years of life, children acquire cognitive, linguistic, socio-emotional and motor skills that form the foundation for subsequent learning.[1,2,3,4]

Evidence accumulated over the last 30 years indicates that successful early learning is context dependent. There are many different types of contexts that can effectively foster early childhood learning, but supportive and responsive contexts are critically important.[5] Children whose early experiences and environments are supportive of learning demonstrate positive learning outcomes, while children who are exposed to less advantageous environments tend to exhibit deleterious outcomes.[6,7]

Children also benefit from high-quality early childhood education by developing stronger language and cognitive skills,[8] showing fewer behavioural problems,[9] developing secure attachment relationships[10] with adults and other children and adjusting well to school.[11] High-quality early childhood learning provides a solid foundation for later academic success and lifelong learning.[12,13,14,15,16]

In a survey of opinion on a broad range of learning issues, the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) asked Canadians about their attitudes toward early childhood learning. The survey asked three specific questions:

1. Do Canadians recognize the foundational importance of early childhood learning?
2. Who is responsible for providing early childhood learning opportunities?
3. What does early childhood learning entail?

This report provides details on the survey's findings to these questions. It is based on data collected in 2006.

CANADIAN COUNCIL ON LEARNING CCL CCA CONSEIL CANADIEN SUR L'APPRENTISSAGE

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The Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning

The Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning (SCAL) asked more than 5,000 Canadians about four aspects of learning throughout the lifespan:

- Early childhood learning
- Structured learning
- Health and learning
- Work-related adult learning

In the section on early childhood learning, Canadians were asked:

- How critical to success is learning at various stages in life?
- Who is responsible for providing learning opportunities for young Canadians?
- How can governments take responsibility for providing learning opportunities to young Canadians?

Parents of young children (under 8) were also asked:

- What should young Canadians learn?
- What kinds of activities are important for enhancing early childhood learning?
- What do parents need to know about early childhood learning?
- How can child-care providers support early childhood learning?
- What factors are important in choosing a child-care provider?
- What do parents think about the child-care services in their communities?

Key findings and an overview of the results are available on the *Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning* pages of CCL's website.

DO CANADIANS RECOGNIZE THE FOUNDATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING?

Canadians were asked about four different stages of lifelong learning:

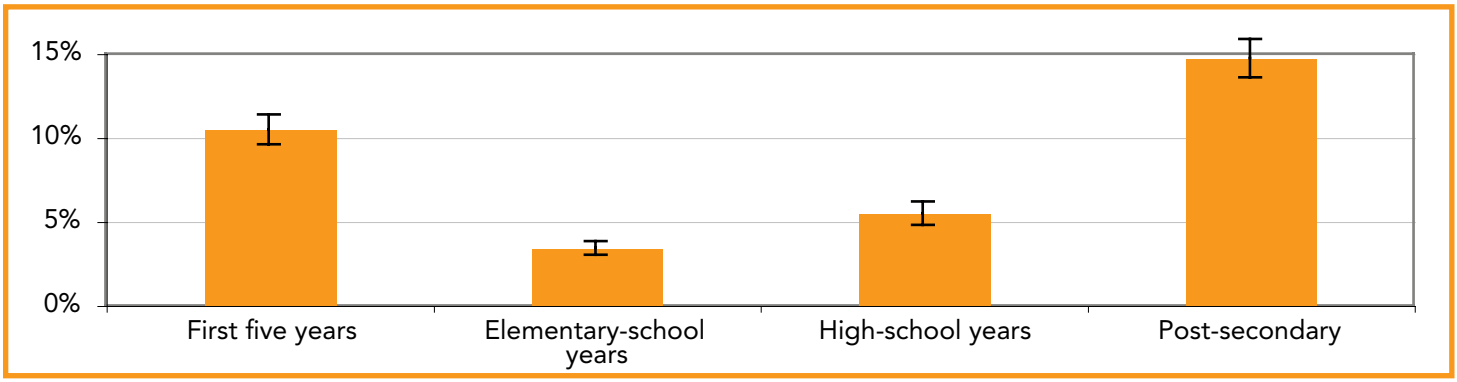
1. Learning between birth and five years of age
2. Learning during the elementary-school years
3. Learning in high school
4. Learning at the post-secondary level

Canadians value learning at all stages

Between 83% and 95% of Canadians agree or strongly agree that learning at each stage is not just important but critical to success in life. In particular, 87% of Canadians agree or strongly agree that learning during the preschool years is critical to success in life. Nonetheless, the

overall pattern of results suggests that some Canadians are not convinced of the foundational role of early childhood learning. Compared to learning during later childhood and through adolescence, Canadians are more likely to disagree that learning during the preschool years is critical to success in life (see Figure 1).

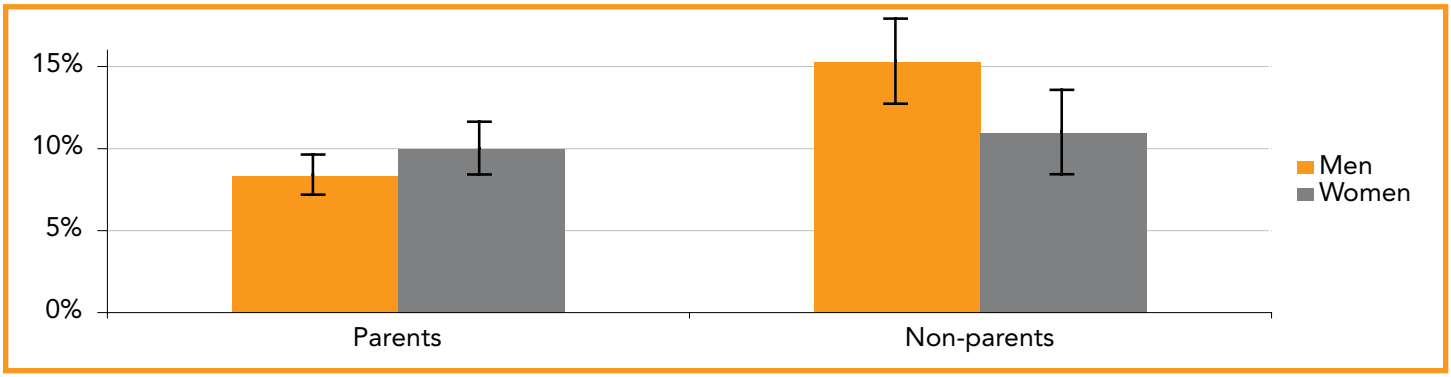
Fig. 1: Proportion of Canadians who disagree that learning is critical to success



