

first **2000** days

Early Childhood Development Network

Lessons Learned
and
Launching Pads

*Prepared by Blythe Butler and Sami Berger
June 2020*

Acknowledgements and positions

Thank you.

We are grateful to all those who supported and contributed to the First 2000 Days Network (the "Network") over the past seven years. The Backbone team, Calgary Reads and all the people who work tirelessly to support children are the heart of the Network.

Where we stand.

We are living and working on Treaty 7 lands, the traditional territory of the Nitsatapi, Tsuu T'ina and Stoney Nakoda Nations, and part of Metis Region 3.

We stand as allies for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and Peoples of Colour).

Early Childhood Development is a gendered and labour issue. Any efforts for change need to include change agents within those systems.

We advocate for embedding the economy within the environment, not the other way around.

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Note from the authors

We entered into the First 2000 Days Network because of the incredible opportunity to build something using a unique, innovative approach. There is a freedom when you're given permission to re-think what's needed to achieve real change that is desperately needed.

The Network was lucky and unique in that it had the time and space to invest in learning from lifelong champions in the sector, leading thinkers on building high quality networks, collective impact, and efforts to support families and children in global contexts. The investment in learning was foundational through the life course of the Network and was one of its greatest assets.

We conducted the interviews for this report after major budget cuts and restructuring under a new provincial government, and some after the covid-19 pandemic hit. Many of those we interviewed had a lot of fear about what might be lost over this period. There was also some hope that the many breakdowns and gaps in the ways that we support children and families, and each other, would highlight the importance and value of reconstructing our system. The pandemic has provided us with a visceral appreciation for how interconnected we all are, and how much strong relationships mean to our collective well-being.

We hope that this report can, alongside many other resources, guide whatever comes out of these turbulent times. There will always be a need to support the youngest members of our communities in a way that acknowledges the complexities - and possibilities - of the systems that impact our everyday lives.

This is one piece of the puzzle.

Blythe and Sami

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Introduction

Over the past seven years, the First 2000 Days Network (referred to as the Network) has invested deeply in an adaptive learning approach. This report is a summary of the high-level lessons that came out of the Network's efforts. Building a high-quality network is a long process and the Network's success and failures are informative for other collaborative efforts and provides leverage points for future change efforts in the early childhood development (ECD) sector.

It is a particularly uncertain time for the Network and the ECD sector broadly. The Network does not have long-term funding. It's unclear whether it will be able to pivot to an even bigger, more impactful strategy or if the pieces of its work will be re-distributed to others in the sector or lost entirely.

The sector is experiencing changes in the structures that support it, as well as substantial changes to funding levels and models. Finally, covid-19 is inevitably going to change what's possible in the near future. Acknowledging this, we will tell the story of what happened to the Network with the explicit goal of helping other players pick up what we learned and take it forward.

The Basics

The First 2000 Days Network acts as a catalyst for linking, aligning, and leveraging efforts in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) system to enable collective action toward improving ECD outcomes. The Network does not provide direct programming or service delivery to families and children. Rather, it focuses on inter-organizational capacity and systems change. By impacting how the sector works together to reduce duplication, decrease inefficiencies, guide quality collaboration, and drive continuous quality improvement at the individual, program and service, organizational, and systems levels, the Network can have a positive impact on child and family outcomes.

Lessons Learned

These lessons are intended to illustrate the Network's most significant learnings from its seven-year history.



Lesson 1: Don't underestimate your ecosystem.

The Network's inception benefitted from a broader context infused with energy and resources for Early Childhood Development. Over time, as Alberta's landscape changed, the Network's strategic options became limited by broader resource constraints and uncertainty.

The Network came into existing during a time where the sector was ready to try something new¹. Perhaps more than anything, the ethos of the First 2000 Days Network is that it is an attempt to be brave, bold, different, and function outside of traditional organizational structures. The Network was created as a result of leadership and capacity provided by Calgary Reads and the existing early childhood development initiative at the United Way of Calgary and Area (Upstart). There was a unique opportunity to position the Network outside of those two formal institutions as a way to signal to the sector that a new approach was being taken. This new approach was valued because there was a recognition that different outcomes would require different behaviors. There was also the belief that this new approach might address some of the frustrations with the status quo.

In addition to the local leadership and capacity provided by Calgary Reads and the United Way, there was also an infusion of energy and resources in early childhood development at the provincial level. In 2014, the provincial government began the Early Development Instrument (EDI) program, which gathered data on the development of young children in Alberta. In addition to funding data collection, the

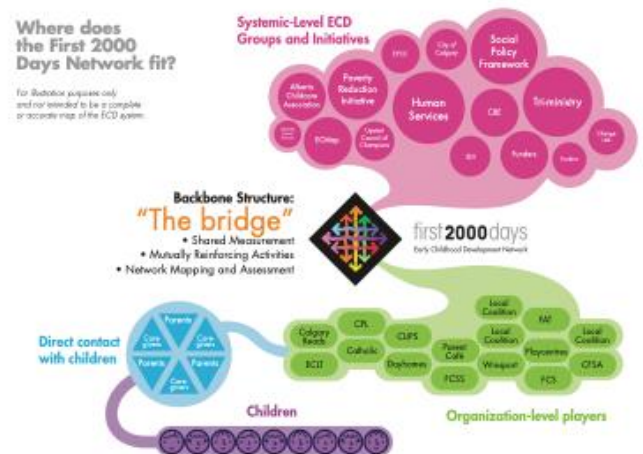


Image 1: The First 2000 Days Network "The Bridge"

¹ See First 2000 Days Network Case Study: Establishing the pre-conditions for systems-level change in Early Childhood Development

government funded community-based coalitions, eleven of which were in Calgary and area. The coalitions created an opportunity to reach families and community in a meaningful, collective way.

