

## Canadian Attitudes toward Child Care and Early Childhood Learning

The foundations for successful learning are laid during children's early years: their activities, and the quality of care<sup>1</sup> and support they receive at this time<sup>2</sup> play a fundamental role in preparing them for learning in school and throughout their lives.<sup>3</sup>

Recent research reveals that growing numbers of Canadian parents are relying on non-parental care during the early years.<sup>4,5</sup> This is due to rising living costs requiring both parents to work, greater labour force participation by women,<sup>6</sup> the need for respite from child-rearing responsibilities, and a strong parental desire to provide their children with the best learning opportunities. As a result, parents and policy makers are paying more attention to the quality of care received by children during their early years.<sup>7,8</sup>

SCAL 2008 examined Canadians' attitudes, experiences and beliefs about learning during the early years. Questions about early childhood learning collected information about experiences in child-care settings and the home.

These questions were asked only of parents with children aged 0–12. Parents were asked to answer questions only about the youngest child in this age category. A total of 1,757 parents (50% male and 50% female) responded. Nearly all fathers (93%) and three-quarters of mothers (76%) who took part in this section of the survey were employed. Employment status information was only obtained for the survey respondents, and not for spouses or partners.

### Overview: What we asked, what Canadians told us

#### 1. What child-care arrangements do Canadian parents make?

- What types of child care do parents use?
- How many hours per week are children in child care?

Parents were asked about their use of several different types of child care:

- day-care centres;
- care in someone else's home by a non-relative;
- care in the child's home by a non-relative;
- care by a relative other than a parent; and/or
- any other child-care arrangement.

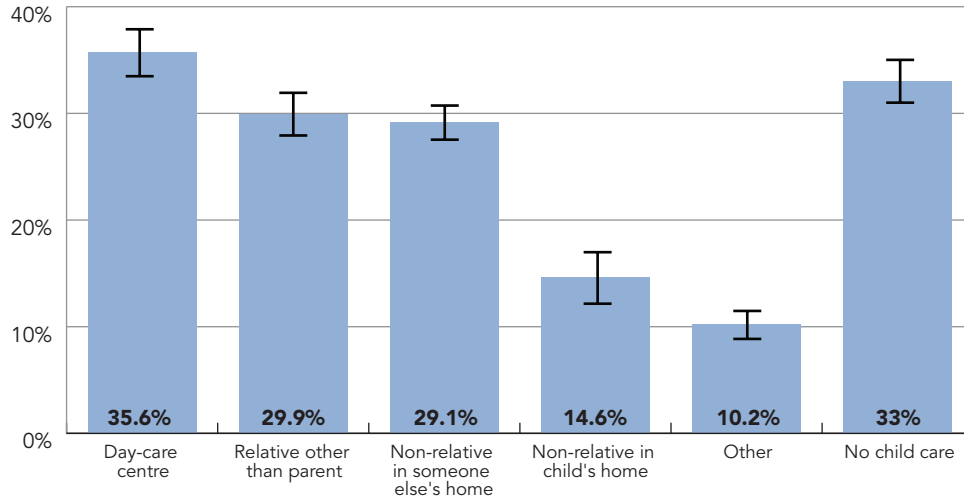
Two-thirds of parents of children aged 0–12 years indicate that they have, at some point, made use of some form of child-care services on a regular basis. These parents rely on a range of services to meet their child-care needs, with day care (36%), care by a relative other than a parent (30%), and care in someone else's home by a non-relative (29%) being the child-care options used most frequently.<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> These options were not mutually exclusive and respondents may have reported using any combination of child-care services.