Parents and non-parents differ in their attitudes toward early childhood learning

Canadians' beliefs about the importance of early childhood learning appear to be influenced by a number of factors. CCL was interested in understanding the profile of people who do not believe that early childhood learning is critical to success in life. It is not surprising that parents are less likely than non-parents to disagree that early childhood learning is critical to success in life, a difference that is stronger for men than for women. Whereas women without children are only slightly more likely than mothers to disagree that early childhood learning is critical, men without children are nearly twice as likely as fathers to disagree (see Figure 2). This gender difference persists when respondents are asked about learning during the elementary-school years, but disappears at later stages of learning.

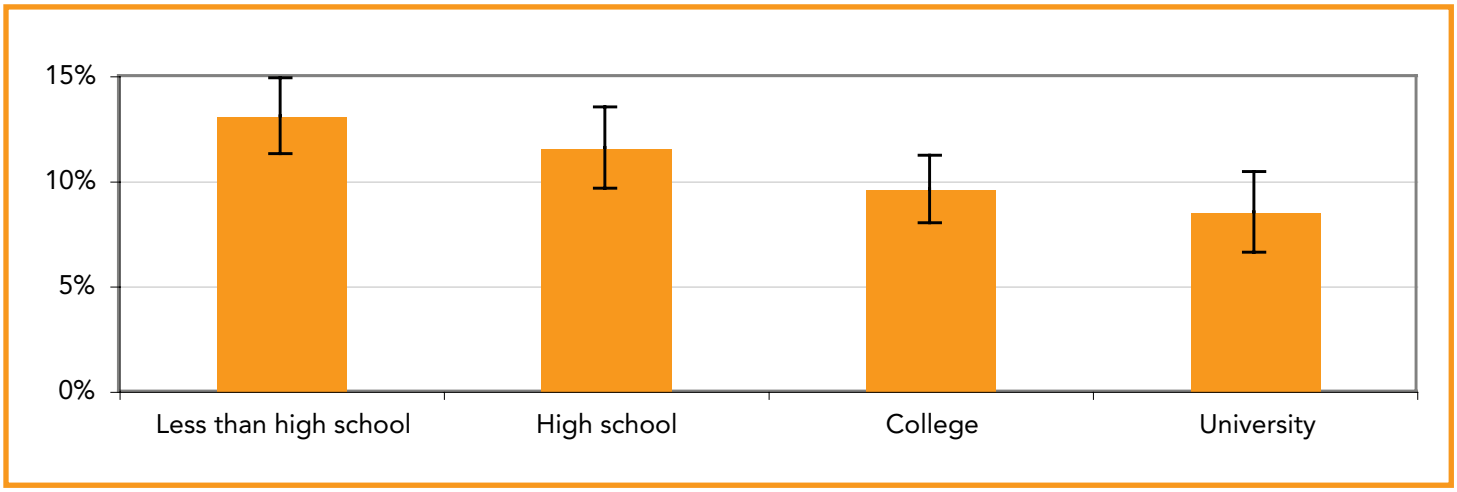
Fig. 2: Proportion of parents and non-parents who disagree that learning during the first five years is critical to success in life



Education also plays a role

Canadians with more education are less likely to disagree that early childhood learning is critical to success in life (see Figure 3).

Fig. 3: Proportion of Canadians who disagree that learning during the first five years is critical to success in life, by level of education



Parental status and education have an additive effect. Non-parents with less than a high-school level of education are nearly three times more likely than parents with a university education to disagree that early childhood learning is critical to success in life (i.e., 19.1% vs. 6.7%).

One quarter of Canadians see early childhood learning as less important than other stages of learning.

In order to analyze further Canadians' attitudes toward learning at different stages in life, responses to all four of the lifelong learning questions were combined to produce a single score describing the perceived relative importance of early childhood learning. Regardless of the absolute level of importance that Canadians accord to different stages of learning, this derived score provides a measure of the relative level of importance accorded to early childhood learning. Based on their answers to all four questions, each respondent's pattern of responses was categorized as indicating that early childhood learning is (1) less important, (2) equally important or (3) more important than learning at other stages.

Overall, 23.2% of Canadians indicate that early childhood learning is less important than learning at other stages of life. That is, nearly one quarter of all Canadians reject the notion that all later stages of learning rest on the foundation of early childhood learning.

Attitudes toward the relative importance of early childhood learning are linked to a number of other attitudes and variables. In particular, the learning conditions in respondents' particular communities, as measured by the Composite Learning Index, are predictive of the relative importance they accord to early childhood learning.

