

Success in Early Childhood: How Do We Get There?



Early Childhood Development

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Success in Early Childhood: *How Do We Get There?*

Why Children are Important

“Children are the world’s most valuable resource and the best hope for our future¹.”

We more commonly say, *“Our children are our future.”* Either way it is said, our children are precious and full of potential. Yet they are also vulnerable, and deserve to grow up in a safe, nurturing and stimulating environment.

Children hold a special place in Aboriginal culture. According to tradition, *they are gifts from the spirit world and have to be treated very gently... They must be protected from harmⁱ*. Today’s children will determine what society will be like in the future. They will shape the world!

Children who are well cared for in their earliest years are far more likely to be successful in school, more productive at work, have greater financial success and be healthier throughout their lives. Children with a good start in life are less likely to fall behind in school, get in trouble with the law, depend on social services, live in poverty, be homeless or have issues with addictions.

What is Early Childhood?

Early childhood is the time in a child’s life from the prenatal period to when they begin schooling. This includes the infant, toddler and preschool yearsⁱⁱ as they transition into school. In the first years, children develop physical, emotional, spiritual and social abilities that are with them for lifeⁱⁱⁱ.

With the new knowledge and research about brain development, we have a better understanding on how, when, and by what means early experiences

¹ Originally spoken by J.F. Kennedy July 25, 1963 as part of a UNICEF appeal for funds.

positively or negatively affect a child's future. We know the first years are more important than we ever thought! Positive early experiences have a huge effect on children's chances for success, well-being and happiness. Healthy development provides the building blocks for educational achievement, economic productivity, lifelong health, positive relationships and successful parenting^{iv}. Parents, caregivers, individuals, service providers, communities and policy makers need to join their efforts to ensure children in the Northwest Territories (NWT) have healthy early childhood experiences and are provided the development opportunities they need to do well^v. Everyone will benefit.

The Foundation of Early Childhood Development

Early childhood development is the term we use to refer to the skills, abilities and milestones that children reach – or are expected to reach – by certain ages in their first years of life. These milestones include walking, talking, learning, sharing and caring about others^{vi}.

Child development refers to how children learn to do difficult things. Development is different than growth. Growth refers to the child getting bigger in size, but development is about how they are increasing their physical, mental, emotional and social skills and abilities. Every child is an individual and develops at his or her own rate. But without a positive start, that rate of development may be significantly slowed or changed. What happens in early childhood matters for a lifetime.

The most intense development occurs during the first three years of a child's life. Research on brain development tells us that the child's capacity to learn, create, love, trust and develop a strong sense of self are determined early in life. This research helps us understand human brain development and the connection between a child's environment and his experiences as a result of that environment, from conception on^{vii}.

Brain development is like building a house. It's a step-by-step process that starts with a foundation, framing walls, putting in wiring and installing plumbing. The brain has to be "wired" properly and built in the right order. A strong foundation builds a strong brain structure, or "brain architecture" as experts call it^{viii}. A weak foundation creates potential problems that can last a lifetime.