**Figure 1**

Types of child-care services used by Canadian parents on a regular basis

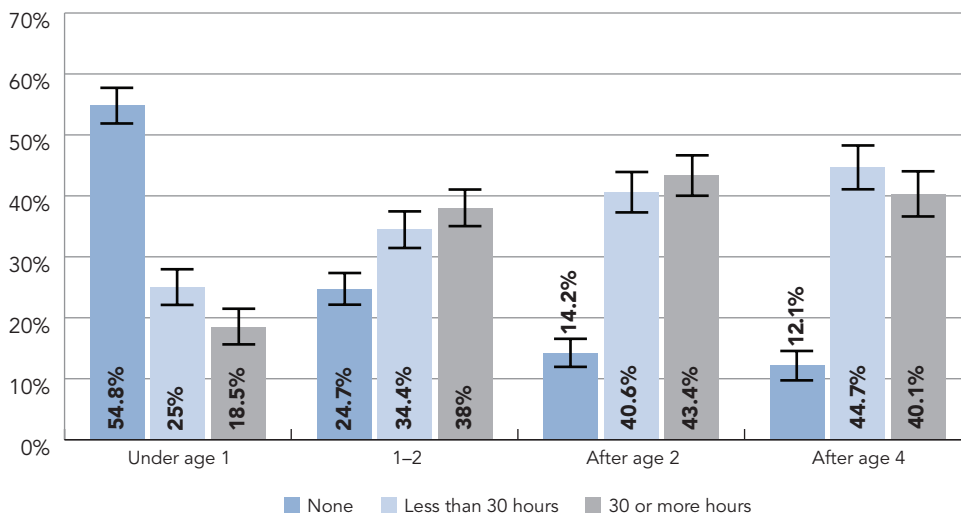


Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

Parents rely more on child care as young children grow older. Fewer than 20% report that their infants under age one were in care for 30 or more hours per week. After their children turn two, more than 40% of parents report that their children are in care for at least 30 hours per week.

**Figure 2**

Average number of hours per week spent in care, by age of child



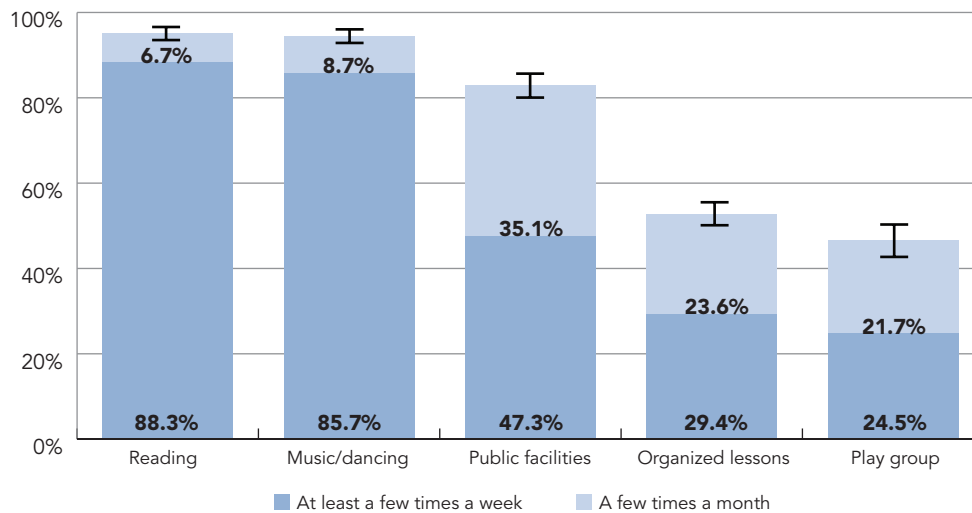
Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

## 2. How often do parents engage in learning activities with their young children?

- Reading to their children
- Singing with, listening to music with, playing music with, or dancing with their children
- Taking their children to organized play groups or drop-in programs at community centres
- Taking their children to public facilities such as libraries, museums and parks
- Taking their children to organized lessons or classes

**Figure 3**

Proportion of parents who report engaging in learning activities with their young children (ages 2–5)



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

Canadian parents recognize the importance of exposing their children to a variety of learning experiences during the early years. When asked about the learning activities in which they engage their 2- to 5-year-olds, nearly all parents indicate that they read to their children at least a few times a month, and that they listen to music together, sing with their children, or dance or play music with them at least a few times a month.