The Network was incubated and fiscally sponsored by Calgary Reads. Calgary Reads provided the Network with leadership, space, and access to organizational support for the Network's early stages of development. Calgary Reads' innovative culture provided an incubation space for the Network that was not constrained by conventional, large organizational processes, standards, and norms. The Network also received three years of start-up funding which provided the resources to design a systems-change approach.

However, as the Network matured, it required more sustained, long-term funding to scale its strategies and impact. Furthermore, the relationship between the Network and Calgary Reads became increasingly confusing, especially for funders. The fiscal agent structure made it increasingly difficult for the Network to apply for funding in a clear and convincing way, especially in a resource-constrained environment. To compound this dynamic, the Network never invested in a separate fund development position and was fully reliant on its fiscal sponsor for generating revenue. This exacerbated the dependency and confusion around the relationship between the Network and Calgary Reads.

The conditions that existed in the ecosystem that generated the possibility for the First 2000 Days Network are all currently being dismantled, changed, or have already disappeared. As a result, the conditions required to continue the work along the same developmental pathway no longer exist. At the time of writing, the following conditions have materially changed, creating detrimental impacts on the First 2000 Days Network:

1. The early childhood coalitions of Alberta, which were the Network's pipeline into community and grassroots organizations, are no longer being funded or supported at the provincial level.
2. The Early Development Instrument (EDI), which provided a shared population-based measure of children's well-being, is no longer being implemented at the provincial level.
3. The Regional Collaborative Service Delivery (RCSD), which provided a mandated structure for cross-ministry alignment around child and family well-being, has been dismantled.
4. The United Way Council of Champions' mandate has expanded to include the youth demographic, which has watered down the focus on early childhood development amongst leaders in the child-serving system in Calgary.
5. The commitment and level of funding for the Network has not been renewed.
6. Between 2016-2019, the Network was put into a holding pattern regarding sustained operational funding. This damaged the Network's momentum and made high-quality strategy impossible
7. Unlike the previous two governments that were in power during the Network's lifetime, explicit strategies supporting children and families is not included in the current government's party platform. This reduces the sector's ability to advocate for systems change and investments at the provincial level.



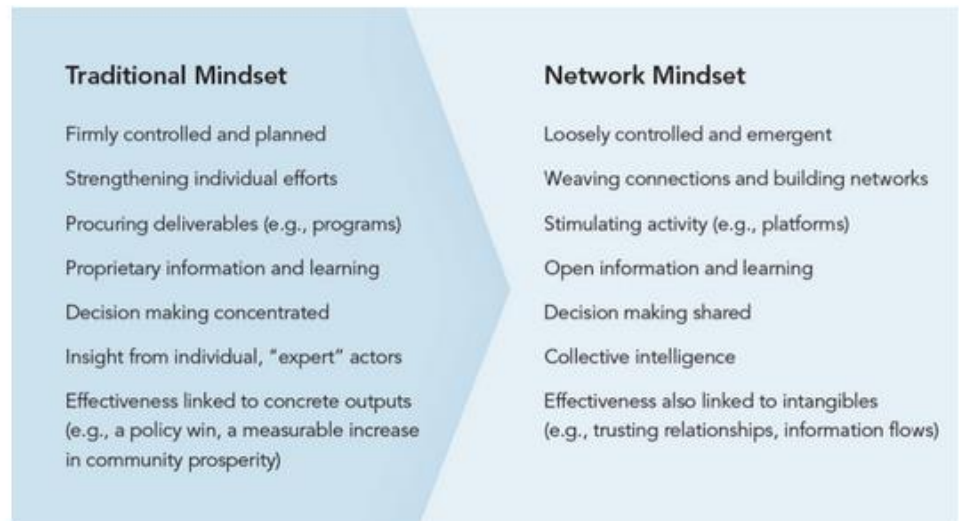
Lesson 2: Culture matters. A lot.

High-quality networks require a culture that is authentic, transparent, and facilitates distributed leadership. Building this culture requires a proactive investment by those within the network to create a sense of belonging and of responsibility, and to value learning openly and being frank with one another.

A network approach demands that participants work with each other in ways that they're not accustomed to. The First 2000 Days Network successfully created a high-quality collaborative culture.² This culture was created through open, sincere, transparent interactions; ensuring participants have power and feel heard; and consistently and explicitly communicating and modeling the Network's values. This was achieved through small but significant decisions like having open meetings, making decisions in the room, grounding strategy in data, ensuring conversations were guided by participants' needs, and promoting critical discussion and decision-making. This resulted in engaging a broad, deep and diverse spectrum of stakeholders who took ownership over various levels of the Network's Theory of Change.