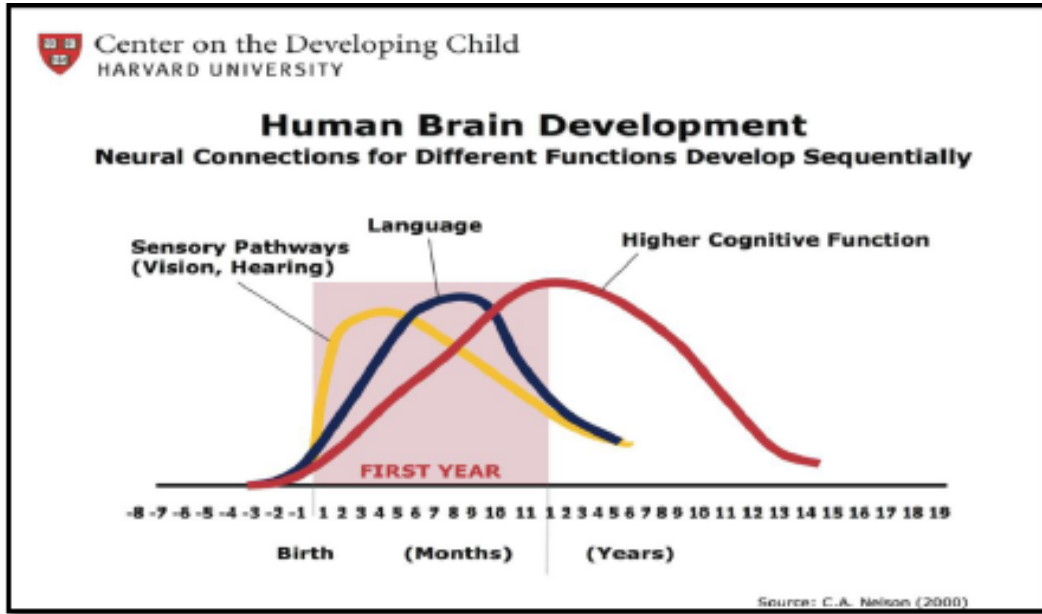
Nature and Nurture – Both Count

Nature and nurture are both important in early childhood development. Research has proven that genes (nature) and experience (nurture) work together to shape human development. Brain development continues throughout life, but the brain is the most open to change during the early years. The experiences of children in the early years have lifelong social and financial impacts on individuals, families, and communities and the NWT as a whole^{ix}.

Children also need the very basics of good nutrition and opportunities for healthy physical growth – a healthy diet to build muscles and bones, strengthen the heart and lungs. Physical activity helps develop motor skills such as running, kicking, throwing and jumping. Everything in the child's environment contributes to his or her experience and brain development.

The Early Environment Matters

A nurturing early environment helps the brain form the right connections in the right order for healthy development^x.



Vision and hearing pathways develop first, followed by early language skills and then the higher thinking (cognitive) functions, such as exploring, learning and problem solving.

Brain development is about many things. Emotional, social, physical and thinking abilities are all connected. Each area is part of the whole. Learning to talk, for example, involves healthy hearing and the ability to hear different sounds. It requires being able to put meaning to words, to concentrate and to interact with others, along with wanting to communicate. Learning to love, trust and get along with others requires the child to have a supportive and caring environment, a place where the child feels safe and secure.

Children Need Interaction

Scientists now know a major piece of the developmental process is the back and forth or what is called the “serve and return^{xi}” interaction between children and important adults. Babies reach out through babbling, gestures and facial expressions. Adults respond with the same kind of sounds and actions such as talking to them, holding them and comforting them



when they cry. This creates positive development and proper brain connections are formed. When children are soothed and comforted, they learn to soothe themselves. On the other hand, when children do not get what they need, receive no response to their actions, or are ignored, they become irritable and unable to calm themselves in healthy ways. Babies who do not experience healthy interactions with caregivers become withdrawn and less able to interact with others, as they grow older.

Simple differences, such as reading and talking with the child, can impact his or her language development a lot. Emotional well-being and social skills developed in the first years of life form the base for thinking and reasoning as children move into the school years.

Exposure to positive experiences has a strong influence over every child’s life. It just makes sense to ensure the right conditions are in place in the early years, rather than trying to correct problems later.

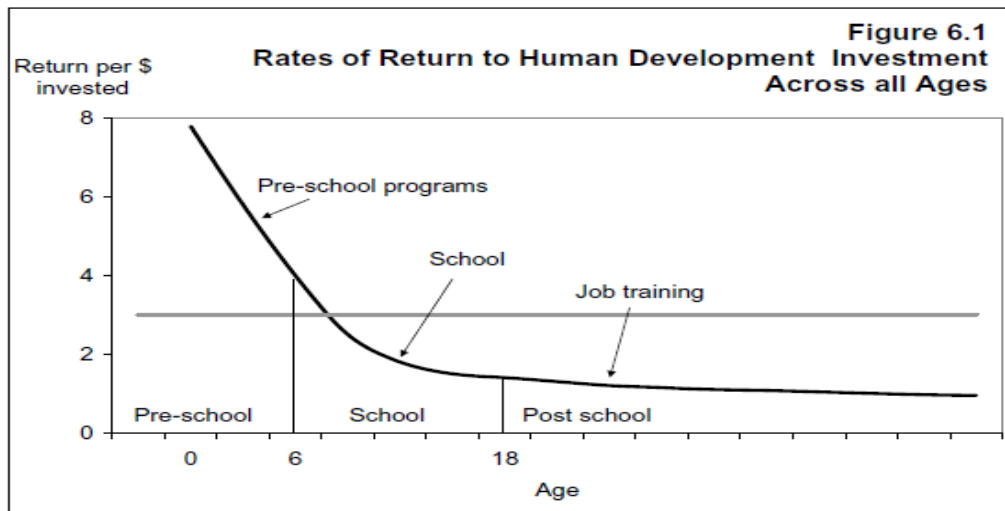
Investing in Early Childhood Development