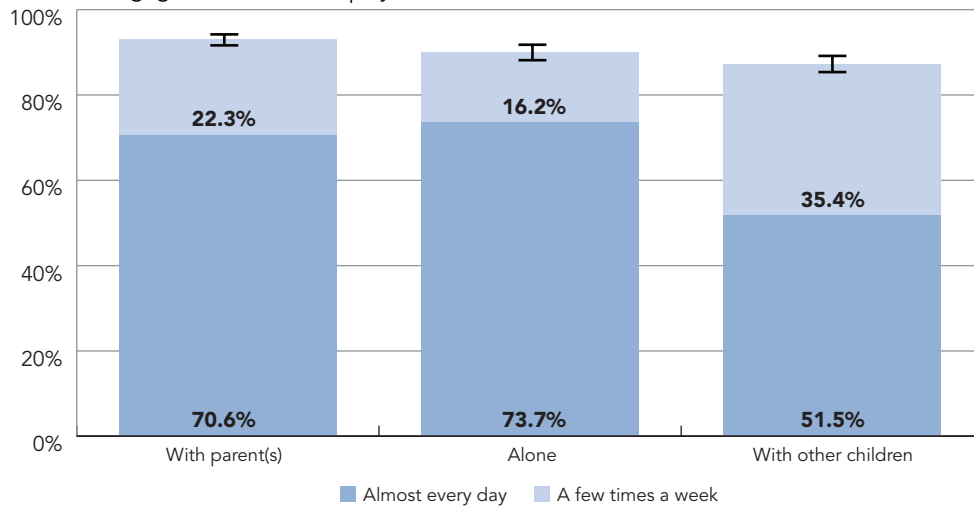
3. How often do parents encourage or allow children to engage in unstructured/“free” play for periods of at least 30 minutes:

- Alone?
- With other children?
- With parent(s)?

Canadian parents appear to recognize the fundamental importance of play to young children’s healthy physical, intellectual, emotional and social development. Nearly all parents report encouraging or allowing their 2- to 5-year-olds to engage in unstructured play for periods of at least 30 minutes.

**Figure 4**

Proportion of parents who report encouraging or allowing young children (ages 2–5) to engage in unstructured play



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

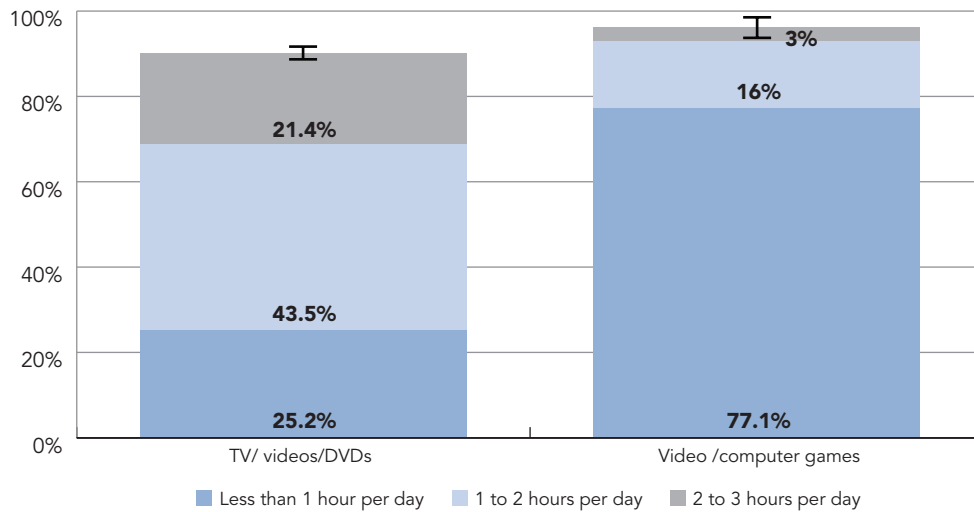
4. How much "screen time" per day do parents allow their young children:

- For watching television or videos/DVDs?
- For playing video or computer games?

Most parents report that they limit the amount of time their 2- to 5-year-olds spend playing video or computer games to less than one hour per day. A majority of parents reports allowing their children to watch television and videos/DVDs for more than one hour per day.

Figure 5

Proportion of parents who allow their young children (ages 2-5) "screen time"



