

A Cross-Jurisdictional Mapping of Developmental, Disability and Early Childhood Intervention Systems in Canada: Ministerial Structures, Service Coordination, and School Transition

Principal Investigator: Dr. Sarah Raza

Working group members: Lucyna Lach, Logan Wong, Amber Mack, Becky Conia, Sabrina Eliason, Lee Pigeau

Overview

Young children with developmental concerns, disabilities, or support needs often require programs and services that span health, education, childcare, and social service systems. In Canada, responsibility for these developmental and early intervention supports rests primarily with provincial and territorial governments, resulting in substantial variation in how services are organized, delivered, and coordinated. Understanding these differences is essential for identifying opportunities to improve continuity of care, reduce navigational burden for families, and support children's successful transition into school.

This report presents the findings of a cross-jurisdictional mapping of developmental, disability, and early intervention programs and services for children from birth to approximately six years of age across all 13 Canadian provinces and territories. Using publicly available policy and program information, the study examined governance structures, ministerial responsibilities, eligibility approaches, transition processes, and care coordination mechanisms. A participatory Working Group – comprising individuals with expertise in disability policy, early childhood services, research, advocacy, and lived experience – informed the project's scope, analysis, and interpretation. A total of 71 developmental, disability, and early intervention programs and services were identified across Canadian jurisdictions

Key findings

1. **Fragmentation is universal, but its form varies.** Responsibility for developmental, disability, and early intervention supports is distributed across multiple ministries in every jurisdiction. While governance structures differ across jurisdictions, fragmentation was not determined solely by the number of ministries involved. In several jurisdictions, some of the most significant disconnects occurred within ministries rather than between them, highlighting the importance of coordination mechanisms in shaping how families experience services.

2. **Supports exist across the continuum of care, but continuity is uneven.** All jurisdictions offered developmental and disability supports ranging from developmental screening and early identification to targeted intervention and specialized rehabilitation services. However, no province or territory demonstrated a fully integrated continuum in which children and families could move seamlessly between levels of support. Families frequently encountered separate programs and services with different eligibility requirements, service pathways, and transition processes.
3. **Needs-based and diagnosis-based approaches to access coexist.** Many early intervention programs allow children to access services based on developmental concerns or functional needs. In contrast, several specialized programs require a confirmed diagnosis before services can be accessed. These differing approaches have important implications for when children receive supports and may contribute to inequities associated with assessment wait times and service availability.
4. **School entry is a critical point of system discontinuity.** The transition from early childhood services into kindergarten emerged as one of the most significant structural challenges identified. In many jurisdictions, responsibility for services shifts between sectors at school entry, while formal mechanisms to support continuity remain limited. More structured transition approaches were identified in jurisdictions such as New Brunswick, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec, demonstrating that greater continuity is possible within a range of governance arrangements.
5. **Formal care coordination remains limited.** Although developmental and disability support systems require families to navigate multiple ministries, programs, and providers, centralized navigation and care coordination mechanisms were uncommon. In most jurisdictions, families remained the primary coordinators of services. Examples from Quebec, Ontario, and New Brunswick demonstrate that coordinated entry points and integrated service models can help reduce navigational burden and improve continuity across systems.

What this adds

- This report provides a comprehensive cross-jurisdictional mapping of developmental, disability, and early childhood intervention systems across all 13 Canadian provinces and territories. Although services are available across Canada, children and families often experience them as separate and disconnected systems. **The findings suggest that the most important difference between jurisdictions is not how many programs they offer, but how effectively ministries, sectors, and programs work together to create coordinated pathways of support.**
- **Key Policy Takeaway:** Taken together, the findings suggest that improving developmental and disability support systems may depend less on creating new programs and more on strengthening connections between existing ones. While services are often available, they are frequently fragmented—making coordination, continuity across transitions, and reduced barriers to access key opportunities for improvement. Ultimately, system effectiveness depends not only on what services exist, but on how well ministries, sectors, and programs work together—making coordination as critical as expanding services.