Working with this network mindset creates opportunities and challenges. The downside and strength of this approach is one and the same.

On one hand, the core team was full of dedicated, passionate people who saw inherent value in acting in high-quality collaboration. They had deep, resilient relationships with one another. The Network was consistently described as a place that felt meaningful, innovative and exciting to engage in. People participated with the Network as human beings while also representing their position in the system. The creation of this culture of belonging, competence and safety within the core network team was paramount to the Network's success.



Source: The Monitor Institute (2011). Catalyzing Networks for Social Change

Image 2: Traditional v. Network Mindsets

² Based on research by Danielle Varda and Darrin Hicks.

“Participating in the Network brings value to me personally and professionally. Learning from and connecting with passionate committed individuals who seek to “link, align and leverage” for the early years is inspiring and meaningful.” -Network Participant

On the other hand, many participants felt the open-ended nature participation to be confusing and disengaging. Many participants wanted to be told what to do or to be given small, discrete tasks (rather than adopting a broad network mindset). Not only are people not used to thinking with a network mindset but participating in the Network was ‘off the side of people’s desks’ and not necessarily tied to their formal roles or positions. Expecting people to participate - and sustain their participation - was a big ask.

Moreover, often people with formal power in the sector were not represented at the Network table. The Network explicitly chose not to recreate a formal leadership table, as it was assumed the United Way’s Council of Champions could play that role. Over time, not having representation from institutional leaders negatively impacted the Network’s ability to create change at scale. Not having formal leaders engaged also became more important to funders who perceived the Network as moving away from the “innovation” stage and began looking for more conventional markers of success.

An adaptive learning approach was core to the Network’s identity and culture. The Network invested a majority of resources into its strategic learning capability, which ensured that all strategic decisions were based on a data-driven understanding of the opportunities and challenges in its context. This included investing in a Developmental Evaluator and a Network Weaver. The Network Weaver was responsible for guiding the Network’s development using the data generated by the Developmental Evaluator, and the overall strategic learning approach.

Quality learning was evidenced by the continuous use of feedback loops to adapt and design strategic activities. The Network’s Theory of Change articulated the “what” and “how” the Network would achieve its goals, at multiple levels. Testing the Theory of Change is how the Network decided what activities to undertake and how to make strategic decisions.

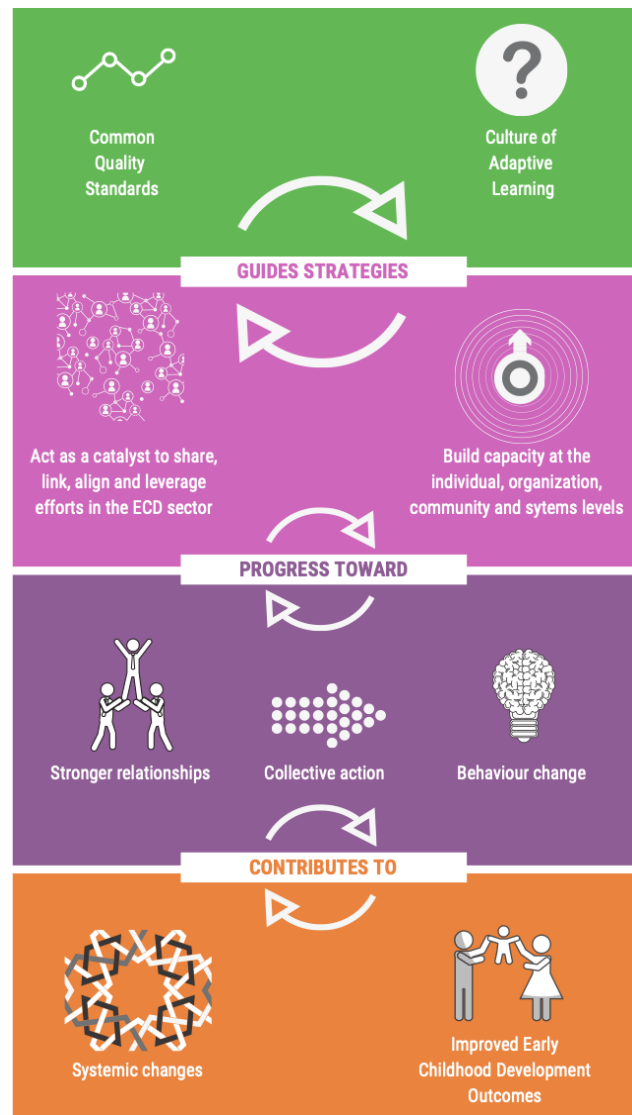


Image 3: First 2000 Days Network's Theory of Change

In addition to informal feedback loops, the following learning summaries illustrate the level of commitment the Network had to this approach: (All documents available on www.2000days.ca)

