



POLICY BRIEF 2024

It Takes a Village

Family Leave to Support Early Childhood Care

Savannah Sutherland

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program takes place on the traditional and unceded territories of the *xʷməθkʷəjəm* (Musqueam), *Sḵwxwú7mesh* (Squamish) & *səlilwətaʔ* (Tsleil-Waututh) Coast Salish peoples.

GRAPHIC DESIGN

And Also Too

COVER ILLUSTRATION

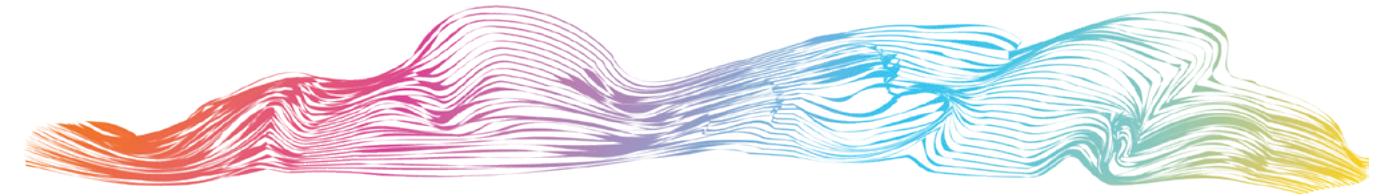
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HEADSHOT PHOTOGRAPHY

Naybu Taw Photography

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About the LEVEL Initiative

LEVEL is a youth engagement initiative of Vancouver Foundation that aims to address racial inequity. We do this by investing in the leadership capacity of Indigenous, racialized, immigrant, and refugee youth to create more opportunities throughout the non-profit and charitable sector.

Despite being the fastest-growing youth populations in British Columbia, Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee youth don't have the same opportunities as other young people. Race continues to be a factor that hinders their ability to have a say in decisions that impact their lives.

LEVEL empowers these youth by building their capacity to challenge and change those systems that hinder their ability to build a more just world.

LEVEL consists of three pillars of work to advance racial equity

1. LEVEL Youth Policy Program
2. LEVEL Youth Organizing
3. LEVEL BIPOC Granting

About the LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP)

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP) brings together young people between the ages of 19 and 29 from across British Columbia who identify as being Indigenous or racialized immigrants or refugees. Indigenous and racialized newcomer youth are dispropor-

tionately impacted by certain public policies but are rarely included in the development and implementation of public policy process. The LEVEL YPP aims to provide these youth with equitable training and leadership opportunities to better navigate the public policy landscape, and to develop new tools and skills to influence, shape, and advocate for policy changes that are relevant in their own communities. Having young people directly involved in shaping policies that impact their lives is essential to creating systemic, meaningful change. The LEVEL YPP's training is grounded from and within Indigenous peoples' worldviews, which the program acknowledges, could vary from person-to-person or nation-to-nation. Indigenous worldviews place a large emphasis on connections to the land. This perspective views the land as sacred; where everything and everyone is related and connected; where the quality of the relationships formed are key in life; where what matters is the success and well-being of the community, and where there can be many truths as they are based on individual lived experiences.¹ As such, an important premise of this training is to centre and place a particular focus on the fact that the work that has gone into developing this training, as well as the training itself, has taken and will take place on unceded (never given away/stolen) territories of the *hə́nq* 'əmin 'ərn-speaking Musqueam peoples, of the Halkomelem-speaking Tsleil-Waututh peoples, and of the *sníchim*-speaking *Sḵwxwú7mesh* (Squamish) peoples.

1. <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-worldviews-vs-western-worldviews>

Biography

Savannah Sutherland



Savannah Sutherland is a dedicated advocate for community building and development. Her commitment to transformative change is evident in her initiatives, from founding University of British Columbia's (UBC) first Black Student Union to working with anti-violence nonprofits, where she provided vital support to survivors of gender-based violence.

Community lies at the core of Savannah's efforts. She plays a vital role in the Van Vogue Jam Arts Society, enhancing Vancouver's ballroom scene through strategic community engagement. This work earned her the "Helping Hand of the Year" award in 2024. Savannah looks forward to one day becoming an aunty, seeing it as a meaningful way to support and nurture her community.