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

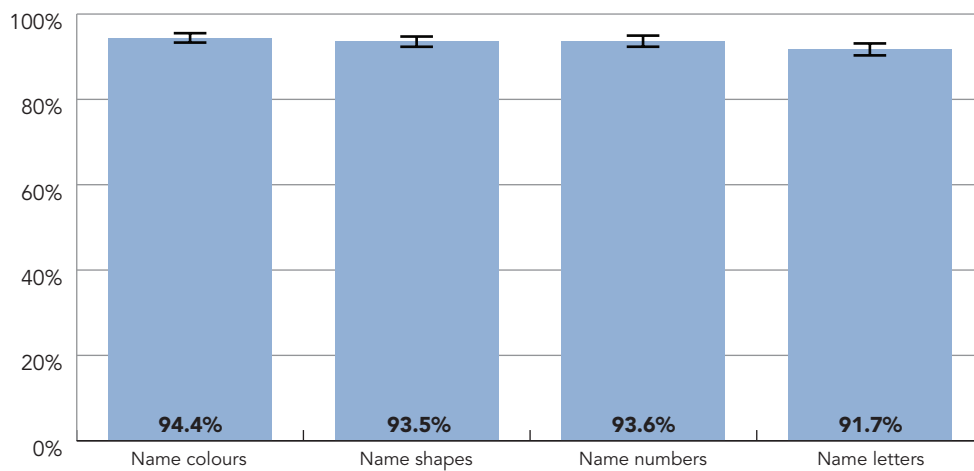
5. Do parents try to teach their young children skills such as:

- Naming colours?
- Naming shapes?
- Naming numbers?
- Naming letters?

Almost all parents report teaching their children over the age of one to name colours, shapes, numbers and letters.

Figure 6

Proportion of parents who report teaching their young children new skills



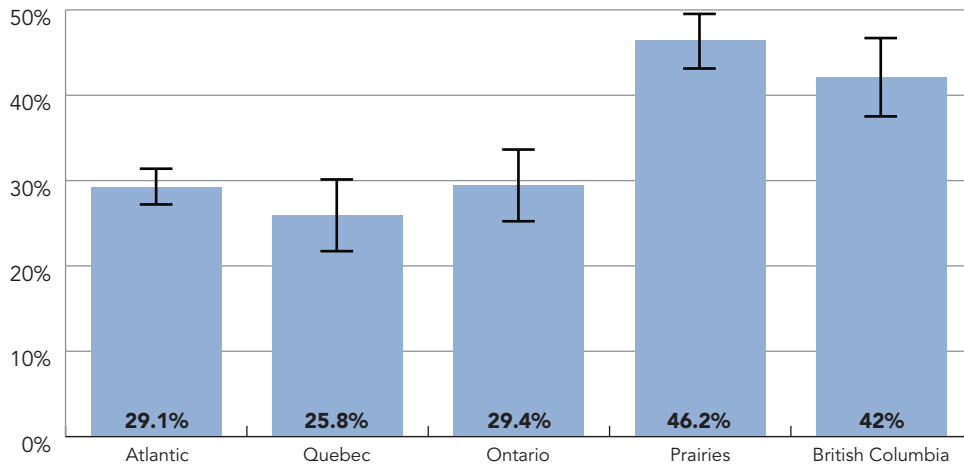
Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

## Regional and income-related differences in parents' use of child-care services

Parents' use of child-care services for children under the age of 13 varies significantly from region to region across the country. Many parents in the Prairie provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba) and British Columbia do not use child-care services on a regular basis. In contrast, most parents in Quebec do make regular use of child care: only one-quarter report that they do not regularly use any form of child-care services.

**Figure 7**

Proportion of parents who do not use child care on a regular basis, by region

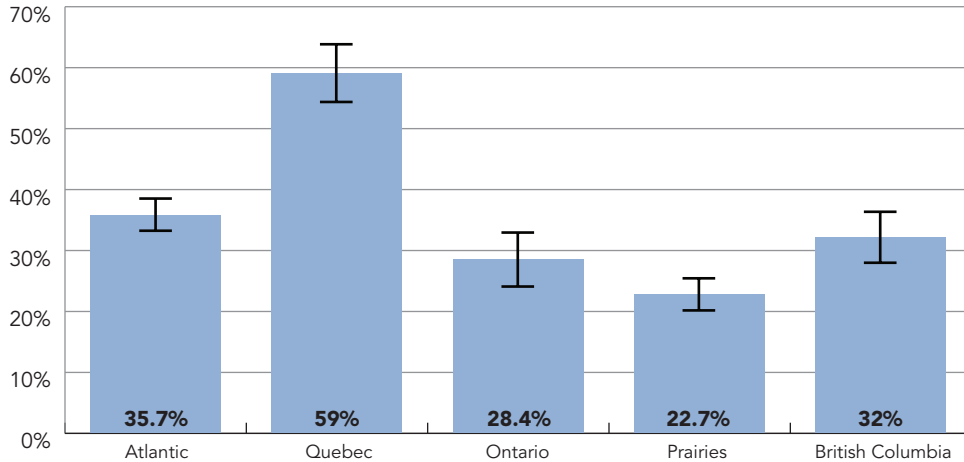


Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

Regional differences are especially striking with respect to parents' use of day-care centres. For example, parents in Quebec are more than twice as likely to report using day-care centres than parents in Ontario and the Prairie provinces.

