

# THE STORY OF A COLLECTIVE PROJECT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN QUÉBEC

**AVENIR D'ENFANTS' SUMMARY  
REPORT HIGHLIGHTS**

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## A mission and vision focused on early childhood development

Avenir d'enfants is a non-profit organization born of a partnership between the Québec Government and the Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon. Through its community mobilization efforts, Avenir d'enfants has provided support and guidance to thousands of local, regional, and Québec-wide partners active in early childhood development.

Starting in 2009 and continuing until 2020, Avenir d'enfants has striven to support and strengthen intersectoral collaborations with a view to implementing concerted strategies that help foster the development of each and every child's full potential—with a special emphasis on families living in underprivileged circumstances.

## Tailored guidance

Over the course of its mandate, Avenir d'enfants' **twin approach based on guidance coupled with financial support has grown to become one of the key means for building our partners' capacities** to plan and implement strategic, collaborative actions, as well as to evaluate their outcomes together.

Given the complexity and scale associated with our mission, Avenir d'enfants has always relied on the values listed below to frame its internal functioning and guidance and intervention roles:

- Respect for our partners and the specific pace of each community
- Proactive approaches based on creativity and resourcefulness
- Collaboration
- Transparency and integrity
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Sharing our knowledge and experiences

Over the course of its mandate, Avenir d'enfants channelled its efforts into three main strategic priorities:

- Supporting long-term intersectoral community mobilization
- Reaching out to families living in underprivileged circumstances
- Advancing the cause: striving to make early childhood development a social priority

### Avenir d'enfants in numbers

- **139 local groups of partners** and **16 regional committees** in 17 regions of Québec implementing projects that target children's overall development, beginning during pregnancy and continuing throughout the preschool period
- **25 First Nations communities** targeted through a partnership with the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission
- **2 projects** with Native Friendship Centres
- **8 Cree communities** receiving support based on a regional agreement
- **1 partnership** with the Inuit
- **35 regional and Québec-wide partnership-based projects** targeting the development of innovative tools and approaches
- **Close to 3000** partner organizations
- **\$400 million in funding allocated** over an 11-year period to support collective action and innovative projects in early childhood development

## Progress observed

### Strategic priority 1: Supporting long-term intersectoral community mobilization

In each community, partners from different business sectors combine their respective strengths, knowledge, and experience into a common vision so they can more effectively address the needs of children and families.

#### Strengthened partnerships and collaborations

Thousands of early childhood development partners from various business sectors, in all regions and at all levels, have implemented actions that build on the strengths inherent in a given community while reinforcing the reciprocal support between them. Far from operating in silos, these actions allow families to get the appropriate service at the appropriate time and delivered by the appropriate organization.

Moreover, the capacity of the groups supported by Avenir d'enfants for acting together has strengthened considerably over time, evolving from a more networking-focused dynamic reliant on information exchange and product coordination to genuinely collaborative work practices.

#### Rewarding partnerships with Indigenous communities

Close collaborations have been established with First Nations, Inuit, and Cree communities for the purpose of acting early on behalf of the children and families in these Indigenous communities. These collaborations have helped enhance the empowerment among the individuals, organizations, and communities concerned, while at all times recognizing the Indigenous organizations' expertise. Genuine collaborations have materialized under an agreement signed between Avenir d'enfants and the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission; another partnership took shape to extend support to the Cree Nation through the implementation of the Maamuu Uhpichinaasuutaau strategy; the Inuit have been offered support under the Ilagiinut project; and guidance was made available to the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec (Quebec Association of Native Friendship Centres) during the implementation phase of the Mamu Atussetau project.

#### Coordination is key

*“Designating a leadership responsible for coordinating actions has enabled us to implement concrete actions in the community, circulate information and coordinate more effectively, and achieve higher partner attendance levels at meetings.”*

- A member of a local group of partners, loose translation.

*“We don't put the children and then the parents in a silo.”*

*“Starting out from a focus on health allows us to intervene at other levels, to take things further.”*

- The director and a counsellor at the Val-d'Or Native Friendship Centre, loose translation.





## Enhanced collaboration with parents

Year after year, the action plans submitted by the groups of partners showed a progression towards prioritizing a wider range of participation types meant to encourage greater parental involvement. The parents' implication in the community, along with activities that are relevant to them, is essential for ensuring the well-being of families as well as the wider community.

In an effort to make parents' needs a core priority among the local groups of partners, the Voix des parents process was implemented in 82 communities across Québec over the course of Avenir d'enfants' mandate. This turn-key process usually brings together about 15 parent-citizens to constitute a working group tasked with drawing up a portrait of the needs of families in the community and suggesting concrete solutions for communities to become more child- and family-friendly. Financial support was awarded for projects seeking to expand parents' involvement and participation, and content under the topic Working together with parents was added on the agirtot.org website.