- [Supporting Early Development Instrument Collection 2016](#) (January 2016)
- [Learning from the PARTNER results](#) (February 2016)
- [Case studies: Sharing back what we have learned](#) (June 2016)
- [First 2000 Days Evaluation Strategy](#) (Sept 2017)
- [First 2000 Days Network Engagement and Capacity Strategy](#) (2017)
- [What have we learned? Learning from Coalition Collaborating for Impact and the Parental Resilience Pilot](#) (March 2017)
- [Developmental evaluation report](#) (Summer 2017)
- [Culture and ethos](#) (August 2017)
- [Engagement and capacity building strategy](#) (August 2017)
- [Developmental evaluation report: Learning trends](#) (Summer 2017)
- [Evaluation strategy](#) (September 2017)
- [Comparative overview: Natural Supports and the Strengthening Families frameworks](#) (December 2017)
- [Sharing the core brain story with primary caregivers: Lessons from the field](#) (May 2018)
- [Strategic outcomes: Trends in sharing and linking](#) (Summer 2018)
- [Learning from the PARTNER results](#) (September 2018)
- The Inspire process: September-December 2018 (December 2018- internal)
- First 2000 Days Network strategic value (May 2019- internal)
- [Strengthening Families Learning Collaborative: Final Report](#) (Spring 2019)
- [A Citywide Strategy For All Children](#) (January 2020)

These reports and the Network's approach to evaluation helped it learn about each element of its Theory of Change and ground strategic decisions in data and critical reflection.



Lesson 3: The nature of the funding has to match the nature of the (changing) challenge.

The Network couldn't have been born without the three years of incubation funding that supported exploration and building a strong network approach. Over time, funders expected the Network to fit into more traditional funding buckets and programmatic outcomes. The disconnect between the Network's funding and the change it was seeking to make became more stark over time.

The Network's first major grant gave the group three years to explore what pre-conditions were required for a successful collective impact and network approach. This long incubation period and flexibility was essential to what the Network was able to achieve. This window of time gave the network enough stability to slow down and explore how to create a high-quality foundation for a long-term strategy. There was the freedom to explore, to define its success, and to invest in understanding what success looks like in the context of building a network. This funding was essential to fund some of

the core functions of the network. This included network leadership, evaluation, coordination, and engagement. The Network’s Backbone was primarily made up of people who worked on an hourly or honoraria basis, which maximized flexibility and the ability to compensate many people, a smaller amount, distributing leadership and resources.

The incubation period created the opportunity for the Network to build a foundation based on research which demonstrated how the quality of a collaborative process links to outcomes at the population level. The Network regularly collected data on process-level and network-level impacts.