The experiences of children in the first five years of life affect children’s development significantly. A significant number of Canadian children are

experiencing developmental difficulties by the time they reach kindergarten. In Canada, less than five per cent of children – or one out of 20 - at every socio-economic level are born with developmental delays. By school age, more than 25% – or one out of four – struggle and are behind where they should be in their physical, emotional, social, language or cognitive development. This percentage does not include children with severe diagnosed disabilities^{xii}. This means that for every 100 children, five have developmental delays at kindergarten, one of the five are delayed at birth and four of the five are delayed as a result of their experiences during their first five years of life. In the NWT, we know that 25 to 30% of children in the NWT are functioning below grade level in Grade 1^{xiii}.

It is not often that a public policy can promote fairness and social justice and at the same time help productivity in the economy and in society at large^{xiv}.

Research is showing that there are long-term payoffs for investing in the early years. Effective early childhood programs create benefits to society that far exceed program costs. Economically, there are jobs created. Parents are able to work. Research shows that every dollar invested in child care increases the economy's output by at least \$2.54. Earnings from increased employment send money back in tax revenues^{xv}. The community benefits from healthy children who are more likely to become fully functioning adults contributing to the economy and quality of life in their community.



(Cunha et al., 2005)
A dollar invested in early childhood yields three times as much as for school-aged children
and eight times as much for adult education.

The economic benefits of investing in the early years go well beyond allowing parents to return to work. This graph shows very clearly that the largest return on investment happens in the earliest years of life and development.

James Heckman, U.S. Economist and Nobel Prize winner, has proven that there are great economic gains when we invest in early childhood development. He calculated that spending \$1 on early childhood programs pays the same dividends as spending \$3 on school-aged programs and \$8 on education for young adults. He proved that dollars invested in the first three years of life is the best investment.

Heckman's "equation" for investing shows that in order to **Gain** a more capable, productive and valuable workforce for generations to come we should:

- **Invest** in educational and developmental resources to provide equal access to successful early human development.
- **Develop** cognitive and social skills and physical well-being from birth to age five when it matters most.
- **Sustain** early development with effective education^{xvi}.

School readiness requires a balanced and supportive approach in the early years of life. Traditionally more investments are focused on children after they enter the school system, with most funding targeted to children deemed to be from high-risk families. If we continue to wait to intervene until children are in school or are grown, we miss out on many opportunities to create better outcomes for our children^{xvii}. We need to focus on creating a system that invests wisely in those first years of life.



Supporting Early Childhood Development

The Foundation of Lifelong Health

Science is showing us that positive development in early childhood helps prevent heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and social issues of crime, alcoholism, illegal drug use and abuse in adults. The rate of teen pregnancy, delinquency and social services involvement is decreased. Learning problems that keep children from reaching their full potential are reduced so the child can achieve his or her goals and dreams^{xviii}.

Positive, quality experiences early on are essential. An environment free of contaminants, overcrowded living conditions and poverty, with good nutrition, filled with positive social interactions and loving, attentive caregivers prepares the developing brain to function at its best^{xix}.



On the other hand, an early environment with poor nutrition, harmful toxins or inappropriate sensory, social or emotional stimulation results in weak brain development. Studies show that children who experience early traumas such as violence, neglect or abuse, find it harder to focus, learn, and remember. They are more likely to have behavioural problems and get sick^{xx}. This weaker foundation can have negative effects on further brain development **even if a healthy environment is restored later on**^{xxi}.

Building the Foundation

A child's family provides the first environment in which they will interact. A parent's ability to make this place safe and nurturing is affected by many things, such as the resources (financial, emotional and time) the family has to devote to their child, the ability to provide a safe home setting, parenting skills, knowledge of child development and knowing what to expect as their child grows. This environment is also affected by other factors such as the parent's own mental, emotional and physical health.