CCL's Composite Learning Index uses a "basket" of indicators to measure learning conditions favourable to Canada's social and economic well-being—much like the Consumer Price Index uses a "basket" of goods and services to measure the cost of living. These indicators, used in the 2006 Composite Learning Index, are organized around four major areas:

1) Learning to know
   a) student skills (reading, math and problem solving)
   b) high-school dropout rates
   c) young adults' participation in post-secondary schooling
   d) post-secondary attainment among working-age Canadians

2) Learning to do
   a) participation in job-related training
   b) availability of work training
   c) access to learning institutions

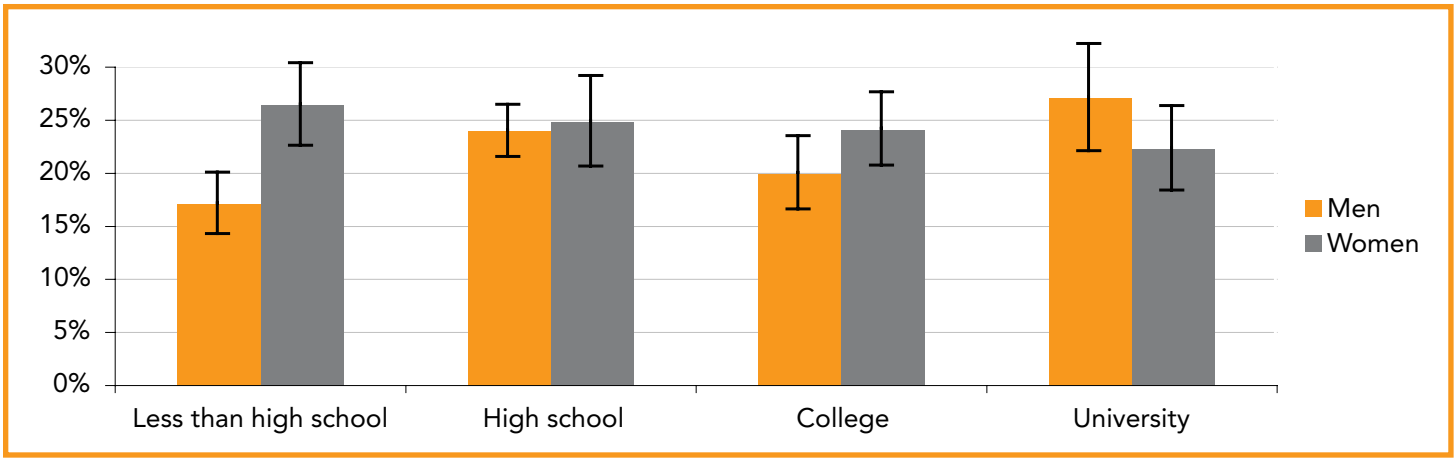
3) Learning to live together
   a) charitable giving
   b) volunteerism
   c) participation in social clubs and other organizations
   d) access to community institutions, such as social clubs

4) Learning to be
   a) exposure to media
   b) exposure to sports and recreation
   c) exposure to cultural events and activities, such as museums, festivals and the performing arts
   d) access to resources, such as libraries

CLI scores are geographically situated: for any geographic area (e.g., region, province, city) the corresponding CLI score describes the learning conditions in that area.

Education: Canadians who have achieved higher levels of education are more likely to indicate that early childhood learning is less important than other stages of learning. This suggests that the importance of early childhood learning may be overlooked by those with a stronger orientation toward formal learning. This trend is particularly strong among men, while women show a weaker trend in the opposite direction (see Figure 4).

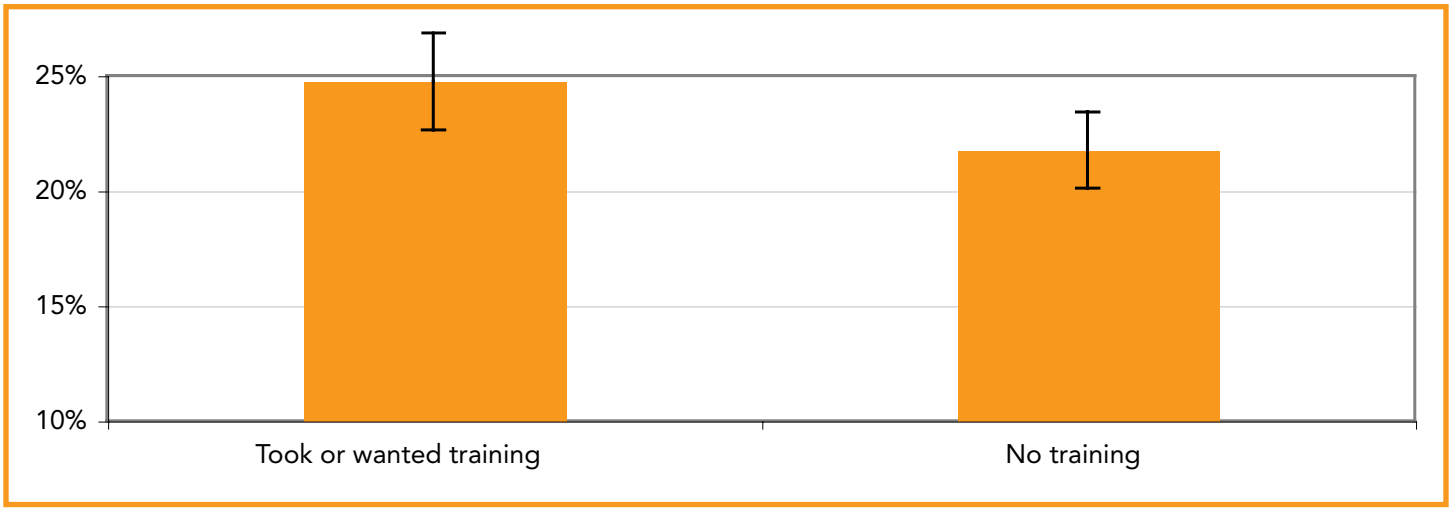
Fig. 4: Proportion of men and women who indicate that early childhood learning is less important than other stages of learning



Level of concern about formal education: Based on a series of questions about elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities in Canada, respondents were assigned three scores reflecting their level of concern about the performance of these schools, colleges and universities. The relationships between these scores and respondents' attitudes toward the relative importance of early childhood learning were examined and the results indicate that there is an inverse relationship between the perceived importance of early childhood learning and concern over post-secondary education at the university level. That is, Canadians who are more concerned about universities are less likely to treat early childhood learning as the most important stage of learning ($r = .105$, $p < .001$). This relationship emerges only for the later stages of formal learning—Canadians who are more concerned about elementary and secondary schools are no more or less likely to treat early childhood learning as the most important stage of learning. This pattern of results suggests that the more preoccupied Canadians are with the later stages of formal learning, the less importance they accord to early childhood learning.

