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***"COVID-19-Inspired" Innovations in
Early Learning and Care for Newcomer Children:
A Rapid Evaluation***

Catalyst Research & Development Inc.

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March 31, 2021



Funded by:

Financé par :



Immigration, Refugees
and Citizenship Canada

Immigration, Réfugiés
et Citoyenneté Canada

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1. Acronyms

AB CS Alberta Children's Services

CIWA Calgary Immigrant Women's Association

CMAS Childminding Monitoring, Advisory and Support (National)

CNC Care for Newcomer Children

ECD Early Childhood Development

EL Early Learning

GGP Global Gathering Place (Saskatoon)

IRCC Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada

LFS Lethbridge Family Services

LINC Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (IRCC funded)

RETIS River East Transcona Immigrant Services (Winnipeg)

RIWC Regina Immigrant Women Centre

2. Acknowledgements & Request

We are grateful to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) for funding Care for Newcomer Children (CNC) in the five centres, and this evaluation, as well as to Childminding Monitoring, Advisory and Support (CMAS) for their support of the centres in Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

We offer many thanks to the advisory members, as this evaluation would not be as successful without their guidance and feedback. We are grateful for their efforts in facilitating data gathering, and particularly navigating the complexities of surveying parents of diverse languages and cultures, and the art-based projects with children.

Finally, and most important of all, we acknowledge the dedication of the CNC staff and parents. They have worked many extra hours – often in less-than-ideal conditions – for the sake of the children. Then, after their full day of work, they took time to complete our surveys and participate in our focus groups – so that others might learn and benefit from what they shared. In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed their creativity, resilience, and willingness to do what is needed for the sake of the children.

We appreciate you all!

We hope this report is helpful - for stimulating thought about young newcomers' families, early learning and care, and possibilities for remote delivery. We hope it contributes to improving practices and supportive policies and, ultimately, to extension to all who can benefit.

Each of the participating agencies developed expertise in remote delivery of early learning and care and are worthy of further support. They will be able to assist any who are interested in early learning and care and, perhaps, guide you as you explore this further.

If you found this report useful, please let us know. Please contact the agency most relevant to you and cc Catalyst at ekrupa@ualberta.ca.

Best wishes on your journey,

Eugene Krupa & Vamini Selvanandan

Catalyst Research & Development Inc.

3. Executive Summary

The early years last a lifetime! Research in Canada and globally has shown that early childhood environments and experiences strongly influence development of children’s brains and body systems. Early learning and care are determinants of health, well-being and success in school years and beyond.

The purpose of this rapid evaluation (10 weeks from start to finish) was to: **a. Describe CNC delivery models and practices** that emerged due to COVID-19 pandemic public health restrictions; **b. Capture “lessons learned”** in these first few months; and **c. Offer recommendations.** The emphasis was on **online activities**, as agencies and funders shared this interest. **We hope the knowledge gained will inform policies and practices** and improve options for parents and children - during the pandemic and in future.

Newcomer families and children have unique needs, so supports must be appropriate, accessible and responsive. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) funds these five agencies in the prairie provinces to support early learning and Care for Newcomer Children (CNC): **Calgary** Immigrant Women’s Association; **Lethbridge** Family Services; (**Saskatoon**) Global Gathering Place; **Regina** Immigrant Women Centre; (**Winnipeg**) River East Transcona Immigrant Services. The agencies also provide employment assistance, language classes (or language learning referrals), settlement services and other opportunities for newcomers. Children benefit directly from CNC and indirectly from the positive outcomes their parents achieve, including cross-cultural connections, communication skills and successful school entry.

The COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020) necessitated restrictions on in-person childcare services. When restrictions eased, significant barriers remained, so agencies developed **remote delivery models**². They incorporated telephone and online conferencing, pre-recorded videos, in-home visits, learning packages, online communities, as summarized in this chart. One hundred and thirty children from 21 different countries of origin participated in online sessions. The full report includes individual site summaries.

	Calgary ¹	Lethbridge	Saskatoon	Regina	Winnipeg
Regulatory Affiliation	AB CS	AB CS	CMAS	CMAS	CMAS
# children attending online	28	5	69	13	12
# children 0-6 attending online	28	5	50	10	12
Dates online sessions were offered	Oct 20->	Jan 21->	May 20->	Mar 20->	Mar - Sep 20
Delivery Model Features					
Adapted curriculum to online	✓	In progress	✓	✓	✓
“Live” online sessions (Live)	✓	In progress	✓	✓	✓
“Video” online sessions	✓	-	-	-	✓
Online communities: Facebook, WhatsApp		✓	✓	✓	
Outreach (phone, email, text)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Home visits	✓	✓	✓	-	✓
Supports Provided to Families					
Digital devices loaned	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
Technical support (Remote, In-Person)	Re	-	Re + In	Re + In	Re
Children’s activity kits	✓	In progress	✓	✓	✓

¹ **Calgary** Immigrant Women’s Association; **Lethbridge** Family Services; (**Saskatoon**) Global Gathering Place; **Regina** Immigrant Women Centre; (**Winnipeg**) River East Transcona Immigrant Services

² Agencies proposed “remote delivery” as the best term to represent the very broad range of services provided off-site.

Evaluation

These evaluation questions were of greatest interest to the agencies and funder:

- What CNC delivery models and practices are agencies using? And how do these align with their situations (i.e., context, populations served, resources available)?
- What tools, technology, resources and preparation are needed to implement these practices?
- What challenges emerged in providing and sustaining online activities? How were these overcome?
- What were the main barriers and facilitators to accessing online children's activities?
- What are the strengths of the program? What can be improved?
- How do online children's activities compare to in-person CNC?
- How can agencies engage with families to better meet their childcare needs?
- What very early outcomes for parents and children can we observe?