When we respond appropriately to a child, the child learns to feel secure, explore the world, control emotions and care about other people. Children learn to connect and interact with their surroundings, including the people in it. We also learn about the child by watching how they respond to new experiences, people and places and connect with others^{xxii}. When there is no interaction, the child's development (foundation) is weakened.



Families require supportive environments in order to meet their child's development needs. Studies show that many areas affect the child, including caregivers outside the family, the community environment, housing, financial security, available resources, early childhood education, cultural and religious connections, and the attitudes, policies and resources provided by the greater society. These areas of influence connect and form the child's and the family's environment^{xxiii}.

Children also need each other. Research confirms that play is an essential piece in a child's development. When children play, they learn about their world. Play promotes social development – children learn to take turns, solve problems, express themselves, and how to make friends and be in a group. Play builds emotional strength - adaptability, self-control and confidence. There is a strong connection between make-believe, early language and literacy development, recognizing letters and numbers. Play is part of the foundation and feeds every part of the child's development. So the next time you are asked to play with a child, go ahead. The happy feelings this creates will be good for you too!



What Affects Healthy Development?

There are many things that can affect a child's early life. One is called "toxic stress". Stress is part of our lives. Learning to cope with it is important. Toxic stress is when a child is raised in a constantly stressful environment – including chronic and serious neglect, parents worried about money for food, exposure to family violence or constant fighting or living in over-crowded housing. Toxic stress is not good for anyone, but is especially harmful for the developing child. Over time, toxic stress can damage a developing brain and lead to lifelong problems in learning, behaviour, and physical and mental health^{xxiv}.

Positive or bearable stress helps the child to build resiliency. Resiliency is the ability to cope well with the ups and downs of life. It is the capacity to withstand

stress, overcome difficulties and become stronger in their ability to cope. One of the most important factors in the promotion of resilience is the presence of a stable and supportive relationship with a caring and nurturing adult. Positive relationships and environments that support healthy social, emotional, physical and mental development allow children to develop the resources and skills they need to cope and adapt to difficulty throughout childhood and the rest of their lives^{xxv}.

Mothers who are experiencing maternal depression may have an effect on their child's healthy development. Depressed mothers may not be consistent or effective in their parenting. They may be tired because of their depression, are unable to stay focused, more irritable, or have less patience in order to provide a nurturing environment. Maternal depression is also linked to family conflict, which leads to higher levels of distress, putting the child's healthy social and emotional development at risk^{xxvi}.

The legacy of colonization and disruption of community has left a lasting effect on the family in the NWT and child development. Traditional values and practices where the child was considered a sacred and shared responsibility were seriously impacted, especially with the creation of residential schools. Family ties and traditional child rearing practices were disrupted. Many parents did not learn how to parent because of being sent away to school and losing the family and community opportunity to learn from their elders. They grew into adults who are insecure in who they are, unsure of what their responsibilities are and how they should fulfill them. The impact of residential school is affecting northern families through many generations.

Childhood injury can change a child's future instantly. More than 65% of NWT children who died during the 1990s were a result of an injury. The main causes of death by injury for NWT children are house fires, car and truck crashes, and drowning. NWT children are more likely than adults to be hit by a car or truck while they are walking or biking^{xxvii}. The extent of injuries needs to be

considered when programs and policies are developed, to keep children safe in the early years.

Because of their smaller size and developmental stage, children are more vulnerable than adults to the impacts of pollution and environmental contaminants. Since children naturally crawl and play on the floor they are in more direct contact with areas where some contaminants may be. They are also more likely to swallow contaminants because of their habit of putting their hand in their mouth. Changes are happening all of the time with industry and government restricting use and access to contaminants such as banning lead in paints or



smoking in public places and reducing exposure to second hand smoke^{xxviii}. We need good information to make healthy choices for our children so that exposure to contaminants is limited.

High levels of nicotine exposure before birth, as well as exposure to second hand smoke, can result in long-term cognitive impairment and decreased physical development. It can also lead to sudden infant death syndrome as well as other health illnesses^{xxix}. The NWT has the second highest smoking rate in Canada, at 29.7%. The rate of second hand smoke exposure at home is 8.6%, which is the second highest rate in Canada^{xxx}.