Work-related adult learning: Respondents were also asked about their recent participation in work-related adult learning. Those who reported recent participation in or unmet need for work-related training were less likely to treat early childhood learning as the most important stage of learning than those who reported no participation in or desire for work-related training (see Figure 5). This finding again suggests that an orientation toward lifelong learning can obscure the importance of early childhood learning.

Fig. 5: Proportion of Canadians who indicate that early childhood learning is less important than other stages of learning, by participation in work-related training



Parents are more likely to recognize the importance of early childhood learning

While some Canadians may be overlooking the importance of early childhood learning, those Canadians who are most immediately responsible for early childhood learning—parents—are also most likely to see early learning as the most important stage of learning. Younger parents (see Figure 6) and parents of younger children (see Figure 7) are particularly likely to express this attitude.

Fig. 6: Proportion of parents and non-parents who indicate that early childhood learning is less important than other stages of learning, by age of respondent

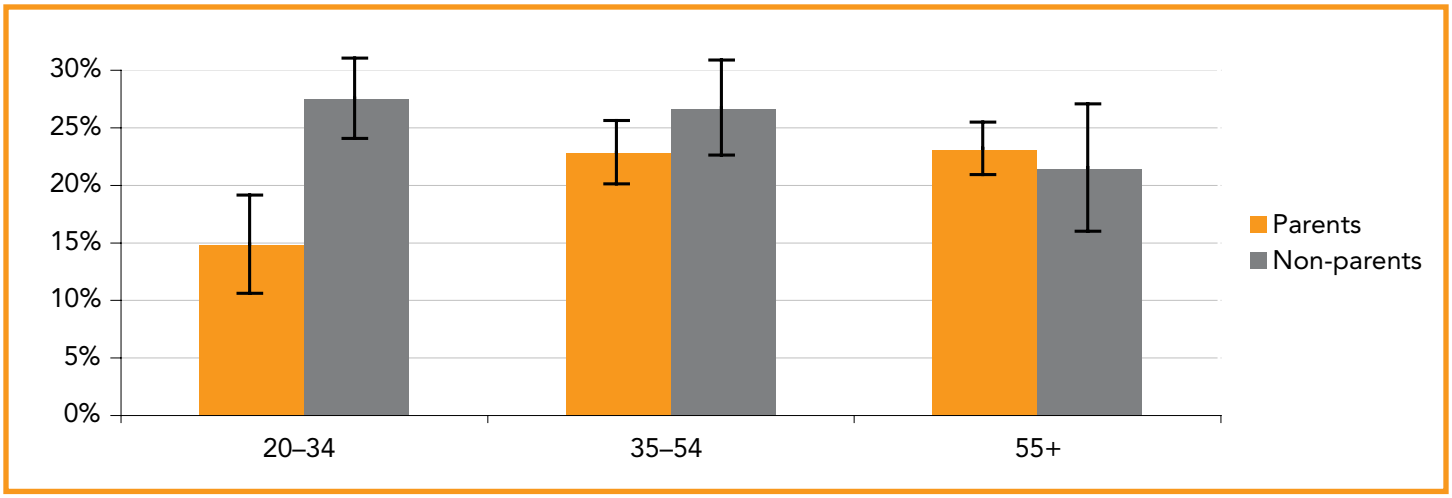
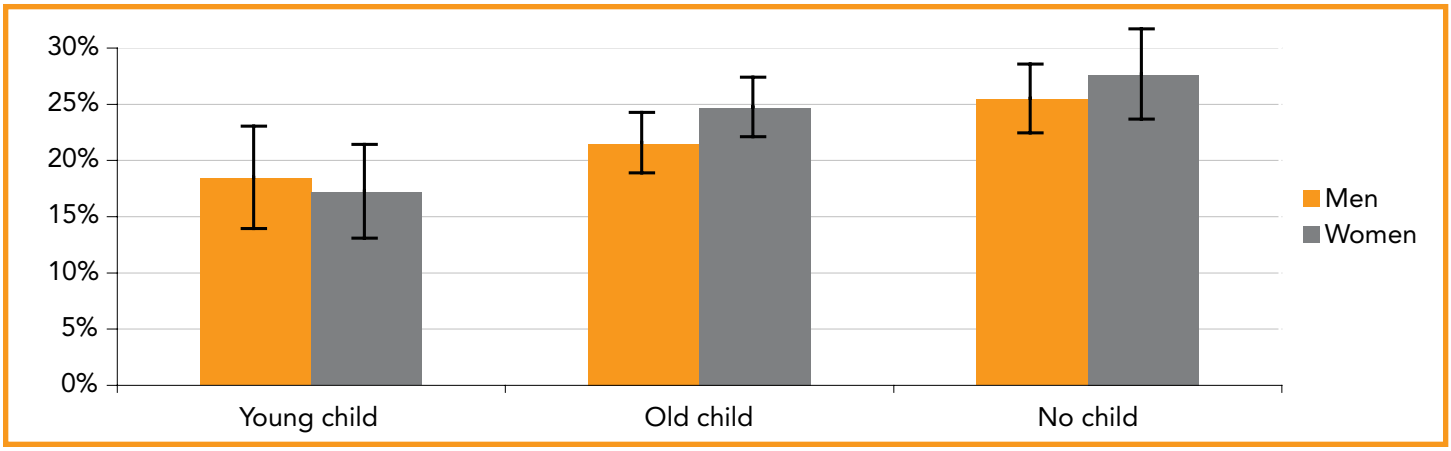


Fig. 7: Proportion of men and women who indicate that early childhood learning is less important than other stages of learning, by parental status and age of child



Everyone benefits from high-quality early childhood learning

Taken together, these findings point to a surprising conclusion: that those Canadians with the strongest orientation toward formal education and lifelong learning are also the most likely to overlook the foundational importance of early childhood learning. On the other hand, parents—particularly parents of young children—generally recognize the importance of early learning and Canadian parents are likely doing their best to support learning during this foundational stage. Parents and children are not, however, the only beneficiaries of positive learning outcomes. The well-being and prosperity of the country as a whole rest on positive early learning outcomes[17,18,19]. Nonetheless, not all Canadians recognize the foundational importance of early childhood learning.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR PROVIDING EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES?