The design, methods and data collection for this rapid evaluation were customized to accommodate the unique features of the agencies, newcomer populations (e.g., low language literacy, low digital literacy, and diversity) and limitations in time and financial resources. **Quantitative and qualitative data** were gathered from parents in a survey (representing 60% of participating families). We gathered insights through **focus groups with CNC staff and managers, and from family art and photovoice projects**. Response rates and data quality were high. Details are provided in the full report and appendices.

Lessons Learned

- 1. Remote services can be enjoyable and satisfying for both parents and children and help achieve learning outcomes** (cognitive, social and physical). Even so, they strongly preferred *in-person* learning.
- 2. Remote services can meet important needs for newcomer children and families.** It helped them continue to learn, but also overcome barriers due to pandemic and other factors, stay socially connected, and be informed about health guidelines and services available.
- 3. Effective transition to online delivery requires understanding families, and adapting approaches** to their situations: learning needs, assets and challenges; barriers to remote learning (including language, fears, comfort with technology); and facilitating factors for families and populations served.
- 4. Adapting learning plans, expectations and delivery is key.** It took time to engage staff, but facilitated ownership, and enabled staff to add their ideas to development in key areas: curriculum and learning expectations; approaches and activities (e.g., type and length of activities, child safety, fine motor skills); delivery system/mode appropriate for teaching/learning objectives (e.g., live [synchronous] sessions may be better than pre-recorded videos).
- 5. Building staff capacity is crucial.** This would include using technology effectively, finding opportunities, overcoming challenges online and in homes, and monitoring and evaluation.
- 6. Training and policy support received from provincial or national hubs is key.** The support from CMAS and AB CS helped agencies learn from each other and improve quality.
- 7. Building family capacity for remote learning is essential.** Assess technology access and use as well as family characteristics (composition, language, logistics, availability) and child development knowledge and skills. Providing devices, technical support, and online support communities was beneficial.

8. Providing “toolkits” with materials for use at home is helpful. Consider materials needed for adapted “home-based” activities; procurement and assembly; timely arrival; resources for materials and logistics.

9. Participating in remote learning activities helped parents become partners in early learning.

Previously, most parents simply dropped children off to childcare while they went to classes. In remote learning, parents had active roles (in conferencing, discussions, setting up activities and materials, etc.). This enabled them to observe more closely, and better understand their children, early childhood development and how to facilitate learning beyond the sessions. More fathers seem to be more involved, and children’s respect for parents may be increasing – all important outcomes in ECD and in resettlement.

10. Agencies were resilient and created remote delivery policies and practices to respond to their new realities. They created appropriate ways to assess needs, communicate with families and support them (email/phone, online communities, etc.) and train staff. Agencies established new systems to procure, distribute, loan and maintain home-use devices and materials. They examined and adjusted timing of “live” sessions and staff work hours, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and resources/budgets (for digital devices, home-use materials and other items above).

Implications and Recommendations

A. The agencies should continue to collaborate in developing remote delivery of EL & CNC. They designed and used different approaches in response to the families and populations they served, organizational capacities, etc., and have demonstrated success. They work well together, and it is likely a wise investment to support their collaboration and next steps in evolving approaches, and create access to other families currently unable to access quality early learning and care (see D below).

B. Knowledge should be shared with other agencies contemplating similar programs. This group is able to deliver satisfaction and achieve important outcomes, and could mentor and support other agencies.

C. Provincial and national government agencies should consider the lessons learned as the develop policies relating to early learning and care for newcomer children, as well as those who are settled. COVID-19 will be with us for some time, but the challenges families face in accessing quality early learning and childcare will persist for many years. Remote delivery can address some of these challenges.

D. Local, provincial and national government agencies should consider expanding remote delivery to include families that are unable to access quality early learning services. I.e., families on waitlists for in-person services; experiencing child and/or parent illness; residing in a major urban centre but too far from services; living in the many prairie towns and small cities that have no appropriate services. **Remote early learning can also supplement and complement in-person early learning** (with additional resources). This evaluation showed early positive outcomes, and agencies in this project could help to mentor others.

E. Establish guidelines for remote early learning. These are emerging and can be enhanced through a review of the growing body of knowledge on toddler and preschooler learning in relevant contexts.

F. Conduct a full developmental and outcome evaluation of programs – to inform agency, provincial and national policies and practices. This should include a scan of programs offered elsewhere, documenting agency/community situations, using knowledge to improve practices and processes and, eventually, documenting outcomes achieved. In addition to ECD outcomes, it is important to measure outcomes related to services, parent engagement and support in early learning, change in parenting role (from passive to partner in ECD). Comparisons with in-person offerings, or other contexts will be challenging.



"My family loves online sessions which keeps my child engaged and happy."

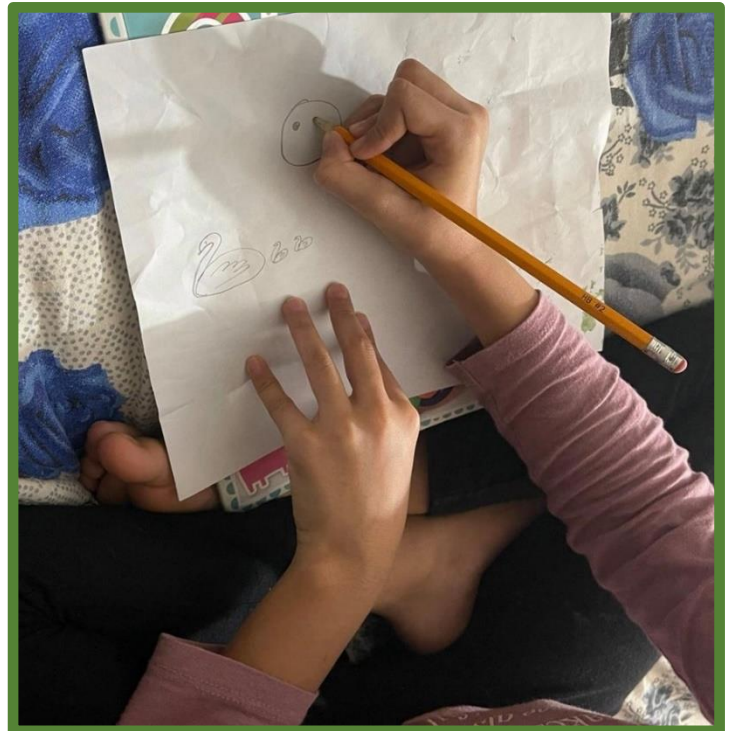
– Parent

"I am so happy I have this class I don't ever want it to stop."