Alcohol can produce devastating effects on brain development, causing Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). Alcohol consumption by the mother during pregnancy can cause brain damage, vision and hearing problems, slow growth and birth defects in the baby. Brain damage can lead to life-long learning disabilities and problems with memory, reasoning and judgment^{xxxi}. The rate of heavy drinking in the NWT was 29.7% in 2011. This is the highest recorded rate

in Canada^{xxxii}. Preventing FASD is everyone's responsibility and is 100% preventable with the proper supports in place!

Understanding Helps Create Support

Early childhood development programs and services cannot overcome the impacts of social and economic challenges on their own. No single approach works. However, research is showing us that providing quality programs like Aboriginal Head Start and supports such as Prenatal Nutrition contributes to children's healthy development. Early supports and appropriate interventions for children and their family can make great improvements in the quality of life and developmental outcomes of children.



Where We are Today

In order to move towards solutions, we need to understand more about who we are and what we are already doing to support our children in the early years.

Northern Profile

The Northwest Territories is unique. We live in a vast geographic space. The population distribution is widespread. Travel from smaller communities to regional centres to receive support is common and necessary.

We are culturally diverse with 11 official languages and many cultural identities. About 51% of the population is Aboriginal^{xxxiii} - First Nations, Inuit and Métis. There are increasing numbers of visible minorities (5.5% of the total population), with a 50% rise in that population between 1996 and 2006^{xxxiv}. Programs and services must respect the diverse cultural needs of the people living in the North.



We have a higher birth rate than the rest of Canada – the NWT rate in 2009 was 16.3 births/1000 people where Canada was 11.3 births/1000 people^{xxxv}. Two parent families (34.4% of private households) remain the most common family type in the NWT. About 22% of NWT children under the age of nine live in lone-parent families, with about 80% of those families headed by single mothers^{xxxvi}. There are more blended families where one or both partners bring children into the relationship. Between 2001 and 2006, there was a 12.2% increase in families in the NWT, which was the fastest growth in Canada^{xxxvii}. The growing birth rate and the greater number of families create increasing demand for programs and services for children and their families.

Women in the NWT are having their babies later in life, similar to the rest of Canada. But teen pregnancy remains higher in the NWT than the rest of Canada. It is decreasing and is the lowest it has been in 20 years going from 78 births/1000 to 39 births/1000^{xxxviii}.



Younger, less experienced mothers or parents may require different supports and programs as they may have less knowledge about childhood development. The needs and resources available to parents, especially teen parents, need to be considered when developing programs and supports. It is important to interpret the impact of teen pregnancies within the cultural context in the North.

Many families live in poverty in the NWT. There are also families who enjoy a higher income than other parts of Canada. In 2009, 24.6% of children under the age of 18 lived in low-income families^{xxxix}. The majority of children live in families where the parents work outside the home. This change has a significant impact on the resources and supports needed for children.

Government Supports

In 2001, the government adopted the *Framework for Action: Early Childhood Development (Framework)*. This *Framework* guided early childhood development for the past 10 years through four key areas for action:

1. Promoting healthy pregnancy, birth and infancy,
2. Improving parenting and family supports,

3. Strengthening early childhood development, learning and care, and,
4. Strengthening community supports.

There were strategies, initiatives, screening tools, areas for action and priorities developed that reflected the research.

There were new programs and services developed for families and their children, such as: the Healthy Family Program, Language Nests, Family Literacy and Universal Developmental Screening^{xl}. Implementing these programs has been a significant achievement. Three actions were discontinued due to funding limitations: Healthy Family Kits/Family Learning Kits, Public Awareness Campaign and Child Development Resource Kits.

In a ten-year review of the *Framework* there were many accomplishments identified along with challenges programs faced. Some accomplishments are:

- 1,871 licensed child care spaces in 123 licensed facilities in 27 communities,
- Healthy families programs that provide support and education are now offered in all regions in the NWT,
- The continued delivery of the Aurora College Early Childhood Development Certificate Program,
- Hundreds participated in Family Literacy Training Institutes,
- Family literacy outreach providers are trained in 33 communities,
- Numerous community-based literacy projects are completed annually, and
- Funding was made available to community based early childhood programs^{xli}.

The NWT Literacy Council recognized the success of the Healthy Family Kits/Family Learning Kits. They secured funding from outside the GNWT to continue this program, including similar resources as the original kits, such as books and other age appropriate items such as a writing pad and pencil, scissors and crayons.