Canadians were asked to what extent they agree or disagree that parents, child-care providers and teachers, pre-schools and kindergartens, and governments should take responsibility for providing learning opportunities to children in the first five years of life. Canadians overwhelmingly agree that parents should be primarily responsible for providing early childhood learning opportunities (97% agree or strongly agree); however, Canadians also see a role for other parties in early childhood learning. Although governments are least likely to be assigned responsibility, a strong majority (75%) of Canadians agree or strongly agree that governments should take responsibility for providing early childhood learning opportunities.

Canadians assign more responsibility for early childhood learning to parents than to others

Given that most Canadians assign primary responsibility for early childhood learning to parents, a composite variable was derived from responses to all four of the responsibility questions. This variable was derived by comparing responses to the question about parental responsibility with responses to the questions about teacher, pre-school and government responsibility. This variable was used to examine attitudes toward the "locus of responsibility" more closely. This approach reveals that:

- 57% of Canadians assign more responsibility to parents than to others: they place the locus of responsibility on parents.
- 43% of Canadians assign the same amount or less responsibility to parents than to others: they distribute the locus of responsibility beyond parents.

Attitudes toward the locus of responsibility for early childhood learning do not differ substantially across parents and non-parents: 57% of parents and 56% of non-parents assign responsibility primarily to parents.

Attitudes toward locus of responsibility do differ as a function of a number of other variables. In particular, Canadians with more education are more likely to assign responsibility for early childhood learning primarily to parents. This is also true for parents with higher levels of household income. As well, Canadians who are married are more likely than those who are single to assign responsibility primarily to parents. And Canadians who report higher levels of social capital are also more likely to centre the locus of responsibility on parents.

In different ways, all four of these variables are measures of the resources to which individuals have access. Household income is a measure of the material resources available to an individual. Educational attainment is also a reliable proxy measure of material resources, as well as a measure of informational and social resources. Social support measures access to emotional and social resources, and marital status measures access to both social and financial resources. These four variables were combined to form a single composite measure of "access to resources".

Social capital is strongly linked to parents' attitudes toward early childhood learning activities. Social capital can be defined as "benefits that accrue from social relationships within communities and families".[20] People derive many different types of benefits from their social networks. For example, valuable information (e.g., about job openings or reliable child care) flows through social networks. Mutual aid and collective action also depend on social networks.[21]

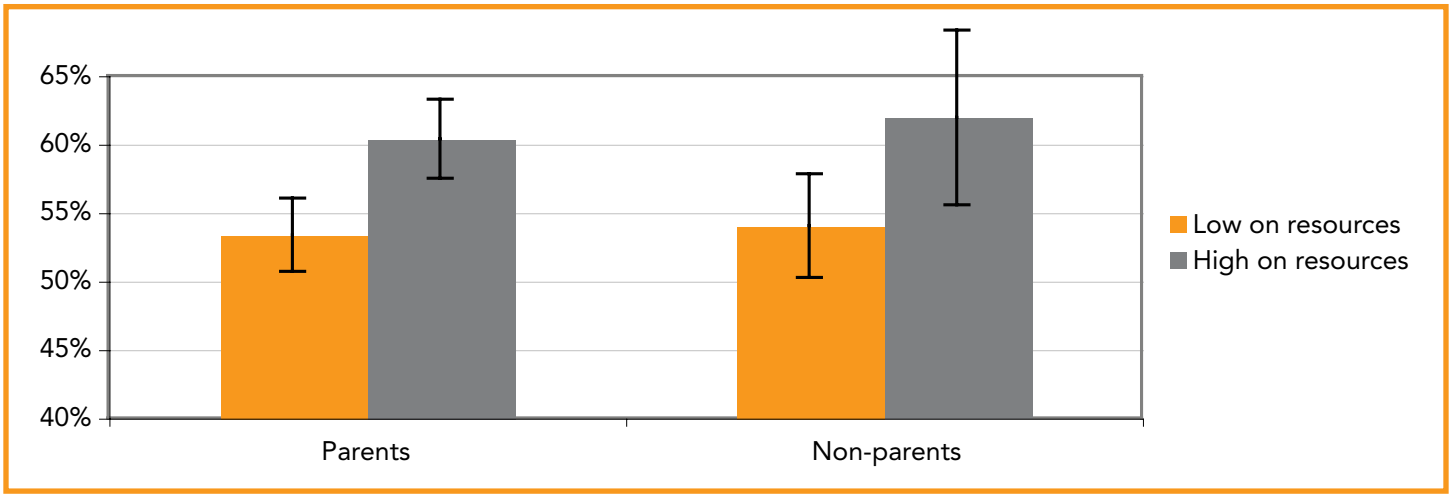
A number of studies have shown that children of parents with more social capital fare better than children of parents with less social capital in many different ways.[22] Social capital has been linked to resilience among children exposed to unfavourable environments,[23,24] to reduced child behaviour problems and increased social adjustment,[25] and to educational attainment and achievement.[26]

In the *Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning* (SCAL), social capital was measured in terms of trust, support and social connections. In particular, respondents were asked to what extent they agree or disagree that:

- You feel you can generally trust most people in your community.
- You have friends or family you can turn to if you need support in a crisis.
- It is important for you to establish and maintain ties with other people.