– Child

"I cannot say how glad I am for the staff and this class [remote CNC]. I am so happy this exists. Thank you so much from the bottom of my heart."

- Parent



4. Introduction

Early childhood experiences play a key role in shaping lives and are key determinants of health and well-being in adulthood [1]. For newcomer children, early experiences of childcare begin their journey of settlement and integration into the country that is their new home. Newcomer families and children have unique needs requiring appropriate and responsive service delivery models [2].

In the Prairie provinces, five organizations funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) have provided these specialized services for newcomer children during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Calgary Immigrant Women's Association
- Global Gathering Place (Saskatoon)
- Regina Immigrant Women Centre
- River East Transcona Immigrant Services (Winnipeg)
- Lethbridge Family Services

These organizations recognize that newcomers require support in adapting to life in Canada and provide employment assistance, language classes (or language learning referrals), settlement services and volunteer opportunities for refugees and immigrants. Acknowledging the family as a unit for settlement and integration, they also provide opportunities for newcomer children to engage in learning and childcare activities.

Children benefit directly from Care for Newcomer Children (CNC) programming as well as indirectly from the positive outcomes their parents experience. Through CNC they have the opportunity to develop cognitively, physically and socially through interactions with childcare workers and their peers. They make cross-cultural connections and improve their communication skills [3]. CNC programs are often the places where newcomer children learn their first words in English, as well as prepare for transition to school [3].

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced a change in the way CNC programs could be delivered. Initially, strict public health restrictions forced CNC programs to halt in-person childcare and deliver services off-site and remotely. When public health restrictions were eased and in-person services resumed, several barriers to in-person attendance to CNC programs were noted including: 1) parents experiencing a lack of confidence in their ability to keep themselves safe during the pandemic; 2) parental fear that their children would not be able to follow public health guidelines while on public transportation or during in-person childcare; 3) parental fear of using public transportation due to harassment or exposure to the COVID-19 virus; 4) parental fear that vulnerable family members at home could get exposed to the virus through their children [3].

The organizations providing CNC rapidly adapted their programs to remove barriers to accessing childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. They started providing off-site childcare services and relaunched in-person delivery of CNC when public health guidelines allowed. The alternative CNC programs took various forms including outreach to families through telephone or videoconferencing, home visits, delivering packages with art and craft supplies, creating on-line communities, and online children's activities.

Although each organization used a different basket of services to provide alternative childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are several commonalities to their approach including:

- family-centered settlement and integration services that acknowledge newcomer children as their clients as well as their parents,
- understanding that newcomers are disproportionately and differently affected by the pandemic,
- recognition that service delivery needs to adapt to overcome unique and novel barriers to meet client needs, and
- deployment of multiple modalities to meet newcomer children’s needs.

5. Evaluation Purpose

The purpose of this rapid evaluation (10 weeks from start to finish) was as follows:

- Describe CNC delivery models and practices** that emerged due to COVID-19 pandemic public health restrictions;
- Capture “lessons learned”** in these first few months; and
- Offer recommendations.**

The emphasis was on **online or “remote” activities**, as agencies and funders shared this interest. **We trust the knowledge gained will inform policies and practices** and improve options for parents and children - during the pandemic and into the future.

6. Evaluation Questions

These evaluation questions were of greatest interest to the agencies and funder:

- What alternative CNC delivery models and practices are being/have been used?
- How do these align with their situation (i.e., context, populations served, resources available)?
- What tools, technology, resources and preparation are needed to implement these practices?
- What challenges emerged in providing and sustaining online activities? How were these overcome?
- What were the main barriers and facilitators to accessing online children’s activities?
- What are the strengths of the program? What can be improved?
- How does online children’s activities compare to in-person CNC?
- How can you engage with families better to meet their childcare needs?
- What very early outcomes for parents and children can we observe?

The Evaluation Pathway and Outcome Map are detailed in Appendices A and B.

7. Evaluation Design and Methods

A one group post-test design was used to evaluate outcomes related to parents and children. Mixed methods were used to collect data and answer evaluation questions. Triangulation using more than one kind of evidence (quantitative and qualitative) and including perspectives from multiple stakeholders increases the strength of the evaluation and confidence in the findings [4]. Quantitative information was obtained through parent surveys and was compared to qualitative data gathered through focus groups with CNC staff and program managers as well as art/photovoice projects created by newcomer families.

Design, methods and data collection tools in this rapid evaluation were adapted to unique aspects of the newcomer population (including low language literacy and low digital literacy) and limitations in time and financial resources.

8. Site / Organizational Descriptions

A. Calgary Immigrant Women's Association - Calgary, Alberta

The Organization

Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA) is a culturally diverse settlement agency that recognizes, responds to, and focuses on the unique concerns and needs of immigrant and refugee women, girls, and their families. CIWA is recognized as a provincial and national leader in outcome-based gender-specific settlement services. The organization uses a holistic approach and offers programs in the areas of settlement and integration, literacy and language training, employment support and bridging programs, family violence, parenting, individual counselling, in-home support, civic engagement, health, housing, and community development. All clients have access to first language support and childcare during group sessions and individual appointments.