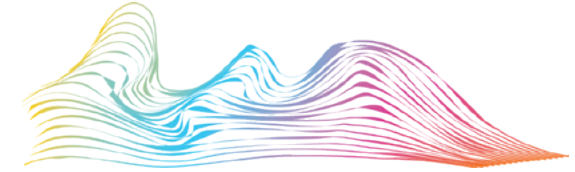
Executive Summary

Canada's current childcare policies, built on outdated nuclear-family structures, fail to meet the diverse needs of today's families.

With 20% of children in Canada living in single-parent households, and the cost of childcare on the rise, low-income, Indigenous, and racialized families face significant challenges. These policies primarily support parents and exclude extended family and community members who often play vital roles in caregiving.

This proposal introduces a Family Caregiver Benefit for Early Childhood Care to address these gaps. By redefining "parent" to include extended family members and other key caregivers, this policy allows them to access up to 25 days of paid leave during a child's early years. We propose administering this benefit through the Employment Insurance (EI) Caregiving Benefits Program, with additional support for those ineligible for EI through provincial income assistance and Jordan's Principle for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis families.

This policy actively addresses inequities in access to childcare support, strengthens community bonds, and enhances cultural continuity. It provides a safety net for families facing economic hardship, and promotes a collective approach to caregiving that many communities have practiced for generations.



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By implementing this policy, we align with Canada's goals for poverty reduction, gender equity, and reconciliation, ensuring that all children grow up in nurturing and secure environments. We will conduct regular evaluations to measure the policy's impact and ensure it continues to effectively meet the evolving needs of diverse families.

Background

The most-recent census notes that 20% of children in Canada live in single-parent households, the highest it's ever been; concurrently, childcare costs and responsibilities have risen,¹ significantly impacting low-income families.

Despite these changes, current federal policies for early childhood care are restricted to support for parents, creating an equity gap in who benefits from parental leave. These policies are based on a nuclear-family model—a colonial approach that does not accommodate mixed families, other caretakers, or community members. Extended family support is integral in many Canadian families, especially among racialized and Indigenous communities who have been practicing collective caregiving for generations. As the cost of living rises, many nuclear families are expanding their care networks. With the saying, “it takes a village” in mind and the weakening of nuclear family structures, our childcare policies must evolve to be more equitable and inclusive.

The challenges of child-rearing disproportionately impact women, who must take on the triple roles of productive (a job), reproductive (household work and childcare), and community responsibilities (Moser 1993). The 2016 Census² notes that 80% of children in single-parent households live with their mothers and are more than twice as likely to live in poverty.

The lack of investment in Canada’s childcare policies creates significant gaps, such as

- **The absence of universally implemented childcare or \$10/day programs.**
- **The absence of paid early childhood education** (preschool).
- **Challenges finding childcare**, with over 50% of parents reporting difficulty in securing childcare for children under age 12.³
- **Parental leave benefits linked to employment**, which reinforce labour force participation inequalities and discrimination against:

- Children whose parents are unemployed, underemployed, or precariously employed
- Children whose parents work in unregulated jobs
- Children whose parents are students
- Children of migrants or immigrants
- Children of Indigenous mothers
- Children of younger mothers
- Children of those who do not earn enough income to take leave at the program’s wage-replacement rate.

As the prevalence of secure work declines, employees with more secure jobs enjoy increasingly generous private employer benefits, creating a growing equity gap in the ability of a newborn child to fully benefit from Canada’s parental leave system.



With the saying, “it takes a village” in mind and the weakening of nuclear family structures, our childcare policies must evolve to be more equitable and inclusive.

Critical shortcomings exist in the accessibility of Canada’s parental leave benefits, and their entitlements are an area for significant government intervention. However, solely focusing on parental leave benefits as a solution to childcare may only further entrench women’s role as caretakers and the associated social and economic precarity. By creating a policy that allows parents to share child-rearing responsibilities with their community, especially before children begin primary school, we can address some of the complexities of childcare while providing more protection for mothers, children, and families.