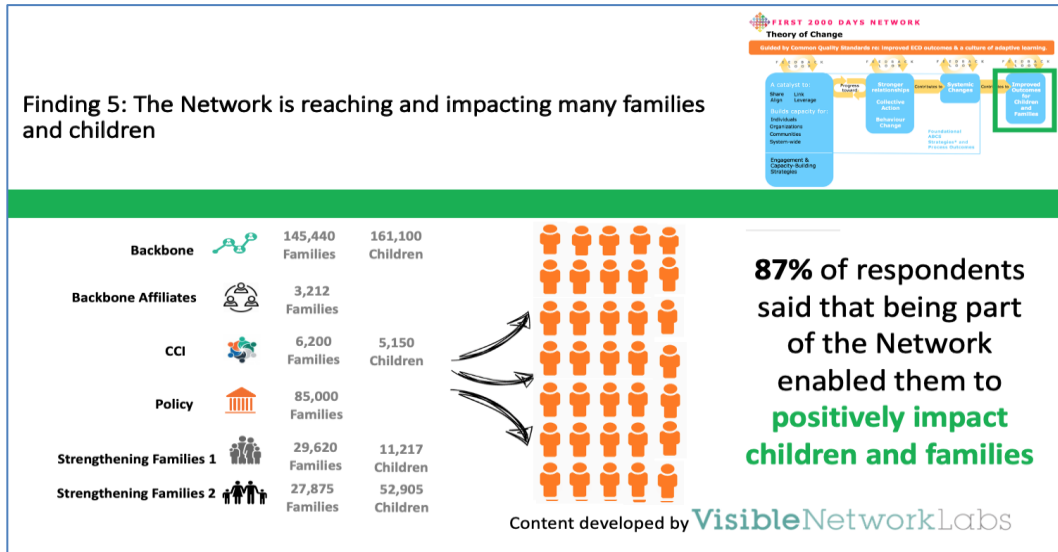


Image 4: Network Articulation of Outcomes

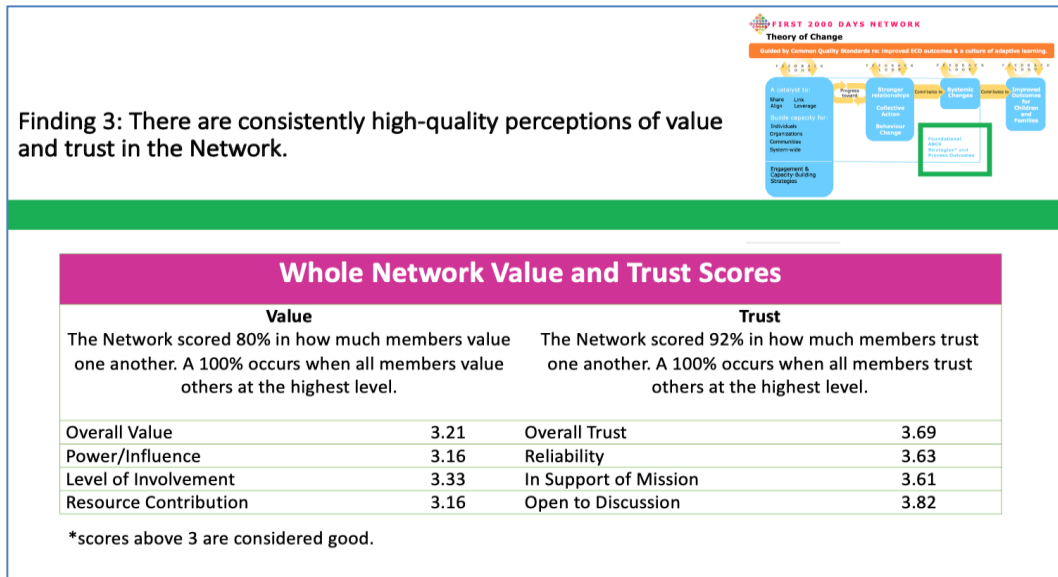


Image 5: Network Articulation of Process Outcomes

Over time, it became harder for the Network to fit into funders' ideas about success, traditional portfolio structures, and what "sells". Funders' tolerance of the network's focus on process outcomes also decreased. In part, this is because the Network's approach is more complicated than a direct-service model/outcome (which the Network explicitly avoided) and other traditional measures of success. The Network's approach to collaboration was also less traditionally structured than other community-based collaboratives or coalitions - so there was no precedent for funders in that sense. Even when individual funders working directly with the network understood and valued its work, it was always difficult for them to translate the value to their colleagues and to community-based donors. The Network, as a collaborative strategy, also didn't fit into typical programming portfolios, making it challenging to fit the concept into the bureaucracy and expectations of larger funders.

Overall, the collaborative structure and function made the Network difficult to fund. This was evident when the Network occasionally helped to host an event, developed tangible materials (e.g. Q cards or advocacy paper), or provided direct capacity building: all of which were easier to fund as "one offs" compared to securing long-term funding for the core collaborative functions of the Network.

Challenges with funding are exacerbated in the current resource-constrained context. Calgary's oil-based economy, the downturn in oil prices, the election of a new government, and covid-19 all had a direct impact on organization's and funder's budgets.



Lesson 4: A Network approach adds unique value when you're trying to make systemic change.

The Network created value through successfully sharing, linking, aligning, and leveraging elements of the early childhood development system. Its power increased significantly as it gained legitimacy and recognition in the sector.

The Network added value by sharing high-quality information, in a high-quality way. The Network developed various resources and collateral. These were intended to share information with different audiences, support advocacy efforts, and create a connection to the Network and its mission. Examples of these resources include:

- [I'm Ready Booklets](#) (translated into 13 languages)
- [Advocacy campaign materials](#) (Q cards, buttons, website, pamphlets, template letters for candidates)
- Development of 2K early years mascot (Tukay)
- Screen Time booklets
- "I'm with the Network" buttons



The ultimate goal was to share this information in a way that reflected a high-quality network approach. In many cases, these materials were developed as a result of high-quality relationships amongst the players.

Image 6: Advocacy Campaign Button & I'm Ready booklet

For example, in the advocacy materials, people from all levels of the sector contributed their time, resources and expertise to developing the messaging. The resources were then shared to benefit children and families, and ultimately push for systems change.

In other cases, however, the collaborative approach was hindered by enduring personal and organizational habits about territory, ownership over material, and the desire for organizational recognition. These tensions were exacerbated by an underinvestment in the First 2000 Days communications capacity. The Network did not invest explicitly in a focused communications function that could have further leveraged and maximized the collective efforts of all of the players.

The Network added value by changing how the pieces of the system work together. It's easy to imagine the value that's created when the people who are providing childcare, emergency shelter or healthcare, building parks, and sharing early literacy resources understand what each other are doing, are connected, and can amplify one another's efforts. The Network did this. These types of connections were built through individual relationships amongst the people that are regularly interacting with the Network. This involved going out and engaging people at gatherings and also facilitating intentional conversations at the Network's weekly meetings. Unlike the oft dreaded "sharing" tables, the Network's leaders consistently cultivated a practice where people were sharing what they were doing in a context where they continuously asked themselves: "How does this information integrate or elevate our work?" In-person opportunities to share and build on existing relationships had a ripple-effect - creating quality, deep connections with a core group of people. Over time, these relationships enabled an integrated, strategic approach to the work.

The Network added value by testing opportunities for more intensive collaboration through shared measurement. In particular, the Network's Strengthening Families capacity building opportunities was a way to coach organizations in their efforts to align around a common quality standard (the Strengthening Families framework). "Shared Measurement" is one of the five key components to a collective impact approach, and this concept was integrated into the Network's Theory of Change from its inception. More generally however, the Network was asking the sector whether there was value for organizations to use the same standards to define quality in their work. This was also closely tied to the Network's desire to have a direct impact on how frontline service providers were interacting with children and families. The Network learned a lot about supporting collaboration around a shared measurement but was not resourced to scale these efforts.³

The Network added value through its neutrality. Later in its life cycle, the Network took on a more decisive role as an advocate on behalf of the sector. The Network's greatest investments in advocacy were through the [Q cards](#), which were used in advance of the provincial election in 2019 and the "[Integrated Approach to Early Childhood Development](#)" position paper.