**Figure 8**

Proportion of parents who report regular use of day-care centres, by region



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

Differences in access and affordability of child-care services across the country are likely important factors in shaping parents' decisions to use child care.

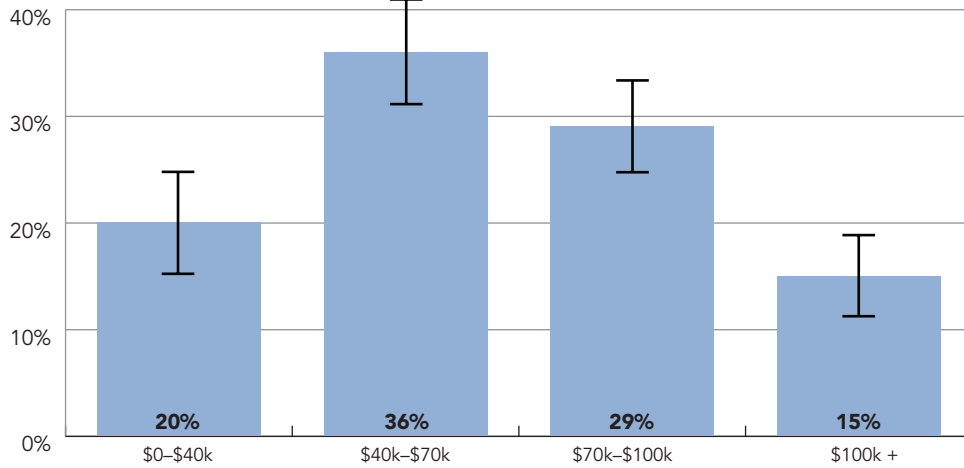
For example, an analysis of data gathered from the *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2006* report reveals that there are .83 regulated child-care spaces per child aged 0 to 5 in Quebec (almost one space per child) while this ratio falls significantly to .34 in British Columbia, and .23 in the Prairie provinces.<sup>9</sup> The greater availability of regulated spaces in certain provinces, in addition to significant differences in the level of public funding allocated to child-care services across provinces, underscores the important influence of access and costs on parental decisions about child care.

Use of child-care services also varies across parents' income levels. Parents in the highest and lowest income quartiles are most likely to use child-care services, suggesting that income is only weakly linked to use of child-care services. However, high-income and low-income parents use different types of child care: high-income parents are much more likely to send their children to day-care centres, whereas low-income parents are more likely to have their children cared for by other relatives.

These findings suggest that affordability is a significant factor in parents' decisions to use child care. The differences in child care use among income groups may reflect the financial burden imposed by the frequently high costs of child-care services and suggests that less affluent parents may need to turn to child-care providers with less experience and training, or to services that are not as stringently regulated as those attended by the children of wealthier parents.<sup>10, 11</sup>

**Figure 9**

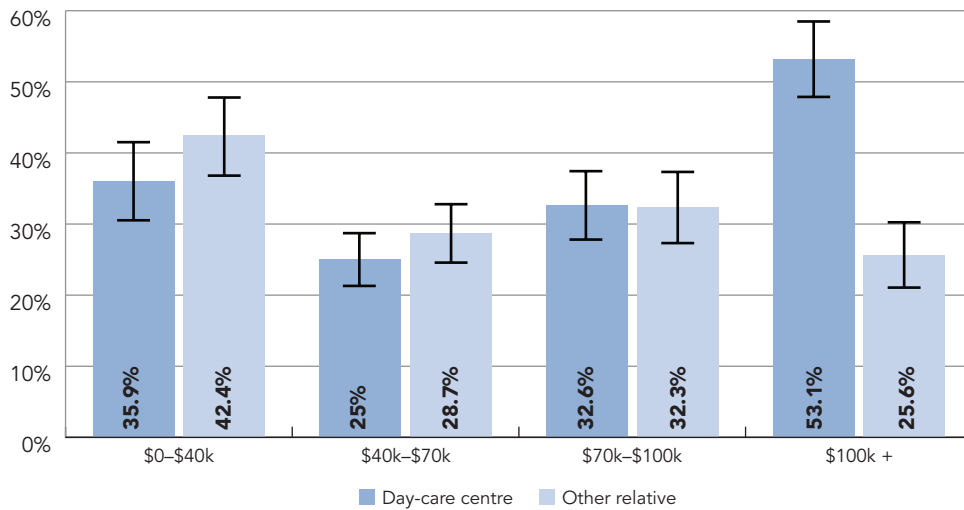
Proportion of parents who have never used child care, by income



