

CHILDREN HAVE A RIGHT TO A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

and elected officials have a responsibility
to make it happen

Please sign on to this [Open Letter](#) if you agree



The [Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care \(CWELCC\)](#) system is in development at the same time as the world is in a race against climate change. People are looking to the United Nations Climate Change Conference 2022 and action on the [2021 Glasgow Climate Pact](#), and its promise to turn the 2020s into climate action and support.

The [Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development Summer Institute](#) in partnership with the [Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development \(EECD\)](#) brought together a cross section of experts

in areas of climate action, equity, urban planning, green engineering, early learning and sustainability, and Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Researchers and practitioners agreed: there is an urgency to act for the future of our children and our planet, and the chance to do so is now. They called on policy makers to ensure Canada's climate goals are reflected in CWELCC spending, policy, and practice, including pending legislation for the establishment of a CWELCC system.

WHY SHOULD CLIMATE CHANGE AND SUSTAINABILITY MATTER TO THE EARLY YEARS SECTOR?

A healthy environment is now recognized as a human and a child right.

The May 2022 [UNICEF's Report Card 17](#) specifically addressing environmental stressors on the well-being of children, ranks Canada 28 out of 39 rich countries. We stand alongside the worst of our peers in municipal waste generation and resource consumption, and 38 in the [world at large](#)—a measure that refers to broader aspects of both physical and policy environments that surround the child. Children are suffering now because of poor policy decisions. This recognition came in a precedent-setting ruling by a UK coroner concluding that [air pollution led to the 2013 death of nine year old Ella Kissi-Debrah](#) and calling for changes to environmental policy.

The impact of climate change is not evenly distributed.

What is bad for everyone is worse for women and children; what is bad for children, is worse for the youngest. Poor individual, societal, and policy decisions effect certain communities of children more than others: those living in [poverty](#), [Indigenous and northern communities](#), and those who are [racialized](#).

The environmental challenge is greater than any one single stakeholder.

Governments must approach climate action in a concerted manner. Environmental degradation is an interconnected problem, requiring intersectional approaches. The complexity of the challenge necessitates the mobilization of every sector—including early childhood education.

Pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours are critical and foundational for effectively addressing climate change, and are developed by age 7.

Transformations in systems and policies, environmental awareness education, and the knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, practices, and beliefs that young children hold about the environment in their early years are now matters of survival. If we don't teach our youngest pro-environmental behaviours and attitudes, we will continue the generational cycle of poor climate action.



WHAT SHOULD GOVERNMENTS DO?

Incorporate climate goals in all sectors and within all public investments and expenditures.

[The Federal government is investing \\$27 billion over the next five years to expand access to affordable child care.](#) The spending of any public dollar requires a sustainability lens. Where new child care programs are located, how they are designed, constructed, and resourced, can either add to the problem of climate change or help mitigate it. This is an opportunity to 'think green', re-evaluate the status quo, and reset the sector to ensure sustainability and climate action are incorporated both at policy and program/classroom levels through legislative changes.

Incorporate sustainability and pro-environmental learning into early years' curriculum.

Climate change impacts us all, but it is children who bear the weight of our errors. Changing attitudes and beliefs towards climate change and sustainability requires turning beliefs into actions and habits. Developing a reciprocal and respectful relationship with the land is now critical to our survival. Early years curriculum must not only support knowledge about the environment, but activism for the environment. These elements should be extended to family engagement to support not only the next generations, but to create behavioural change today.

Build reciprocal relationships and partnerships with Indigenous leaders and knowledge keepers and incorporate land-based learning into all aspects of the early years.

The very identity of Indigenous people is woven into their relationship with the land. Although their traditional way of life has contributed little to climate change, they are amongst the most adversely impacted.

While climate change continues to pose an increasing threat to the survival of Indigenous peoples, they continue to be excluded from policy decisions and climate negotiations and their wisdoms ignored.

[Climate experts](#) agree that one critical way to address the climate crisis is to empower Indigenous communities, and to support meaningful dialogue with Indigenous knowledge holders to determine sustainable and co-operative steps forward.

Keep climate action and sustainability as a top priority in community and urban planning.

Where child care centres are located is as important as how they are built and what happens inside them. The federal government's refusal to allow its funding to be used to support early learning and child care programs offered by schools curtails efforts to create [15-minute neighbourhoods](#). Walkable communities are critical to reducing carbon footprints. Existing public infrastructure in schools, parks, and libraries should be [leveraged to maximize their functions](#).

Use an equity lens in all policy decisions.

The climate crisis builds on the rampant inequities in our society. With racialized, marginalized, and [Indigenous and Northern communities](#) bearing much of the negative impact of climate change. How we plan and develop policies and neighbourhoods around climate change mitigation can either add to the inequity crisis or help ease it. For example, low-income neighbourhoods are [much less likely to have green spaces and canopies](#) and are more likely to be [exposed to air-pollution](#). Incorporating the notion that a child has a human right to a sustainable, clean, and healthy environment was recognized by the [United Nations Human Rights Council](#) on October 8, 2021 and must be incorporated into legislation and policies.





We know we will never achieve a perfect world, but as young people, we will never stop fighting for a better future. To the adult allies and decision-makers, we ask, are you with us?

—Ella, Karel and Katie, youth climate advocates, [UNICEF Report Card 17](#).

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If you agree with this statement, please add your voice and [sign here](#).

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