This was only possible after a few years of building its reputation as a neutral entity and having enough trusting connections to be a reputable, legitimate voice for the sector. Most importantly though, the Network was able to maintain its neutrality over the years. This meant that the Network was not

³ For a detailed summary of the lessons learned through this process, see the Strengthening Families Learning Collaborative: Final Report (Spring 2019)

formally or informally associated with any organization or player in the sector and was not beholden to political or power dynamics.

One of the Network's greatest value-adds was paying attention to and engaging different levels of representation across the system: grassroots, organizational, institutional, system-level. No other entity in the Early Childhood Development ecosystem in Alberta was responsible for building relationships, learning from, and integrating activity across all of these stakeholder groups.



Lesson 5: Invest in collaborative capacity.

The ability to take a collaborative approach to social change depends on a high-performing team that is compensated for their time.

Strong operational capacity impacts any organization's ability to be successful, and the same is true for networks. Voluntary contributions to the network's goals are necessary, but not sufficient to maintain and reach systemic social change.

- A Network Weaver provides leadership and guidance for the development of the Network according to network science and research on high quality collaborative processes.
- Learning and evaluation generates the data required to make strategic decisions and to communicate the Network's progress and value, internally and externally.
- Participants engage with their own professional and personal networks to maximize the benefits of a network approach, intentional investment in engagement helps to maximize network effectiveness in terms of enabling change through social norms and behavior change models, based on network theory.
- Administration and coordination are essential to allow network members to focus on outcomes-based work that is required to achieve the network's strategies.
- Communication supports the ongoing feedback loops that are required for shared intelligence across a Network, to distribute high-quality information, and to drive more general buy in and legitimacy of the approach.

All of these roles are necessary for a high-functioning network to sustain change efforts.

Launching Pads

The following launching pads are intended to illustrate potential leverage points for future strategies, activities, and actions to improve outcomes for children and families in Alberta.



Launching Pad 1: Build Up, Not Again.

Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

At the time of writing, the state of the sector and broader society are in flux. The Government of Alberta has released a new funding structure under the Children's Services Ministry, and there is still a lot of unknown about the implications or impacts of these new structures. To date, eight agencies in Calgary and Area have received funds to provide child and family programming and will act as “hubs” in the new “hub and spoke” model⁴. It should be noted that many programs have had to cease operations as a result of this funding change and the new system is not fully operational.

This funding change is a new leverage point for collaborative action, shared measurement and alignment toward improved early childhood outcomes. The [Well Being and Resiliency Framework](#) which underpins this new funding structure should be leveraged. However, the efforts to work with the new hub and spoke structure should not be limited by the players involved: there is an opportunity for agencies, programs, services and families who are not a part of the hub and spoke model to be included in the conversations around what is needed for children and families, and how to align those efforts..

Another significant part of this new structure is a yet to be developed framework for “Standards of Practice”, as referenced in Section 3.7 of the initial funding expression of interest. These Standards of Practice will be developed with the group of funded agencies and the Government of Alberta. There is an enormous opportunity to ensure that any new standard developed leverages existing provincial and global standards that are already in place⁵.

⁴ For more information visit: <https://www.alberta.ca/family-resource-networks.aspx>

⁵ Including but not limited to: [Together We Raise Tomorrow - Strategy for ECD in Alberta](#), including draft Outcomes Framework, [Strengthening Families Framework](#), Research from the [Muttart Foundation](#) on Early Learning and Care, Research on the [social determinants of health](#) and [brain science](#), [All our Families](#) study and protective factors research (Tough, University of Calgary), [Natural Supports framework](#), [Curriculum](#)

Moreover, any outcome measurement system should be available to and aligned with other funding agencies. Aligning the standards by which we support families and measure their outcomes, at a community-scale is imperative. Focusing narrowly on Government of Alberta funded agencies will put Alberta at a disadvantage in terms of knowing how our children and families are doing at a population level. Individual family outcomes are not the goal and will never tell us if our investments are making any difference. See “[A Citywide Strategy for Children](#)” which lays out the foundation for this approach.

Incorporate a family-centered lens in existing strategies.

Beyond ECD strategies, there are many other strategies that if connected could improve outcomes for children and families in Alberta. The following (and others not listed here) can be used to support advocacy and contribute to improving ECD outcomes:

- Poverty reduction strategy
- Hubs strategy/FCSS neighborhood strategy
- Domestic violence prevention strategies
- Sustainability framework for the City of Calgary
- Age-friendly Strategy
- Resilient Cities Strategy
- Mental Health Investments (City of Calgary)
- Climate Change strategies
- Grade Level Reading campaign
- PLAY/Physical literacy campaigns

In addition, ECD is a gendered and labor issue. Taking a family-centered lens in any of these strategies requires including change agents from within those systems.



Launching Pad 2: Integrate across Children’s Services, Health, Education, and Community and Social Services.