Gaps

The review identified gaps in services and funding for children with challenges, disabilities or developmental delays. This area did not receive funding specific to the *Framework*. This is important for policy makers to prioritize, given the knowledge we know have about the advantages of investing and providing appropriate supports early in life.

Another gap was the lack of program monitoring and evaluation. Consistent data collection and analysis did not occur. This is important to make sure the program or service is meeting identified outcomes and expectations^{xlii}.

Other GNWT Early Childhood and Development Programs and Services

The programs created through the *Framework* are just part of the supports provided for children and their families in the NWT. There are programs that:

- Screen infants for development,
- Provide supports to parents in areas such as breastfeeding, prenatal care through the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program, health promotion and dental care,
- Create awareness about FASD or injury prevention,
- License early childhood programs,
- Provide funding for respite and rehabilitation services and development of early childhood programs through the Healthy Children Initiative, and,
- Protect children from abuse and neglect.

The government is investing significantly in early childhood development. We recognize there are changes that need to be made, given the changes in family structures over the past years, the importance of culture and the new information about brain development. Creating positive, stable relationships

and nurturing environments during a child's early years provides the base for a lifetime of healthy development.

Creating New Supports

There is a saying "*it takes a village to raise a child*". This can be traced to African folk wisdom, and there is wisdom in those words! There is a shared responsibility to ensure: children are provided support and care, illnesses are prevented, families are supported, and access to health care and early learning are available.

The knowledge gained through the research about brain development is significant to future discussions about program development and supports. There are opportunities to work together – with the family, communities and governments – to ensure a high quality environment for early childhood development and learning.

The structure of families is changing. Networks and supports now go beyond the traditional family and place where people live. The family and the family's family are the first natural



connections made. But with our ever-mobile society, parents of young children may not have immediate family close by. They may reach out and create an extended family, connecting with friends who have young children or others in the community who can provide a network of support. Parents will build a social network of formal and informal supports when they can.

Families look to many areas where supports can be found. Workplace communities can be a place of support when they adopt family friendly policies, such as offering flexible work hours^{xliii}. Schools may expand to become a community hub, expanding services and supports that go beyond the role of teaching students. Religious and faith-based communities provide spiritual, social and personal connections that are different from other community supports^{xliv}. And there are virtual communities where parents are reaching out through social media to ask questions, chat with others and get information to help them make decisions related to early childhood development. All of these communities are important connections for families that offer links with other parents and networks of support.

There is potential to strengthen the system of early childhood development that is reflective of the unique cultural practices in the North. Communities and community groups need to think seriously about what they can do to have a positive impact on the families of young children. Communities should ask, “How can our community support healthy early childhood development?”

Governments can be involved in other ways than funding programs. Collecting and sharing good information and knowledge will assist with the discussions as new ideas are created and developed. Working together between governments, departments and with community organizations is important. Governments should ask, “How can we effectively support healthy childhood development?”

Where Do We Go From Here?

Working Together

Early childhood development is a topic that captures the attention of many people – parents, families, caregivers, community groups, Aboriginal governments, the Territorial government and government workers such as early childhood educators, nurses, social workers and many others. The topic matters because children matter. The future of our communities lies with our children, who need to be nurtured within their families and communities.

The success of any plan requires strong leadership. It relies on integration of services through collaboration at all levels. Effective and efficient policies for early childhood development that meet individual, social, cultural, and economic objectives are needed. Programs and services should support and stimulate early childhood development and learning and contribute to good conditions for growth.

It does “*take a village to raise a child.*” Children are precious and have tremendous potential. When we help them develop their potential, we are part of something truly great!

The Northwest Territories *Framework for Action: Early Childhood Development* is currently being renewed. The Departments of Health and Social Services (HSS) and Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) want to hear your views on how the healthy development of children can be supported in the NWT. Your input matters.

Please provide your thoughts and ideas by clicking on and completing the appropriate confidential online survey(s). We need to hear from you **by January 10, 2013.**

Survey for **Parents and Community Members**

https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/NWTparents_community_at_large

Survey for **Early Childhood Development Professionals**

https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/NWT_ECD_providers

Survey for **Northern Leaders**

https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/NWTcommunity_leaders

Thank you for your support. We look forward to hearing from you!

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