
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION:

EARLYON CHILD AND FAMILY CENTRE FUNDING

Purpose

Increase the core funding allocation for EarlyON Child and Family Centres (static since 2018) and extend the dedicated EarlyON mental-health funding beyond 2025. We appreciate the Province's collaboration and the additional CWELCC spaces allocated to Renfrew County through the recent recalibration; these are improving access to childcare for families.

Proposal

We are requesting an **increase to the funding allocation for the EarlyON Child and Family Centres**, which has remained static since 2018. This funding is essential not only to maintain high-quality programming, but also to respond to the growing and unmet mental-health needs of children and families – particularly those who are currently disconnected from available services. While the Ministry's dedicated mental-health funding for EarlyON Child and Family Centres has had a significant positive impact over the past three years, it is scheduled to end in 2025. Without continued and enhanced investment, we risk losing the progress made and the capacity built to support families in crisis or at risk.

We propose using this increased investment to pilot a community-based outreach model focused on identifying families with emerging or existing mental-health concerns and intentionally connecting them to EarlyON programs, where they can receive appropriate early supports.

The pilot would hire two staff who are designated and trained as mental health-focused outreach workers. Their role would be to:

- Function as dedicated liaisons between families and EarlyON Centres
- Build trust with families through community-based and partner-supported engagement
- Identify mental-health needs early through conversation and relationship
- Collaborate with community partners to ensure coordinated support
- Help identify and eliminate access barriers (e.g., transportation, awareness, stigma)
- Coordinate with Family and Children's Services of Renfrew County to reinforce their role in family preservation, not separation
- Support program staff in engaging families who may need enhanced or tailored support

This model would help to close the gap between need and access – ensuring that families with mental-health concerns are not just introduced to EarlyON Child and Family Centres throughout Renfrew County but actively supported to engage and stay connected.

Why this Matters

EarlyON Child and Family Centres are foundational in supporting the early learning, development, and well-being of young children and their families across Ontario. In Renfrew County – a region characterized by vast geography and diverse populations—these centres provide free, inclusive, high-quality programs that serve as essential entry points for families to access resources, parenting supports, and early childhood education.

These services are particularly critical for children aged 0-6, promoting healthy development in key areas such as communication, gross motor skills, social-emotional growth, and early literacy. EarlyON centres also provide parents and caregivers with tools, expert guidance, and community-based peer support, which strengthens parenting confidence and family stability.

Since 2018, EarlyON funding allocations have remained flat, despite increasing demand and evolving community needs across Renfrew County. In 2022, the Ministry of Education introduced dedicated mental-health funding within the EarlyON framework over a three-year period to support enhanced mental-health initiatives for children, families, and early years staff.

This targeted investment has been invaluable in strengthening local capacity and integrating mental-health resources and learning into the broader early years system. Renfrew County has effectively leveraged this funding to respond to the ongoing and significant mental-health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, with this mental-health funding set to end in 2025, and no increase in core EarlyON funding since 2018, there is growing concern that progress made may be undermined just as needs remain critical. Sustaining and where possible increasing this funding beyond 2025 is essential to ensure that children and families in Renfrew County continue to access timely, prevention-focused supports that contribute to their long-term wellbeing.

Current Challenge: Mental Health Needs and Barriers to Access for Vulnerable Families

As the designated Service Manager for Renfrew County, we have a clear line of sight into the growing mental health needs of children, families, and the early years workforce – particularly among those facing significant vulnerability. This includes:

- Newcomers to Canada
- Low-income and rural families
- Families involved with or at risk of involvement with Family and Children's Services (FCS)
- Individuals experiencing low literacy, mental-health challenges, housing instability, or limited access to transportation

Despite the strength of EarlyON programming, the families who most need early mental-health support often face the greatest barriers to access. Stigma, lack of trust in systems, geographic isolation, and limited-service awareness all contribute to underutilization – especially in remote and under-served areas of our region.

Rationale for Investment

Targeted investment in mental health through EarlyON Child and Family Centres has been critical in helping us begin to close these access gaps. Research shows that early mental-health supports:

- Improve emotional and developmental outcomes for children
- Reduce the need for more intensive interventions later in life
- Promote caregiver resilience and family stability
- Are among the most cost-effective public investments

The resolute mental-health funding provided over the past three years has allowed Renfrew County to integrate mental-health promotion, early identification, and professional learning into our EarlyON system. This work is just beginning – and there is more to be done.

We urge the Ministry of Education to increase core EarlyON funding to support this pilot outreach initiative, and sustain the dedicated mental-health funding beyond 2025, to ensure we can continue responding to the needs of vulnerable families, strengthen early intervention, and build a more equitable and resilient early years system.

Together, we can ensure that all families – regardless of background or circumstance - have access to the opportunities and support they need to thrive. We value the Ministry's partnership and are ready to co-design the outreach pilot, measurement plan, and multi-year funding approach to deliver fast, visible impact for families.