The Innovation

The Alternative Childcare Pilot for LINC Children was designed to support and address their needs during the pandemic. The online and in-person delivery focused on the cognitive, social and emotional development of children. Children of mothers enrolled in online LINC classes received in-person childcare services for children (24 months-6 years) and Online Childcare Services (30 months -6 years) through electronic platforms while their mothers attend online LINC classes. The program is funded by IRCC.

Launching the Alternative Childcare Pilot for LINC Children required several steps of preparation. A theme-based, customised curriculum was developed to address the needs of children and mothers. CNC childcare staff received training in conducting the Ages and Stages Questionnaire, in-home visitation, survey training for the Alternative Childcare Needs Assessment, curriculum development and evaluation data entry. Electronic meeting platform accounts were assigned to childcare staff to connect with children and their mothers. Client preparation included phone contact to enroll children in the program and loaning of laptops to those who did not have access to electronic devices at home.



Program Activities	<p>Remote CNC sessions using theme-based curricula for maximum 2 h/wk. Children participated alone or accompanied by their parents.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • play-based, interactive and hands-on activities such as book reading, songs and rhymes, arts and crafts etc. <p>Home visits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CNC staff engaged children in activities to improve all-round development at their homes. <p>Home deliveries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CNC staff delivered resiliency toolboxes to client homes each month containing class material, curriculum and educational supplies.
Tools and Resources	<p>Human Resources: LINC CNC Program Coordinator, Language Training and Childcare Department Manager, 9 Early Childhood Educators (Level 1 staff – 6; Level 2 staff – 1; Level 3 staff – 2)</p> <p>Curriculum: theme-based</p> <p>Electronic platforms: Zoom, WhatsApp</p> <p>Resiliency Toolboxes: children's books, crayons, markers, craft paper, colouring supplies, toys, children's mask, hand sanitizer, disposable gloves, shopping bag, Christmas toys</p> <p>Technology: Phones, computers, laptops, smartphones</p>
Population served	<p>Families:27; Mothers:27; Children: 32;</p> <p>Countries of origin: Canada, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, India, Israel, Kuwait, Syria, Turkey</p> <p>Languages spoken: Amharic, Arabic, Dinka, Farsi, French, Hindi, Nuer, Oromo, Persian, Portuguese, Tigrinya, Turkish</p> <p>> 30% of children served are refugees; about 50% born in Canada</p>
Intended users of the program	<p>Mothers who are attending online LINC classes and their children (30 months to 6 years old) who are registered in LINC childcare services</p> <p>Mothers who are comfortable with in-person home visits by childcare staff</p> <p>Mothers who are comfortable ONLY through online platforms</p> <p>Mothers who are not comfortable with either of these 2 options</p>

B. Lethbridge Family Services - Lethbridge, Alberta

The Organization

Lethbridge Family Services, Immigrant Services department supports newcomer families in adapting to life in Lethbridge. The program provides settlement services, employment assistance, orientation to life in Canada and volunteer opportunities for refugees and immigrants. The organization recently received funding to provide a childcare program to their clients. Implementation was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in November 2020 the decision was made to launch the program.

The Innovation

The Childcare for Newcomer Families program is funded by IRCC and currently has 5 spaces for children between 19 months and 5 years. Childcare sessions are offered in-person either on-site or at the Resettlement Assistance Program apartments where their newcomer clients are residing. Childcare is currently provided in-person with preparation underway for providing online CNC for Government Supported Refugee families who have just arrived in Canada and are still within their quarantine period.



<i>Program Activities</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program activities are under development with the current focus being on literacy and numeracy. • CNC staff engage children in drawing, crafts, coloring and games. • 20-30 hours of CNC per week (each child receives 20-30 hours of CNC over an 8 week period)
<i>Tools and Resources</i>	<p>Human Resources: 1 Childcare worker Supplies: arts and crafts supplies Materials: books, toys, blocks Technology: tablets for use by parents may be used by children in future</p>
<i>Population served</i>	<p>Families: 3; Mothers:3; Fathers:2; Children: 5 Countries of Origin: Somalia, Syria, Eritrea Languages spoken at home: Arabic, Sudanese Arabic, Tigrinya, Somali Clients may be vulnerable (young, single mothers), have little knowledge of life in Canada or need to enhance parenting skills. Children may not have had early learning opportunities previously.</p>
<i>Intended users of the program</i>	Children whose parents have Permanent Resident status and participate in Resettlement Assistance Program or the Newcomer Settlement Services Program orientations.

Lethbridge Family Services was not yet conducting online children’s learning activities at the time of data collection for this evaluation and thus does not have data summarized in the evaluation findings of this report. However, a preliminary survey of 4 parents (with 5 children) showed early positive outcomes related to parent satisfaction and learning outcomes for children.

D. Global Gathering Place - Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

The Organization

Global Gathering Place (GGP) is located in Saskatchewan's largest city and provides personalized settlement assistance to thousands of newcomers every year. The drop-in non-profit organization helps newcomers navigate everything from language, health care, case management, employment, housing to life skills and more through a dynamic variety of programs and services that support clients in building knowledge and making connections. The Care for Newcomer Children (CNC) and Childminding programs are provided to clients attending Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC), Skills Aimed For Empowerment (SAFE), Stage 1&2 English, Communication Circle, and other settlement programs. Many clients can only access these services if childcare is provided. Other programs for parents and children offered at GGP include the Maternal Assistance Program, BrightStart!, Early Language Learning Program, and Homework Help, and all these offer information, resources, parenting and school support, and culturally safe spaces for connections critical to the families' successful integration in the community.