In 2019, 66% of all actions targeting parents focused on their involvement; 39% of actions aimed to collaborate with them, and 40% sought to extend decision-making powers to the parents. That means a substantial part of the actions targeting parents allowed for their implication as volunteers during a neighbourhood party; their collaboration on a stakeholder committee to answer specific questions; or their ability to actively participate in a roundtable discussion, or organize and manage a bartering activity between families.

*“For me, the experience was an eye-opener about who I am. It has left its mark on my daily life. [...] My actions as part of the Voix des parents process also gave me a sense that I was helping to improve the lives of hundreds of children in my neighbourhood, including my own.”*

- Mélanie Bourgeois, committed citizen and mother, Québec City, loose translation.

## Improved intervention practices

Numerous innovation projects at the regional and Québec-wide levels have helped reinforce intervention practices by enhancing early childhood stakeholders' professional and managerial expertise and guiding the changes in practices.

Likewise at the local level, more than two thirds of the local groups of partners (69%) receiving guidance and support from Avenir d'enfants experienced a substantial improvement in their ability to reach out to children and families by reconsidering their practices.

*“The changed practices in the way fathers are welcomed has led to their increased attendance at activities. The fathers have also become more involved with their children. As such, the sharing groups for parents saw participation rates rise from 25 to 80, including many more dads. The prenatal courses for fathers were a huge success. Many more couples than before come to the CLSC when their children have an appointment.”*

- A member of a local group of partners, loose translation.

## **Evaluative culture boom**

Our partners have developed and implemented an evaluative culture. This allows for more well-honed actions, which, in turn, have more positive impacts on the children and families. These skills are crucial for maintaining a collaborative dynamic among the partners, ensuring that the actions carried out on behalf of children and their families are of high quality, while also serving to convince the funding partners of the added value gained from collective action.

*“We are better able to account for our actions (more accurate reporting, more reliable figures, etc.) and the impact they have on our children and families, not to mention that we can share our success stories with the community.”*

- A member of a local group of partners, loose translation.

## **The agirtôt.org web platform**

### **Showcasing the expertise of our early childhood development partners and inspiring each other**

The purpose of the agirtot.org web platform is to help enable the different partners in their efforts to improve the overall development of preschoolers across Québec. The agirtot.org website offers content on various subjects connected to early childhood development and collective efforts, which draw on the experiences and the expertise of Avenir d'enfants' partners.

The website also highlights the learning outcomes partners have attained. The publication of their accomplishments, tools, and evaluation processes is meant to inspire similar actions among other early childhood development stakeholders. One of the objectives is to narrow the gap between theoretical content and concrete action.

**agirtôt.org**

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concertée en petite enfance



## **Strategic priority 2: Reaching out to families living in underprivileged circumstances**

Taking action in underprivileged environments as soon as possible is essential for fostering equality of opportunity in the lives of young children. However, this is a complex undertaking, seeing how the life journeys of families living in underprivileged circumstances—beginning with pregnancy—can often be more difficult.

### **Structuring projects**

In an attempt to more effectively reach out to families living in underprivileged circumstances, over the course of Avenir d'enfants' mandate, 19 structuring projects were implemented under innovation partnerships as well as with Indigenous nations. The goal of these projects was to improve service quality and early childhood development expertise and practices so as to intervene more effectively on behalf of underprivileged children and families. These initiatives were carried out within the education system, the public health and social services network, educational child care services and community networks, as well as through municipal and regional projects.

### **Partners defying obstacles**

When seeking to establish a range of adapted, high-quality services, it is essential to listen to the needs articulated by the families, seeing how each and every one of them faces obstacles on their paths. While the sources of these obstacles can sometimes be traced back to the parent or the family themselves, they are also associated with the intervention workers, organizations, the government, or society at large. In an attempt to enhance the services available to families, many partners have carefully considered and acknowledged the strengths and limitations connected to the actions and services on offer for the children and families in their respective communities. As such, the projects supported by Avenir d'enfants have been able to clearly document and enhance the understanding of the different types of obstacles in play, and thereby seek more effective methods and actions to overturn them.

Local groups of partners have implemented strategies designed to more successfully reach out to these families, and encourage their participation in and access to available activities and services. The focus on outreach work as an effective strategy for connecting with families living in underprivileged circumstances has grown significantly in recent years. Among other things, this approach makes it possible to engage with hard-to-reach, isolated families that don't make use of available services.



*“Thanks to the outreach officer’s endeavours, some families, with whom a sound relationship of trust had been established, managed to overcome their isolation; access (free or low-cost) family-centred activities; solidify their children’s school-readiness and guide them through various processes; develop a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood; empower themselves to act (solving a work-related situation, ending a conjugal violence situation); handle basic needs such as healthy eating, appropriate clothing, or a better understanding of certain public services such as public transport and the school system.”*

- Excerpt from the evaluation report of a Laval-based group of partners, loose translation.