“A house divided against itself cannot stand”- Abraham Lincoln

The call for an integrated approach to children and families at the ministerial level is more important than ever. As the impacts of covid-19 set in, our family and social structures may need to change over the long-term. Any future work attempting to improve the lives on children and families **must** advocate for inter-ministerial integration as outlined in the “[Integrated Approach to Early Childhood](#)”

[Framework for ELCC](#), Benchmark Study on ECD Awareness and the many countless research projects underway on Early Childhood Development and related topics across Alberta and beyond.

[Development](#)” position paper written by the First 2000 Days Network. This paper outlines integration using the following enabling elements⁶:

1. **Legislation:** Legislation has a significant impact on the long-term viability of an integrated approach. In Alberta, there are already numerous pieces of legislation that directly or indirectly address child health and wellbeing, educational outcomes, early learning and childcare, and the child welfare system. An integrated approach would expand the legislation that is identified and considered relevant for alignment with early childhood priorities.
2. **Initial and Ongoing Situational Analysis:** In undertaking broad systems change, it is crucial to understand the broader societal context. To support an integrated approach, an initial situational analysis should map out the interwoven parts of the current factors that impact ECD. If established as an ongoing piece of work, this situational analysis lends itself to a process where feedback loops about shifting contexts are consistently evaluated and introduced into the process, leading to a more robust, integrated system as time progresses.
3. **Guiding Principles:** Any strategy, management model, or cultural change process needs to be guided by an articulated set of principles and values. They are a statement of values that guide how the government should think about and do work through an ECD lens.
4. **Guiding Strategy:** A guiding strategy establishes the foundation for the implementation of an integrated approach. It lays out the direction and goals of the integrated approach to ECD. This strategy is guiding by the broader outcomes and objectives of the integrated approach to ECD.
5. **Management Model:** A management model includes a clear governance model, institutional anchor, and adequate funding. Without it, intersectoral coordination exists by name only. A management model is the mechanism through which intersectoral coordination can be evaluated, accountable, and transparent. Furthermore, a management model ensures government is invested long-term, despite potential changes in party leadership and policy priorities, guaranteeing there is consistency in leadership, knowledge, and oversight.
6. **Evaluation:** An evaluation framework should outline indicators that are realistically measurable while still providing useful information. While evaluated is challenging in complex and unpredictable systems (Preskill and Gopal, 2014; Cabaj, 2018), the approach to evaluation must reflect this complexity and the non-linear relationship between strategy and evaluation.
7. **Public Awareness:** There is an opportunity to change how, why, and whether the general public cares about early childhood development. We can work to expand how people connect their own and their families’ well-being to the well-being of children in their communities, and more

⁶ We are listing the elements of the paper in full for ease of access and so they aren’t forgotten.

broadly, their province. Moreover, there is room to improve the public’s overall understanding of early childhood development.

8. **Research and Innovation:** A Research and Innovation Strategy would “provide a unified, evidence-informed framework that addresses the gaps in existing knowledge and builds on the strengths of our communities... A shared language and conceptual base are needed to engage stakeholders with diverse expertise at all levels” (Benzies, 2013).



Launching Pad 3: Design for the child, not the institution.

A child grows as a single entity from conception to age 8. They are the same person the whole way through. However, the systems that are designed to support a child over this time period are incredibly fragmented. We know that there is a need to stop lobbing children from the public health system, to early childhood services, to pre-school and childcare, through to the primary school system. Families should not have the burden of navigating a system whose parts do not speak to one another. There are opportunities to build a strategy and fund the connections **between** systems throughout the early years life-cycle of families⁷.

Integrating this system of care and service delivery, funding, governance, and management of federal and provincial support for children and families would align with global best practice in supporting children’s well-being.

“We—all those involved in systems-building—have an unprecedented opportunity to revisit the need for a coordinated early childhood system, intentionally outline and define what this system should look like and identify and accelerate opportunities for improvement.”⁸



Launching Pad 4: Align the change agents.

In our immediate context, an alignment opportunity exists amongst institutions and funders that invest in children and families. There is an opportunity to find the alignment leverage points amongst all of the influential and important players in the early childhood development system.

This alignment is possible within these institutions and organizations and also amongst their leadership. These include but are not limited to⁹:

⁷ A draft Citywide Strategy for Children can be found [here](#).

⁸ National Institute for Children’s Health Quality. [“Strengthening Early Childhood Systems: Lessons from the Pandemic and a Call to Action”](#)

⁹ Existing mechanisms such as the Council of Champions could come into play here.

- University of Calgary
- Mount Royal University
- Bow Valley College
- PolicyWise
- United Way of Calgary
- Muttart Foundation
- Calgary Foundation
- Palix Foundation
- Funded agencies through the Family Resource Network
- Enough for All/Vibrant Communities Calgary
- Agencies serving Indigenous people, women and new Canadians



Launching Pad 5: We'll give you a program!

The desire for capacity building opportunities for professionals working directly with children and families was articulated over and over again, from multiple stakeholders. Funders were energized by opportunities to fund activities that were more programmatic. Organizations and agencies consistently showed interest in participating in the Network's Strengthening Families capacity building workshops.