The composite access to resources variable is significantly correlated with attitudes toward locus of responsibility for early childhood learning: Canadians with access to more resources are more likely to assign this responsibility primarily to parents, while Canadians with fewer resources are more likely to see this as a distributed responsibility (r = .171). This is equally true for both parents (r = .163) and non-parents (r = .173; see Figure 8).

Fig. 8: Proportion of parents and non-parents who assign responsibility for providing early childhood learning opportunities primarily to parents



Do parents know enough to support their children's early learning?

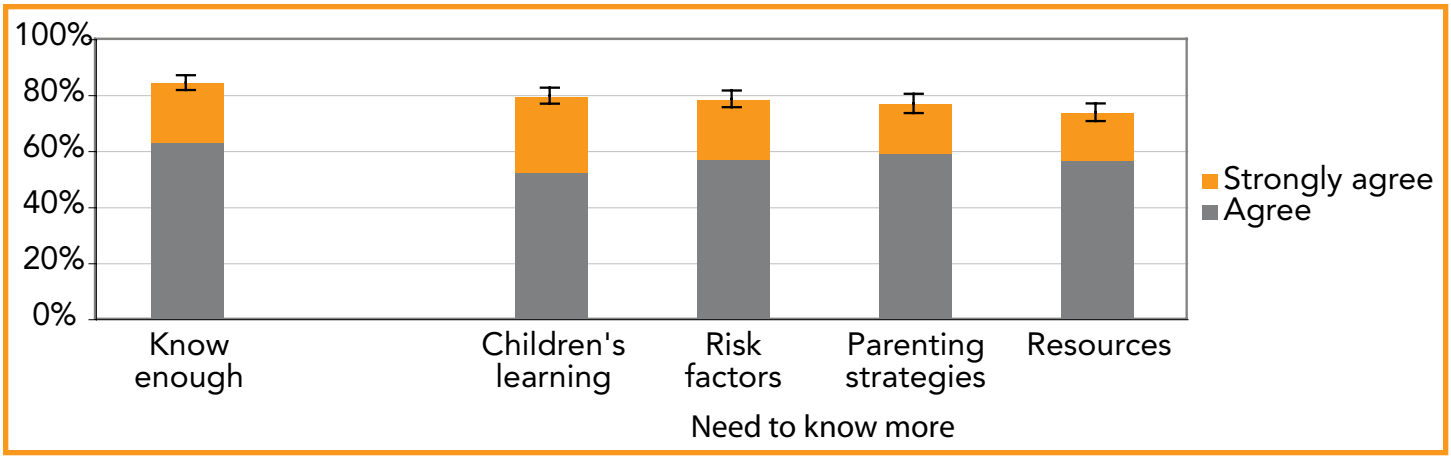
Most Canadians—including parents—believe that parents are primarily responsible for providing early childhood learning opportunities. How then do Canadian parents feel about their ability to support their children's early learning?

Parents of young children (under 8) were asked if they know enough to support their children's learning. Most Canadian parents agree that they know enough to support their children's learning, but parents do not appear to be entirely confident of this as only one in five strongly agree (see Figure 9). Parents were also asked if they want to know more about various issues associated with early childhood learning. In particular, they were asked to what extent they agree or disagree that they need to know more about:

- Children's learning
- Risk factors that can affect early learning
- Parenting strategies
- Resources in the community for parents and children

Most parents agree that they need to know more about issues associated with early childhood learning, but this does not appear to be an urgently felt need as fewer than a third strongly agree (see Figure 9).

Fig. 9: Proportion of parents who agree that they know enough versus parents who agree that they need to know more about issues associated with early childhood learning



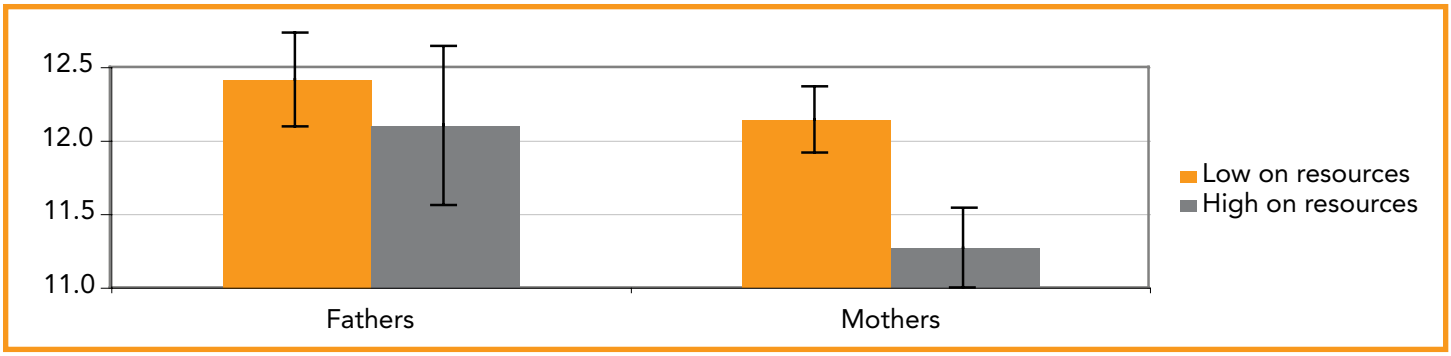
What drives parents' desires to learn more about early childhood learning?

Responses to the four questions concerning parents' perceived need to learn more about issues associated with early childhood learning were combined to form a single composite measure of "desire to learn" about early childhood learning. Surprisingly, desire to learn is not strongly related to parents' confidence in the knowledge they already have (r = .053). To the extent that there is a relationship, parents who strongly agree that they know enough to support their children's learning express a stronger desire to learn than those with less confidence in their knowledge.