The Canadian government recognizes the importance of family members (including immediate family and other individuals considered to be like family⁴) in providing culturally safe and relevant care to critically ill or injured individuals and those requiring end-of-life care. However, they have failed to support the involvement of extended family in early childhood care despite this being the philosophy of many Indigenous and racialized communities since time immemorial. The definition of “parent” is expanded with this policy proposal, effectively increasing how we understand care for the early years. For children aged 0–5, parental childcare expenses were lowest among children using a family member full-time (\$238 per month on average),

compared to a non-relative full-time, such as a nanny (\$2,711 per month on average⁵).

Strong relationships across generations can also have significantly positive impacts. For many Indigenous and racialized families, grandparents play an important role in raising children and passing down values, traditions, and cultural knowledge to younger generations. “Knowing that your loved ones will step in when parents can’t be there helps build strong bonds, gives our children hope, and creates a safe space for them. It reassures parents that their children are cared for and demonstrates to the child that they are never alone, even in the absence of their parents. This creates a safety net and a sense of peace and security for both the parents and the child.⁶”



For many Indigenous and racialized families, grandparents play an important role in raising children and passing down values, traditions, and cultural knowledge to younger generations. Photo by Rod Long, Unsplash.

Family leave policy could significantly benefit Indigenous communities by supporting some of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action addressing child welfare. This policy could empower community members to support parents in the earliest stages and keep children in culturally appropriate environments when the prevalence of poverty⁷ and ministry intervention⁸ is the highest and most devastating.

Improving childcare policies ensures every child grows up in a nurturing and secure environment. As a young child and a grown woman, I have experienced how empowering a robust family unit can be difficult, especially in my youth's most vulnerable and vital years. Extended family members often become the lifeline, providing emotional and practical support when it is needed most and providing an avenue to avoid or support in instances of abuse. Such reforms would strengthen inter-generational bonds and create a more reliable safety net for families, offering economic stability and shared caregiving. Knowing that our support networks have the resources and time to stand by us fosters a deep sense of security and belonging, which are crucial for overcoming life's hardships and ensuring our children thrive.

A family leave policy for early childhood care aligns with many Canadian policy priorities, including poverty reduction and equity, economic advancement, gender equality, truth and reconciliation, health, quality of life, and well-being. Therefore, I am proposing the creation of a family leave benefit for early childhood care to encourage and support extended family members to be active participants in the lives of their young kin.



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Proposal

For the following proposal, a **Family Member** includes immediate family and other relatives and individuals considered to be like family, whether related by marriage, common-law partnership, or any legal parent-child relationship.⁹

FAMILY CAREGIVER BENEFIT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE

1 Up to 25 days of leave can provide early childhood care beginning 3 months before a child's arrival (due date/adoption date) and within the first 5.5 years of a child's life.

This leave would be administered and compensated under the Employment Insurance Caregiving Benefits Program.¹⁰

- Provincial income assistance programs will compensate people who do not qualify for employment insurance.
- First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people can apply for family leave benefits under Jordan's Principle¹¹ if they do not qualify for employment insurance.

Early childhood care includes care and support for the new child, including care and support for the parents and the home.

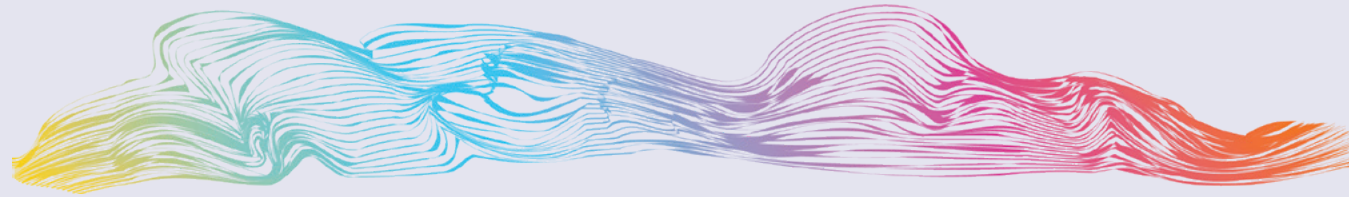
2 The leave can be taken incrementally or all at once.