In addition, key stakeholders identified the strategy of supporting "Professionals to effectively support families" as one of the most impactful and feasible strategies that could improve outcomes for children and families.

The Network has already developed an approach to building capacity among family serving agencies, centered on a shared measurement framework¹⁰. Other jurisdictions have demonstrated that this can be [scaled and implemented](#) in an ongoing, sustainable way. There is a clear opportunity for a capacity-building entity to adapt the Network's resources and implement it to make progress in this area.



Launching Pad 6: Go big or go home.

There is an opportunity to re-ignite energy and commit to the importance of early childhood development. Albertan practitioners, funders and families need to bring passion and momentum back to the early years. This might be accomplished by:

- Leveraging global experts to share and celebrate what we know works for children and families around the globe.
- Creating opportunities for parents and caregivers to have a voice about how they are impacted by our broken systems and a systemic focus on economic development.

¹⁰ For a detailed summary of the lessons learned through this process, see the Strengthening Families Learning Collaborative: Final Report (Spring 2019)

- Creating a Center of Excellence, devoted to aligning and leveraging the relationships and knowledge of the change agents listed above. This Center could drive policy change, practice change, and parenting change which could benefit generations of Albertans¹¹..
- Using covid-19 as an opportunity to design new systems and approaches. **We have an opening to raise ideas that support public health approaches, that demonstrate strong social safety nets, that maximize opportunity for jobs and the economy, and that support the pipeline of ideas and wellbeing that we all so desperately need.** Our failure in recovery will be to miss the opportunity to have the courage go broad, deep, wide and have the foresight needed to change the way things are, for the better.

At this point in time we are not aware of a specific initiative whose mandate it is to create and sustain this type of engagement and momentum around the early years.

¹¹ The approach and implementation frameworks used in social change efforts such as Planet Youth could be used as guiding processes for driving similar integration around ECD.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has given people a visceral insight into the essential work that people working in the ECD system provides, not only to our most vulnerable, but to all of Alberta's families. We know what's important. We know what works. What we've learnt is that we need to fund the integrations and capacity to do what we already know is effective.

The First 2000 Days Network has always sought not to reinvent the wheel, but rather draw on high-quality, research-based approaches that clearly and exhaustively outline what needs to be done (see a comprehensive [bibliography](#) on work the Network drew on). In that light, this report will close with the [National Institute for Children's Health Quality \(NICHQ\) articulation](#) of what is required for developing a comprehensive early childhood system post-COVID.

Take their word for it, not ours¹²:

1. **Provide funding to coordinate state and community-level supports:** Multiple, non-integrated funding streams that fund direct services but not collaboration among them have created gaps in the early childhood system. Because of these gaps, families miss out on needed services and supports. The pandemic has intensified this problem because families need those supports and services more urgently than ever. Fostering early childhood systems coordination at the state and community levels requires funding for collaboration and coordination. Specifically, this means funding direct service lines to allocate time and resources toward collaboration and funding a backbone organization or program that can facilitate interaction between different service providers.
2. **Leverage two generation approaches:** A child's health and well-being is inextricably linked to the health and well-being of their parent or caregiver. Two-generation approaches that emphasize prevention and promote protective factors are critical to fostering child and family well-being. A comprehensive early childhood system should ensure that families have access to pediatric care, affordable childcare, and other early childhood support and services, *as well as* housing, job support, and education opportunities.
3. **Use intentional design to address system gaps:** Successfully supporting two-generation approaches requires bridging gaps between the many different services that support families. Along with funding (see bullet 1), bridging these gaps depends on intentional design informed by all key stakeholders—health and social service providers, educators, state and local

¹² Some people will dismiss these ideas because they were generated in the US. That would be a mistake.

government officials, community leaders, and, perhaps most importantly, families who can best speak to the system gaps and inequities they experience.

4. **Put families first:** At its core, a comprehensive early childhood system emphasizes the importance of valuing the role of families as first teachers, as care coordinators, and as long-term guardians for their children. With children home with their families and isolated from resources, the pandemic has shined a needed light on family's incomparable role in promoting and protecting their children's health. As such, the system's primary focus should be on building the capacity of families and the communities in which they live, as this will ultimately increase opportunities for them to lead and succeed.
5. **Maintain adequate data:** Adequate data means that service providers can easily identify who is at risk, know how to connect with them, and can track whether they receive services. This is always important, but especially during a pandemic when even more families are at risk. Being able to track and ensure linkages and referrals, the actual receipt of support and services, and the quality of linkages and access must be a core component of all local programs moving forward.
6. **Focus on equity:** Providing universal and equitable access to concrete supports gives *all* families the freedom to choose services that work best for them; this is vital for promoting equity. All services should also be sensitive to unique cultural differences among families and communities, and service providers should be trained on cultural competency, cultural humility, and the importance of trauma-informed care.

This report reflects the most significant learnings from the experience of the First 2000 Days Network. It also identifies potential opportunities that can be taken up by the Early Childhood Development sector.

*“We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”
- T.S. Elliot*

Onwards and upwards.

**“You think that because you understand “*one*”
that you must therefore understand “*two*”
because one and one make two.
But you forget
that you must also understand “*and*”.”**

– Sufi wisdom