Parents' desire to learn about issues associated with early childhood learning is related to their attitudes toward locus of responsibility for providing early childhood learning opportunities and to the availability of resources. These factors operate differently for mothers and fathers. For fathers, locus of responsibility is a significant predictor of desire to learn. Fathers who assign responsibility for early childhood learning primarily to parents express a stronger desire to learn about early childhood learning than do fathers who see this responsibility as distributed. While this relationship holds true for fathers (r = .104), locus of responsibility is not strongly related to desire to learn for mothers (r = .034). Access to resources is a better predictor of desire to learn for mothers. Mothers with access to fewer resources express a stronger desire to learn about early childhood learning. This relationship holds true for mothers (r = .252) but is largely attenuated for fathers (r = .061; see Figure 10).

In short, mothers who are single, have little education, living on a low income, and/or have little social support are more aware of a need to learn about early childhood learning than are mothers with access to more resources. This suggests that lack of resources may be a barrier to learning about issues related to early childhood learning and points to an important area of unmet need.

Fig. 10: Level of desire to learn more about issues associated with early childhood learning, for mothers and fathers



WHAT DOES EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING ENTAIL?

What kinds of activities do parents consider important in the context of early childhood learning? This question draws attention to two aspects of early childhood learning in which the views of parents and of early childhood learning experts are sometimes misaligned. One aspect is the importance of structured versus unstructured activities; the second is academically oriented versus socially oriented activities.

Structured versus unstructured activities

In recent years, developmental psychologists and early childhood educators have been expressing growing concern about an overemphasis on structured activities in young children's lives.[27,28] These experts argue that young children are spending too much time in organized activities and not enough time playing on their own terms. There is broad consensus among developmental experts that spontaneous free play is a critical component of learning for young children and that unstructured play contributes to many different aspects of children's development—physical, social, emotional, intellectual and creative.[29,30,31,32]

In Canada, there is some evidence that young children are spending increasing amounts of time in structured activities, leaving less time available for unstructured free play. Between 1999 and 2003, the percentage of Canadian preschoolers who participated in organized lessons increased from 23% to 30%; the percentage participating in coached sports increased from 36% to 41%.[33]

Do parents recognize the importance of unstructured play? Parents of young children were asked about a number of activities—including structured and unstructured activities—that can contribute to learning in young children. In particular, parents were asked to what extent they agree or disagree that the following are important to young children's learning:

- Playing
- Attending organized lessons or classes

Parents are overwhelmingly in favour of both types of activities: 97% agree or strongly agree that unstructured activities like play are important and 91% agree or strongly agree that structured activities like attending organized lessons are important. Parents also appear to treat play as more important than attending organized lessons: while 56% of parents strongly agree that play is important, only 29% strongly agree that attending organized classes is important. As well, only 3.9% of parents indicate a more positive inclination toward organized lessons than toward play.

Overall, Canadian parents appear to treat unstructured activities as more important than structured activities, suggesting that claims about the overstructuring of early childhood may be overstated.

Academically versus socially oriented activities

In many ways, early childhood learning culminates with the beginning of formal schooling. School readiness is, therefore, one important goal of early childhood learning. Previous research has shown that parents often hold narrower views of school readiness than do early childhood educators. In particular, parents are often preoccupied with academically oriented skills, such as knowing the alphabet and being able to count. In contrast, early childhood educators often express a broader view of school readiness that also emphasizes social and emotional regulation skills, such as problem solving, being sensitive to others, and displaying appropriate classroom behaviours.[34] Children develop these skills through interaction with others, particularly with other children. Thus, this broader view of school readiness suggests that social activities are an important aspect of early childhood learning.

Do Canadian parents recognize the value of socially oriented activities? Parents of young children were asked about the importance of both academically and socially oriented activities. In particular, they were asked to what extent they agree or disagree that the following academically oriented activities are important to young children's learning:

- Learning letters and numbers
- Reading to children

Parents were also asked to what extent they agree or disagree that the following socially oriented activities are important to young children's learning:

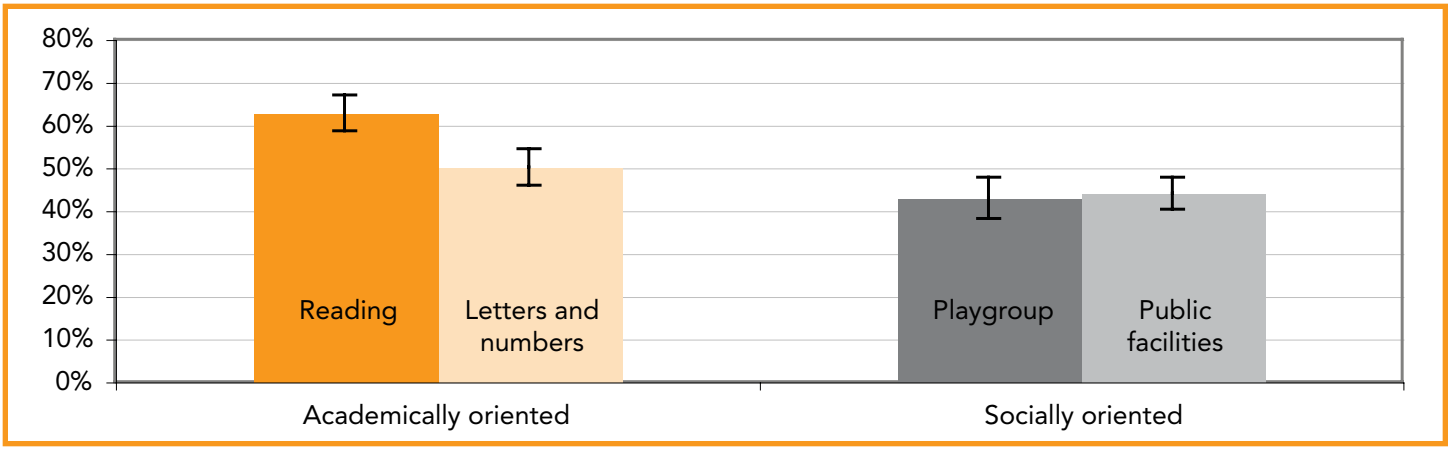
- Attending playgroups
- Going to public facilities such as libraries or parks

Parents are in favour of all of these activities: over 90% agree or strongly agree that each activity is important. However, parents endorse the academically oriented activities more strongly than the socially-oriented activities (see Figure 11). This finding suggests that many Canadian parents maintain a view of early childhood learning and school readiness that is focussed on learning in the academic domain and less concerned with the social domain.