POLICY EVALUATION

Regular evaluations are crucial to ensure that public policies continue to meet the needs of most people in Canada, especially our most vulnerable. I propose regular evaluations beginning 5 years after implementation and continuing every 10 years after. These evaluations should consider:

- 1 Uptake by parents and family members, including accessibility and availability of information about this benefit.
- 2 The impacts of race, immigration, physical and mental ability, gender identity, Indigeneity, education, and socio-economic status.
- 3 Collecting qualitative and quantitative data and analyzing it through an intersectional and gendered lens.

Conclusion



In conclusion, Canada's current childcare policies, based on a nuclear-family model, do not meet the needs of diverse families, particularly those in single-parent households, Indigenous communities, and racialized groups. With 20% of children in Canada living in single-parent homes and the rising costs of childcare disproportionately affecting low-income families, it is clear that a more inclusive approach is necessary.

This policy proposal for a **Family Caregiver Benefit for Early Childhood Care** seeks to expand the definition of "parent" to include extended family members and others who play a crucial role in a child's upbringing. This would allow these caregivers to take paid leave to support new parents and care for young children, reflecting the collective caregiving traditions many communities have long practiced.

This policy would address the current system's shortcomings by recognizing the importance of extended family and community support,

This policy would address the current system's shortcomings by recognizing the importance of extended family and community support, offering a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities.

offering a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities. It would also provide a safety net that strengthens family bonds, supports cultural continuity, and ensures children grow up in secure, nurturing environments.

Implementing this policy aligns with Canada's broader goals of poverty reduction, gender equality, and social justice, and it responds to the TRC's Calls to Action regarding child welfare. Regular evaluations of the policy's impact will ensure it continues to meet the needs of Canada's most-vulnerable families, helping to build a more inclusive and supportive society.

ENDNOTES

1. Government of Canada. 2017. "Portrait of Children's Family Life in Canada in 2016."
2. Government of Canada. 2017. "Portrait of Children's Family Life in Canada in 2016."
3. Due to lack of affordable and licensed childcare.
4. The full definition per employment insurance is: "Family as including immediate family and other relatives and individuals considered to be like family, whether or not related by marriage, common-law partnership or any legal parent-child relationship."
5. Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. 2023. "Estimates of Parental Child Care Expenses in January to February 2022."
6. Shawn Ann Pine (2024)
7. UNICEF Canada. 2022. "Parental Leave... For Every Child."
8. Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal. (2016). *Indigenous Children in Care.*
9. 2019. "Caregiving Benefits and Leave—Canada.ca."
10. Current Employment Insurance Caregiving Benefits include; Family caregiver benefit for critically ill or injured children or adults, and compassionate care benefits for end of life care.
11. Government of Canada; Indigenous Services Canada 2018

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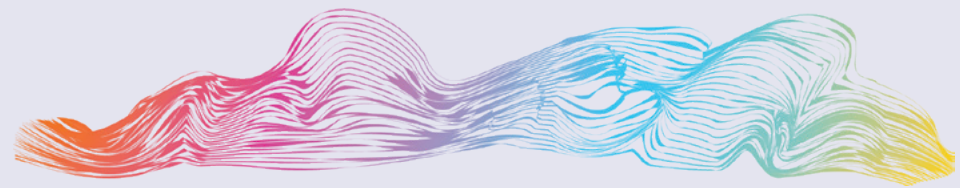
Shawn Ann Pine, Aunty, 31 July 2024