### **Web content and tools for rethinking existing practices**

One of the topics featured on [agirtot.org](http://agirtot.org) deals with how to more effectively reach out to families living in underprivileged circumstances. It includes information about the obstacles families face, outreach work, and the inspiring initiatives implemented by some partners.

More specifically, the content includes turn-key tools and concrete actions for more effectively reaching out to the families with the greatest needs: the Constellation Approach, the *Halte-garderie du coeur... pour toujours!* and *Les Cellules de renouvellement de pratiques*.

Over the past few years, the partners supported by Avenir d’enfants have had several opportunities to exchange and discuss the intervention realities connected to families living in underprivileged circumstances:

- Thematic event: *Créer une relation de confiance parents-intervenant, la clé pour soutenir les familles vivant en contexte de défavorisation* (Creating a relationship of trust between parents and intervention workers—the key to supporting families living in underprivileged circumstances) as part of the Journées annuelles de santé publique (annual public health days, or JASP) in 2018
- Regional events: *Dialogue entre parents et intervenants* (Dialogue between parents and intervention workers)
- Workshop proposals for exploring the obstacles faced by families
- Regional forums on strategies for more effectively engaging hard-to-reach, isolated families

### **Strategic priority 3: Advancing the cause: striving to make early childhood development a social priority**

The major social changes aspired to by early childhood development partners cannot materialize without the public’s and decision-makers’ support. Avenir d’enfants and its partners have been pushing the issue and exerting their influence in the hope of getting early childhood development recognized as a social priority.



## **The perinatal period: a growing concern**

The collective efforts undertaken in Québec in early childhood development over the years have seen an increasing focus on preventive measures concerning the perinatal period. The sooner action is taken the better the chances that children develop their full potential and gain a solid footing for embarking on their life journeys.

Over the course of Avenir d'enfants' collective project, hundreds of local initiatives have been devoted to children's earliest years with their families. The increased focus on the perinatal period has been sustained over time: in 2019, 83% of groups continued to carry out actions centred on pregnancy and the first years of life. Out of a total \$2.5 million grant budget devoted specifically to initiatives connected to the pregnancy period, 66% of grants were awarded between 2017 and 2019.

## **Large-scale population surveys**

With Avenir d'enfants' support, it was possible to carry out large-scale surveys, the results of which have been made available to its partners:

- Enquête sur le développement des enfants à la maternelle (Québec Survey of Child Development in Kindergarten or EQDEM) in 2012 and in 2017
- Enquête québécoise sur le parcours préscolaire des enfants à la maternelle (Québec Survey on the Preschool Path of Kindergarten Students or EQPPM) in 2017
- Initiative Perspectives parents (Perspectives parents initiative), carried out in 2015 in partnership with the Institut de la statistique du Québec and Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières

## **Raising the public profile of early childhood development**

Thanks in large part to the many contributions of Avenir d'enfants' partners, early childhood development has managed to carve out an increasingly larger space in the public sphere. As a matter of fact, 10% of all actions supported by Avenir d'enfants included a component focused on the importance of early intervention by influencing local and Québec-wide decision-makers and the general public.

Public opinion with regard to early childhood development has also seen a favourable shift. The rate of Quebecers who believe that early childhood development ought to figure among political decision-makers' priorities rose from 60% in 2015 to 75% in 2018, while—also in 2018—87% of Quebecers felt the government should do more to support early childhood development. And last but not least, the rate of Quebecers who consider young children's development a shared or collective responsibility increased from 67% in 2015 to 77% in 2018.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Surveys conducted by the Léger company on behalf of the Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon and the Observatoire des tout-petits.

The influencer stance adopted by Avenir d'enfants and its 3000 partners has certainly made a difference in the remarkable evolution of the public profile of early childhood development. In particular, this was achieved through representations made before decision-makers, as well as participation in numerous public consultations.

*“The Certification-Famille project has helped raise awareness among relevant stakeholders (merchants, municipalities, public spaces, community spaces, etc.) about the needs of families who would like to access their spaces. A number of physical arrangements and accommodations were carried out in order to address the requirements of families and their young children. In some municipalities, this project was incorporated into family policies.”*

- A member of a local group of partners, loose translation.

### **Major policy initiatives targeting early childhood development**

The prominent position early childhood development has gained in the public eye is finding expression in the public policies that have been implemented in recent years. No matter what is at stake—education, health, or the fight against poverty—early intervention, prevention, and supporting families now take centre stage in major government policies, such as:

- Agir tôt program
- Québec's preventive health policy
- Québec's policy on educational success
- Stratégie 0-8 ans
- Québec's national health program

## **Four major recommendations**

This summary report covering ten years of collective action provides Avenir d'enfants with a unique vantage for substantiating the learning outcomes attained by the partners, who have worked hard to support children and their families throughout Québec. Backed by the experiences of over 3000 partners—active in every region and every network, at the local, regional, and Québec-wide levels—Avenir d'enfants has drawn on this report's contents to formulate four major forward-looking recommendations, as well as some suggested courses of action for putting them into practice.