Reading to children

Parents read to their children for a variety of reasons—not just as an activity geared toward academic success: to bond with their children, to help their children unwind before bedtime and to share their love of reading. However, research on parents' attitudes toward reading indicates that parents see a direct link between reading with their preschoolers and later school success.[35] As well, over the past three decades since researchers began to understand that important pre-reading skills develop within family-based interactions around shared reading experiences,[36,37] parents have been strongly encouraged to contribute to their preschoolers' future school success by reading to them.

Fig. 11: Proportion of parents who strongly agree that academically and socially oriented activities are important to young children's learning



Social capital is linked to parental attitudes toward structured and unstructured activities

To further examine parents' attitudes toward structured and unstructured activities and toward academically and socially oriented activities, two new variables were derived from responses to the six activity questions. Responses to the "play" question and the "organized lessons" question were combined to derive a measure of the relative importance of play. Responses to the "reading", "letters and numbers", "playgroups" and "public facilities" questions were combined to derive a measure of the relative importance of academically oriented activities.

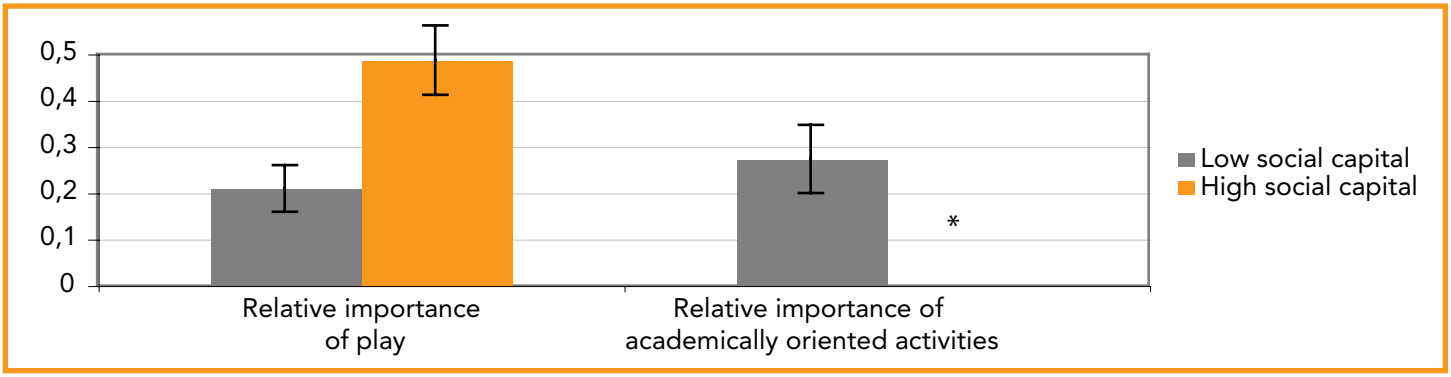
Analyses involving the relative importance of play variable indicate that parents with more resources are more likely to emphasize the importance of unstructured activities like play over structured activities like organized lessons. A stepwise regression indicates that the most important resource is social capital. Above all other factors, social capital appears to have the strongest impact on parents' attitudes toward the relative importance of play.

This finding suggests that parents with access to strong social networks and support may be better positioned to ensure that their children engage in one of the most important early childhood learning activities: play.

Analyses involving the relative importance of academically oriented activities indicate that access to resources does not predict parental attitudes toward academically and socially oriented activities. While social capital is linked to attitudes toward structured and unstructured activities, it is not strongly linked to attitudes toward academically and socially oriented activities (see Figure 12). Other resources such as income, education and marital status are also not strongly linked to these attitudes.

This finding suggests that across a broad cross-section of Canadians, attitudes toward early childhood learning and school readiness are focussed on academically oriented activities.

Fig. 12: Mean relative importance of play and of academically oriented activities, by social capital



* Data too unreliable to publish

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, Canadians' attitudes toward early childhood learning present a generally positive outlook, but with a few areas of concern.

Canadians recognize the importance of all stages of lifelong learning, including early childhood learning. However, nearly one quarter of Canadians reject or overlook the foundational role of early childhood learning. Surprisingly, it appears to be those Canadians with the strongest orientation toward formal and lifelong learning who are most likely to overlook the particular importance of early childhood learning.

Canadians, including parents, see parents as primarily responsible for providing early childhood learning opportunities. Nonetheless, most Canadians are also open to the possibility that other parties can contribute to early childhood learning.

Most parents are interested in learning more about issues associated with early childhood learning. Fathers who feel that parents are primarily responsible for providing early childhood learning opportunities express a stronger desire to learn about these issues. Mothers whose resources are limited also express a stronger desire to learn about early childhood learning issues.

Finally, parents acknowledge the importance of unstructured play in early childhood learning and indicate that play is more important than structured activities such as organized lessons and classes. Many parents are also preoccupied with academically oriented activities, which provides some support for the argument that parents may hold a narrow view of school readiness in which the importance of socially oriented activities is overlooked.

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