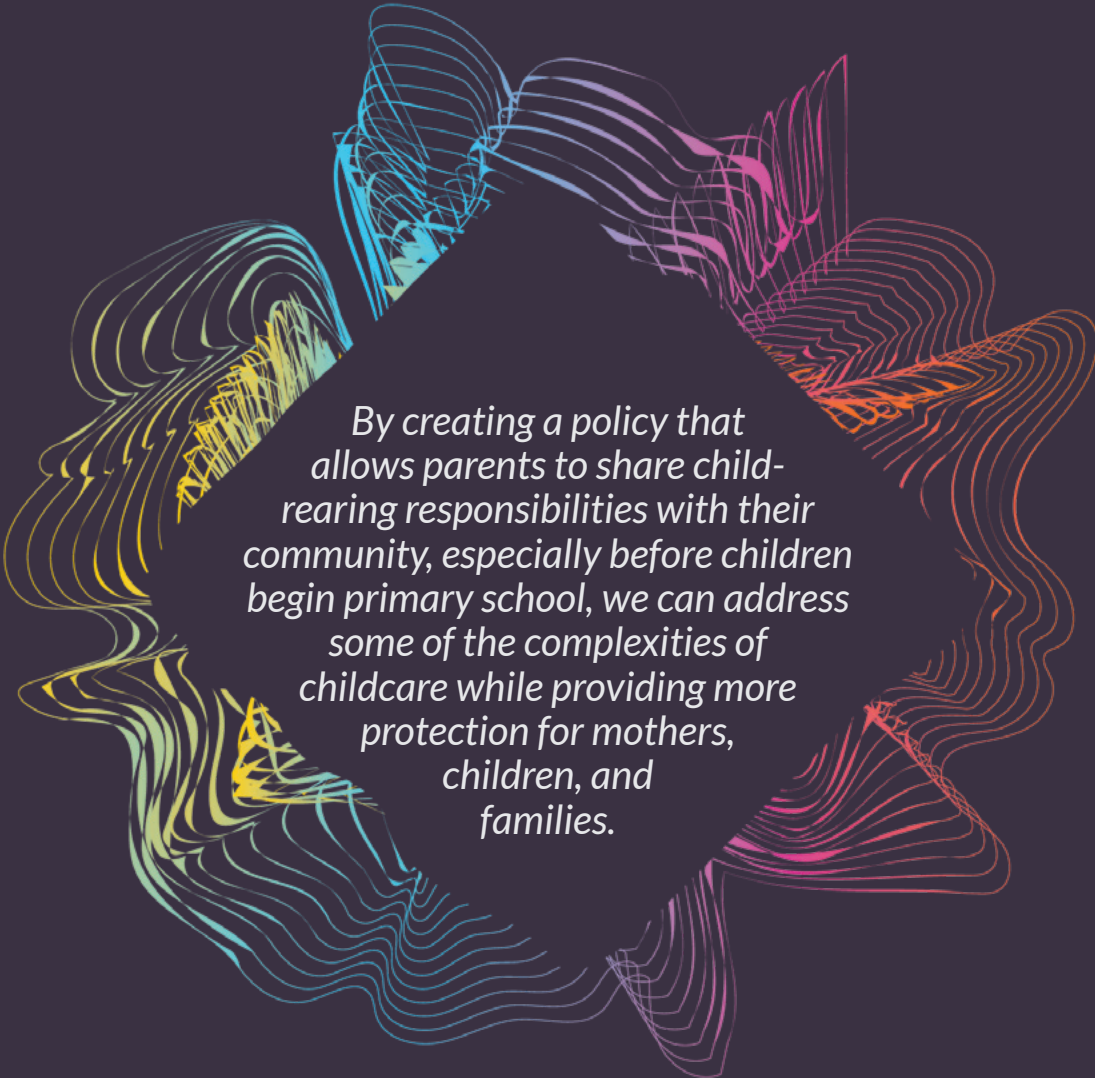
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I am also deeply grateful to Amora for your unwavering support and belief in my work, which will

continue to motivate me. I extend my heartfelt thanks to my grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, whose boundless love and support have continuously inspired me. Most importantly, to my parents, who have worked tirelessly to keep us connected to our family and culture despite the physical distance. This policy reflects *all a wi's* collective effort and dedication, and your contributions are deeply valued.





By creating a policy that allows parents to share child-rearing responsibilities with their community, especially before children begin primary school, we can address some of the complexities of childcare while providing more protection for mothers, children, and families.

Vancouver Foundation is Community Inspired. We are a community foundation that connects the generosity of donors with the energy, ideas, and time of people in the community. Together, we've been making meaningful and lasting impacts in neighborhoods and communities since 1943. We work with individuals, corporations, and charitable agencies to create permanent endowment funds and then use the income to support thousands of charities. We recognize that communities are complex and that collaboration between multiple stakeholders is needed to help everyone thrive and evolve. Vancouver Foundation brings together donors, non-profits and charities, government, media and academic institutions, local leaders, and passionate individuals to build meaningful and lasting change in the province of British Columbia. We see young people, their voices and experiences as part of that vision to building meaningful change.

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