To see all the suggested courses of action, please consult Avenir d'enfants full summary report.



## **Recommendation 1: Set up winning conditions in support of collective action on behalf of families and children**

### **COURSES OF ACTION**

#### **Coordination and mobilization support for early childhood development**

- Make resources available to establish a position tasked with coordinating activities and supporting the early childhood development partners at the local and regional levels.
- Maintain the existing agreements with First Nations, Cree, and Inuit in order to support their empowerment on behalf of the children and families in their communities.

#### **Funding and accountability**

- Support collective action with funding and guidance that meet the priorities, as defined by the local and regional stakeholders, such as:
  - restricting funding to project proposals
  - using flexible funding criteria
  - allowing for experimentation and innovation
- Support the roll-out of action plans with a minimum three-year duration and streamline the reporting requirements in cases where a single project is supported by several donors or funding partners.

#### **Evaluations and using the results**

- Provide dedicated support for participatory evaluations conducted by and for the local partners that make room for critical reflections concerning the manner of working together, the initiatives implemented, and their impact on the children and families and their environments.
- Maintain and promote the [agirtot.org](http://agirtot.org) web platform as a tool for sharing and knowledge transfer between partners implicated in early childhood development.

## **Recommendation 2: Improve coordination between family services**

### **COURSES OF ACTION**

#### **Service continuum**

- Beginning with pregnancy, establish a preventive service continuum involving all frontline services (family medicine groups, pharmacists, community organizations, social pediatrics centres, drop-in child care centres, municipal day camps, educational child care services, school boards, integrated health and social services centres, etc.) by improving, among other things, the coordination between the individual services so that children and families can more readily access the appropriate resources.



- Grant adequate, recurring funding support to Family Resource Centres, community drop-in child care centres, and perinatal resource centres so they are in a position to live up to their supporting and guiding roles regarding children and their families.
- Drawing on relevant government policies (Québec preventive health policy, Policy on educational success, Stratégie 0-8 ans, and Québec's 2015-2015 national health program), establish and support an inter-ministerial body with a mandate to coordinate the implementation of measures and services intended for children and their parents, from pregnancy until school entry.

### **Strengthening parents' capacity to act**

- Implicate parents in the elaboration of available family services and the evaluation of service quality, and institute regular dialogue spaces between parents and the individuals working in these services.
- Support community initiatives that aim to strengthen families' capacity to act with regard to their living conditions (access to food and housing, access to jobs and schooling, integration of immigrants, etc.).

## **Recommendation 3: Ensure support is adapted to the needs of families living in underprivileged circumstances**

### **COURSES OF ACTION**

#### **Outreach approach**

- Support outreach services (frontline community workers, resources deployed beyond the organizations' walls, etc.) based on the communities' experiences with implementing these types of initiatives.
- Integrate the outreach approach success factors into the work practices of the individuals employed in the health and social services network:
  - Meet with the families in places where they already are
  - Strengthen families' capacity to act so they can wield greater control over their lives
  - Assign an outreach worker to look after all the organizations in a given community and act as a facilitator between the community's resources and the families

#### **Continuous improvement of the available guidance and services**

- Put in place success factors that enable organizations to regularly review their practices in order to ease the access barriers.





## **Recommendation 4: Make developing the full potential of every child a social priority by taking action from pregnancy until the transition into school**

### **COURSES OF ACTION**

#### **Service quality**

- Strengthen support measures to help improve the quality of the services available to children and families with enhanced guidance and funding resources in order to:
  - Improve the theoretical and practical aspects of the basic training program for individuals tasked with working with children and their families, with a particular focus on such subjects as intervention in underprivileged environments, access barriers, relationship with the parent, social and emotional skills, and language development.
  - Support the continuous improvement of practices, professional training and development, and integration of knowledge and skills into the networks that offer services for children and families.

#### **Population surveys and research**

- Enhance knowledge about the status of children's development and their parents' experiences (replicating Québec Survey of Child Development in Kindergarten (QSCDK), Québec Survey on the Experience of Parents of Children Aged 0 to 5 (QSEPC), Québec Survey on the Preschool Path of Kindergarten Students (QSPPKS))

#### **Public policies**

- Adopt a new perinatal policy to succeed the one that expired in 2018 and support a diverse and universally accessible range of perinatal services.
- Institute a systematic practice whereby the pregnancy confirmation appointment also serves as the starting point for the perinatal service continuum.

#### **Québec-wide collective**

- Maintain a Québec-wide intersectoral committee with a mandate to make early childhood development a social priority.



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