The Innovation

GGP's Remote CNC program was launched to support families at a time when public health restrictions precluded the provision of onsite CNC. Due to ongoing need, the program has continued even after in-person CNC relaunched in October 2020. The program is funded by IRCC and the Ministry of Immigration and Career Training, Government of Saskatchewan. Remote CNC sessions are offered to children 3-10 years of age and delivered several times a week to newcomer families participating primarily in language and settlement programs.

Preparation was required prior to launching GGP's Remote CNC program. Necessary tools, training, and other support were provided to staff by GGP to transition to remote programming. Staff discussions on vision and plans for alternative delivery, as well as assistance from CMAS (through webinars and sharing cafes), helped create the online model and resources, shape policies and develop remote CNC curriculum. Client preparation occurred through telephone calls and emails after the closure of onsite CNC services and involved assessment of needs and remote technological support for those who required it.

<p>Program Activities</p>	<p>Remote CNC sessions using theme-based curricula for 21.5 hours / week. Several scheduled group sessions were provided throughout each week. Younger children participated with parents; older children mostly on their own.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lessons on language, mathematics, days/months of the year, Canadian culture, topics on self-care, manners, food, nutrition and healthy eating, dental hygiene, school readiness, the pandemic, etc. • open-ended conversations and communication practice • storytelling, reading, rhymes and videos • songs, singing, and music • movement, dance, fitness, and body breaks • arts and crafts • virtual tours • information about community programs and services for families <p>Online community and support through emails and telephone calls, which provide parents with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • craft and art ideas, • exercise/ fitness/movement and physical activity ideas, • story/book/video recommendations, • information on relevant topics such as the pandemic, self-care, winter dressing, Canadian holidays, etc., • information about GGP’s programs and community supports, services, and resources, and • an online community of staff and peer support. <p>Home deliveries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff delivered learning and activity kits (arts and crafts supplies, etc.) to clients’ homes weekly. These toolkits were used during online sessions.
<p>Tools and Resources</p>	<p>Human resources: 2 CNC Staff, 1 Language Services Manager Curriculum: theme-based ideas, materials, and resources Electronic platforms: Zoom, Facebook, YouTube Toolboxes: worksheets, writing and colouring materials, books, arts and craft supplies, treats and gifts on special occasions such as Halloween, Christmas, Valentine’s Day, etc. (some gifts were donated by the community) Materials: whiteboards, posters, worksheets and other educational resources, cultural artifacts, etc. Technology: tablets, laptops, desktop computers, cellphones</p>
<p>Population served</p>	<p>Families: 41; Mothers: 19; Fathers: 7; Children: 69 (36 boys, 33 girls) Countries of Origin: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Eritrea, Ethiopia, India, Iran, Pakistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Vietnam Languages spoken: Amharic, Arabic, Bengali, Cantonese, Dari, Gujrati, Hindi, Mandarin, Pashto, Portuguese, Somali, Spanish, Tamil, Tigrinya, Urdu, Vietnamese</p>
<p>Intended users of the program</p>	<p>Toddlers, pre-schoolers, and school-aged children newly-arrived in Canada and whose parents are attending LINC, SAFE, Stage 1&2 English, Communication Circle, and other settlement programs at GGP</p>

D. Regina Immigrant Women Centre - Regina, Saskatchewan

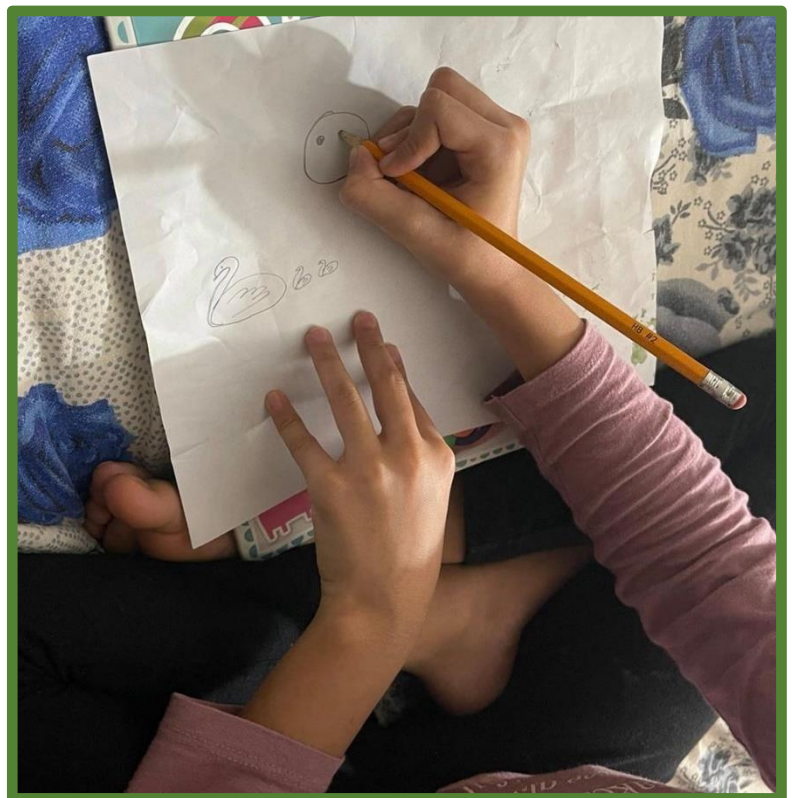
The Organization

The Regina Immigrant Women Centre (RIWC) provides programming for the education, integration, enrichment and empowerment of immigrant and refugee women and their families. RIWC offers CNC program under guidelines provided by CMAS Toronto to parents enrolled in its LINC classes. The on-site program has 8 childcare spaces that are free for children aged 6 months to 6 years but is not currently offered due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Innovation

The remote-Childcare for Newcomer Children (rCNC) program started in March 2020 when LINC classes transitioned on-line and is funded by IRCC. Virtual childcare programming is provided to children aged 2 ½ to 12 years whose parent(s) are enrolled in on-line LINC classes. Regular surveying of LINC clients has shown that clients (mostly mothers) prefer to remain on-line due to problems with transportation or not feeling comfortable leaving their homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, in-person programs have not resumed, and the LINC classes and the associated CNC program are only delivered virtually at this time.