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

**Figure 10**

Proportion of parents who report using different types of child care, by income



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

## Learning activities adopted by parents who do not use child-care services

In addition to temporarily relieving parents of child-care responsibilities so they can work, study or pursue leisure activities, child-care services provide important learning opportunities that can carry long-term benefits for children.<sup>12</sup>

However, SCAL 2008 results suggest that many parents who do not send their children to child care find other ways of providing learning opportunities.

Compared to parents whose children regularly attend child-care services, a greater proportion of parents whose children have not attended any form of child care report taking their children to public facilities (e.g., libraries, museums and parks) and to organized play groups. These activities expose children to a variety of experiences by providing access to resources, environments and activities that can help support learning.

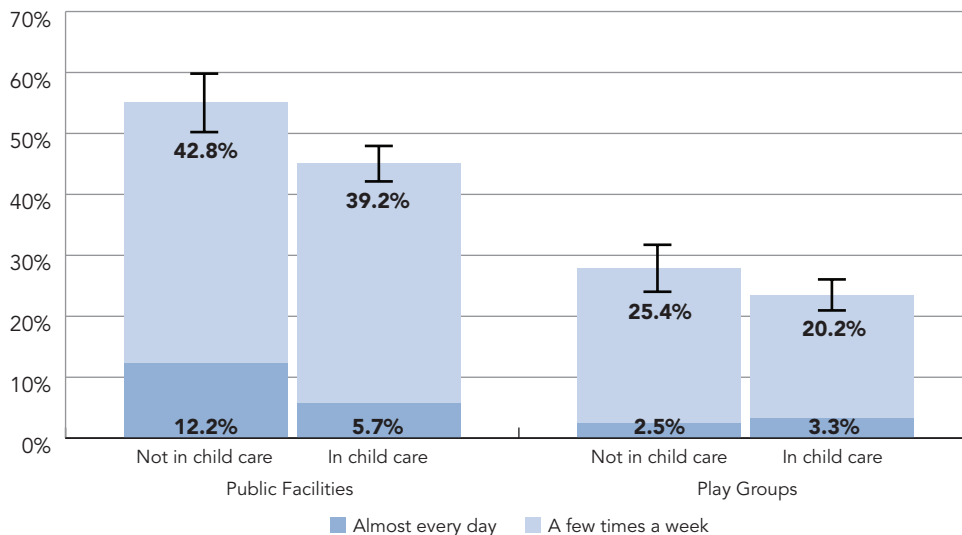
Organized play groups and public facilities provide opportunities for children as well as parents:

- children can interact with other children in structured and informal environments;
- children can access learning resources (such as books, displays, artwork, craft materials, etc.), activities, and physical settings that may differ from those in their own homes; and
- parents have a chance to socialize with each other.

The greater use of public facilities and organized play sessions by parents who do not use child care may indicate that these parents rely upon these programs and resources to complement their children’s learning experiences.

**Figure 11**

Proportion of parents (with and without children in child care) who engage in learning activities with their children



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

## Conclusion

Two-thirds of Canadian parents of young children report using some form of child care on a regular basis. Parents in Quebec—where regulated child-care spaces are more abundant and on average less expensive than in the rest of the country—are more likely than parents elsewhere to use child care, and especially more likely to use day-care centres. Parents with higher incomes are also more likely to use day-care centres. Parents who do not use child-care services provide learning opportunities for their children by making more frequent use of organized play groups and public facilities such as libraries, museums and parks.