Preparation was required to transition from onsite to rCNC. This included initial contact with new parents enrolled in LINC classes to identify needs, expectations, interests and availability for rCNC participation and to offer remote options. Feedback from parents was incorporated and weekly rCNC sessions were increased. Also, children from other RIWC programs and children older than 6 years of age who wanted to attend after school were included in rCNC programming.



<p>Program Activities</p>	<p>Remote CNC sessions provided 7-8 hours per week.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> storytelling, reading, role-play and puppeteering, song- and dance-based activities, arts and crafts, language and gross motor activities, hands-on science-based activities and vocabulary building activities (for older kids), etc. pre-recorded videos containing poem recital, book reading or demonstration of an arts and crafts activity by CNC staff <p>Online community and support through emails, telephone calls, and videoconferencing. Regular contact with parents to assess developmental and parenting needs.</p> <p>Home deliveries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> CNC workers and LINC staff deliver arts and crafts material to kids’ homes. The material is used during online sessions to work on activities. <p>Homework support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> provided to children over 6 years of age attending school virtually
<p>Tools and Resources</p>	<p>Human resources: 2 ECE childcare workers Electronic platforms: Zoom, WhatsApp, FaceTime Toolboxes: arts and craft supplies, activity packets Materials: books, puppets, etc. from the previous in-person CNC program Technology: donated laptops, cellphones</p>
<p>Population served</p>	<p>Families:10; Mothers:10; Children: 17 (13 attend regularly) Countries of origin: India, Syria, African countries (not specified), China Languages Spoken: Hindi, Gujarati, Arabic, Mandarin</p>
<p>Intended users of the program</p>	<p>Parents enrolled in LINC classes – mostly mothers with children 2-6 years old</p>

E. River East Transcona Immigrant Services (RETIS) and School Division - Winnipeg, Manitoba

The Organization

The River East Transcona Immigrant Services (RETIS) program offers Settlement Services, Adult Language classes and long-term Care for Newcomer Children for IRCC-eligible newcomers arriving in the North East quadrant of Winnipeg. The CNC Part-time program offers childcare at 2 different sites for a total of 38 childcare spots. There are 4 staff who work with newcomer children aged 19 month -6 years while parents attend English classes. RETIS is embedded within the River East Transcona School Division and has access to space and in-kind supports and services through the school division. This unique relationship enables connection to free preschool programs and a smoother transition for newcomer children at school entry.



The Innovation

The Temporary Remote Learning for CNC program ran from March to June 2020 when strict public health restrictions forced shut-down of in-person CNC programs. It was offered to children of parents who were enrolled in English language learning classes during that period. It was discontinued in when in-person programming resumed. Preparation to launch the remote CNC program included professional development for CNC staff on virtual methods of engaging children and communicating with clients about how to access the virtual program.

<i>Program Activities</i>	<p>Remote CNC sessions: 30-45 min/week (4 videos/week), parents and children participated together.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • videos focused on movement, stories, songs and crafts made from common household materials • live online sessions with songs, movement activities, stories and crafts to engage children in age-appropriate activities <p>Home deliveries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CNC staff dropped off activity kits containing supplies such as markers, glue, scissors, etc. at children’s homes to enable art experiences.
<i>Tools and Resources</i>	<p>Human Resources: 4 CNC workers, 1 co-ordinator Electronic platforms: YouTube, Microsoft Teams Toolboxes: Art and crafting supplies Technology: Phones, computers, laptops, smartphones</p>
<i>Population served</i>	<p>Families:9; Mothers:8; Fathers:1; Children: 12 Countries of origin: Syria, Kazakhstan, India, Djibouti and Ukraine Languages spoken at home: Arabic, Kurdish, Punjabi, Russian</p>
<i>Intended users of the program</i>	<p>Parents on English language class wait list Parents who cannot attend in person because of work or because they have children younger than 19 months, the minimum age limit for in-person CNC programming</p>

9. Evaluation Findings

Facilitators and Barriers to Remote CNC

Facilitators:

Technology was key to communicating with families, and maintaining connection during the abrupt disruption of in-person learning at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents transferred digital skills learned in their own language learning to support online children’s learning.

Relationships between staff and parents facilitated delivery of remote CNC programming, increased enrollment and reduced isolation for many families. Pre-existing relationships between children and CNC staff increased children’s desire to participate virtually to maintain this relationship.

Virtual delivery also strengthened collaboration between CNC staff and language instructors within the organizations.

Peer influence by other parents or children possibly increased uptake of online children’s programming. One-on-one family sessions were sometimes converted to multifamily sessions to maintain social relationships and connections.

Training and policy support from CMAS helped in launching and maintaining remote CNC. Training webinars and café discussions on connecting with newcomer children online, networking with other CNC-providing organizations, and policies for secure and professional online sessions were all instrumental.

"The staff is really engaging with all the children and treats them like family rather than just children." - Parent

"Children want that personal connection with their own CNC worker."
-CNC worker

"The CMAS support was monumental" – CNC coordinator

Other factors and actions that facilitated online children’s learning were as follows:

- phone calls, emails, texts, and online communities;
- home delivery of toolboxes or kits (containing toys, books, arts and crafts materials, etc.);
- gathering contact information prior to closure of in-person classes;
- needs assessment conducted with parents.



Parents reported the following factors that enabled participation:

- ability to participate without having to leave their homes during cold weather;
- spend less time commuting;
- reduced worry about exposure to COVID-19.

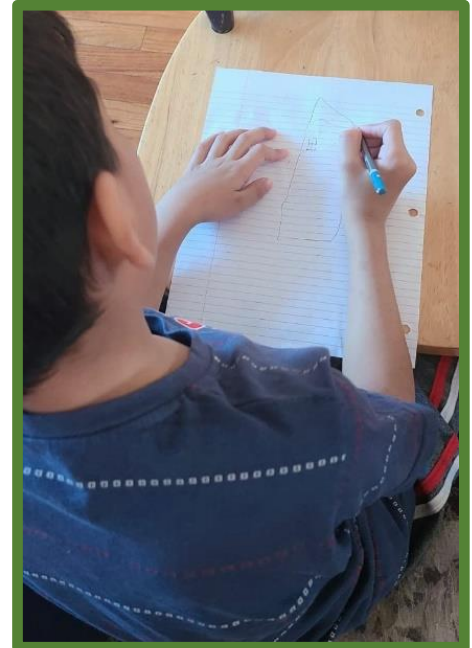
"We don't have to leave the house and take a long bus ride to the building." – Parent

Barriers:

Technology provided barriers as well. Families experienced difficulties in connecting digitally for a variety of reasons: no internet connection, no digital devices, and poor digital literacy.

Technical challenges were addressed by the following actions:

- CNC staff developed their own digital skills and learned new ways to use technology to engage with families.
- Electronic devices purchased or donated were lent or given to families who lacked their own.
- Agencies provided telephone or in-home technical support.
- Some described acquiring these skills through their own efforts and perseverance and others were given professional development through their agencies.



Other barriers parents experienced in remote CNC participation included:

- other competing activities (work, language classes for parents, other children's needs, food preparation and other household duties);
- having a schedule that did not match with program times;
- levels of English language skills; and
- having other caregivers for children in the home (e.g. grandparents).

Strengths and Areas for Improvement in Remote CNC

Strengths of remote programming for newcomer children included the following:

Flexibility in thinking about how CNC could be delivered during the pandemic and **adapting** to the needs and schedules of parents and children was important. Early monitoring and needs assessments allowed for adjustments to be made to programming in response to feedback from parents and CNC staff.

Creativity on the part of CNC staff and managers was key to supporting challenges newcomer families were facing with social isolation and mental health. **Commitment** from staff to continue engaging children in learning and the commitment of parents (specifically mothers) to support children's learning through virtual activities were also important.

"Everyone of us rose to the moment, and tried to think of ways to serve our clients." - Manager

Adapting or creating new **curricula specifically suited for virtual delivery** was important to ensure that learning activities could be delivered effectively through online platforms. **Toolboxes** (containing toys, books, arts and crafts supplies, etc.) supported the curriculum, served as positive reinforcement for participation in remote CNC activities and got the larger community involved through donations of toys.

A number of **areas for improvement in remote CNC** were identified:

- reaching families currently not engaged in EL & CNC,
- better engaging children in physical activity,
- length or scheduling of programming,
- more frequent delivery of toolboxes, and
- providing more live online sessions rather than prerecorded videos.



Additional supports required to optimize remote CNC included the following:

- staff training on curriculum development and remote delivery,
- further training of staff in use of technology,
- support with data entry,
- additional funds to purchase learning materials for toolboxes and digital devices (to be used by CNC staff and families), and
- updating or creating relevant policies.

Comparing remote and in-person CNC

Managers and staff felt more familiar with the well-developed in-person CNC program. In-person contact gave opportunity to discuss individual child needs and development with parents and to fully implement the early childhood curriculum with children.

Children expressed a **strong desire for returning to their physical childcare space** and missed the face-to-face interaction with friends and CNC workers. As parental presence and participation is required for remote CNC, it does not provide *childcare*. Online sessions are **limited by allowable screen time** for preschool children so activities had to be fewer and shorter and **delivering activities for gross motor skill development was challenging**.

However, children benefited from being in the **comfort of their own home** and surrounded by family members. Learning could be **self-paced** and the **schedule customized** as parents and children had unlimited access to online learning resources. Live online children's learning sessions were offered several times a week and sometimes after regular working hours, on weekends and more than once in a day. Parents found **remote CNC more convenient** and felt

"He [child] likes the activities in the online classes but prefers in person classes." – Parent

"We prefer in-person because of having the teachers there to help with crafts and learning." – Parent

Both parents and children described specific skills and knowledge:

- vocabulary and writing skills,
- counting and numeracy skills,
- information about Canada (seasons, money),
- science topics related to space and animals,
- geography topics related to country names and location,
- drawing, painting, singing and dancing.

“I love that I can make new friends and learn how to play new games while learning new things. I really liked learning about space and seeing what Mars looks like. I even saw what space looked like on my birthday! I love playing scribble and drawing too and my teacher is so nice and funny.” - Child

“My child learned new things and talks more now.” – Parent

Parent satisfaction and enjoyment of remote CNC were high, with 96% of parents surveyed reporting both outcomes. Ninety-eight percent reported that **remote CNC provided more learning opportunities** for their children during the COVID-19 pandemic and many **expressed appreciation and gratitude** that their children had access to remote CNC.



“Thank you for doing this! My child is really enjoying this.” – Parent

“My family loves online sessions which keeps my child engaged and happy.” – Parent

“I cannot say how glad I am for the staff and this class [virtual CNC]. I am so happy this exists. Thank you so much from the bottom of my heart.” - Parent

10. Evaluation Strengths and Limitations

These **strengths were incorporated in the process and increased credibility and validity** of this rapid evaluation and, hopefully, will facilitate utilization of results:

- Perspectives of diverse stakeholders were incorporated in design, implementation and interpretation of the evaluation;
- Triangulation of data through qualitative and quantitative methods;
- Pooling data across the five sites in the three provinces;
- Individual site descriptions as well as group analysis;
- Active engagement and participation of the Evaluation Advisory Committee.

These limitations should be considered in interpreting the results of this rapid evaluation:

- Diversity in program design and delivery among the sites make comparison challenging (different interventions, age groups served, type of online activities [synchronous vs. asynchronous], supplementary childcare services [home visits]);
- Resource limitations, time available and relatively low numbers of participants in early learning precluded stronger evaluation design (experimental design or case-control);
- Number of families served and surveyed was too small for subgroup analyses;
- Language and literacy limitations experienced by parents and the use of staff to help parents fill out surveys may have influenced data quality in a few instances; and
- Standardized and validated developmental tools (Ages and Stages Questionnaire, Nipissing District Developmental Screen, etc.) were not used to evaluate developmental outcomes for reasons including time, human resources, low numbers of participants, and early stage of program development.

11. Lessons Learned

- A. **Remote services can be enjoyable and satisfying (for both and children) and help achieve learning outcomes** (cognitive, social and physical). Even so, they strongly preferred *in-person* learning.
- B. **Remote services can meet important needs for newcomer children and families.** It helped them continue to learn, but also overcome barriers due to pandemic and other factors, stay socially connected, and be informed about health guidelines and services available.
- C. **Effective transition to online requires understanding families, and adapting approaches** to their situations: learning needs, assets and challenges; barriers to remote learning (including language, fears, comfort with technology); and facilitating factors for families and populations served.
- D. **Adapting learning plans, expectations and delivery is key.** It took time to engage staff, but facilitated individual senses of ownership, and enabled staff to add their ideas to development in key areas: curriculum and learning expectations; approaches and activities (e.g., type and length of activities, child safety, fine motor skills); delivery system/mode appropriate for teaching/learning objectives (e.g., live [synchronous] sessions may be better than pre-recorded videos).
- E. **Building staff capacity is crucial.** This would include using technology effectively, finding opportunities, overcoming challenges online and in homes, and monitoring and evaluation.
- F. **Training and policy support received from provincial or national hubs is key.** The support from CMAS and AB CS helped agencies learn from each other and improve quality.
- G. **Building family capacity for remote learning is essential.** Assess technology access and use as well as family characteristics (composition, language, logistics, availability) and child development knowledge and skills. Providing devices, technical support, and online support communities was beneficial.
- H. **Providing “toolkits” with materials for use at home is helpful.** Consider materials needed for adapted “home-based” activities; procurement and assembly; timely arrival; resources for materials and logistics.
- I. **Participating in remote learning activities helped parents become partners in early learning.** Previously, most parents simply dropped children off to childcare while they went to classes. In remote learning, parents had active roles (in conferencing, discussions, setting up activities and materials, etc.). This enabled them to observe more closely, and better understand their children, early childhood development and how to facilitate learning beyond the sessions. More fathers seem to be more involved, and children’s respect for parents may be increasing – all important outcomes in ECD and in resettlement.
- J. **Agencies were resilient and created remote delivery policies and practices to respond to their new realities.** They created appropriate ways to assess needs, communicate with families and support them (email/phone, online communities, etc.) and train staff. Agencies established new systems to procure, distribute, loan and maintain home-use devices and materials. They examined and adjusted timing of “live” sessions and staff work hours, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and resources / budgets (for digital devices, home-use materials and other items above).

12. Recommendations and Implications

- A. The agencies should continue to collaborate in developing remote delivery of EL & CNC.** They designed and used different approaches in response to the families and populations they served, organizational capacities, etc., and have demonstrated success. They work well together, and it is likely a wise investment to support their collaboration and next steps in evolving approaches, and create access to other families currently unable to access quality early learning and care (see D below).
- B. Knowledge should be shared with other agencies contemplating similar programs.** This group is able to deliver satisfaction and achieve important outcomes, and could mentor and support other agencies.
- C. Provincial and national government agencies should consider the lessons learned as the develop policies relating to early learning and care for newcomer children, as well as those who are settled.** COVID-19 will be with us for some time, but the challenges families face in accessing quality early learning and childcare will persist for many years. Remote delivery can address some of these challenges.
- D. Local, provincial and national government agencies should consider expanding remote delivery to include families that are unable to access quality early learning services. I.e., families on waitlists for in-person services; experiencing child and/or parent illness; residing in a major urban centre but too far from services; living in the many prairie towns and small cities that have no appropriate services. Remote early learning can also supplement and complement in-person early learning** (with additional resources). This evaluation showed early positive outcomes, and agencies in this project could help to mentor others.
- E. Establish guidelines for remote early learning.** These are emerging and can be enhanced through a review of the growing body of knowledge on toddler and preschooler learning in relevant contexts.
- F. Conduct a full developmental and outcome evaluation of programs – to inform agency, provincial and national policies and practices.** This should include a scan of programs offered elsewhere, documenting agency/community situations, using knowledge to improve practices and processes and, eventually, documenting outcomes achieved. In addition to ECD outcomes, it is important to measure outcomes related to services, parent engagement and support in early learning, change in parenting role (from passive to partner in ECD). Comparisons with in-person offerings, or other contexts will be challenging.

13. References

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Appendix A. Evaluation Pathway

Evaluation Question	Indicator	Data Source
<i>What remote delivery models and practices are being/have been used?</i>	Articulation of service delivery models and program activities.	Survey of program managers
<i>How do these align with their situation (i.e., context, populations served, resources available)?</i>	Description of why above models and practices were adopted.	Survey of program managers
<i>What tools, technology & resources are needed to implement online children's activities? What preparation was needed?</i>	List of tools, technology and resources used in programs. Description of what was done to prepare for the shift in service delivery	Survey of program managers, CNC staff/manager focus group
<i>What were the main barriers and facilitators to accessing online children's activities?</i>	Description of facilitators enabling uptake of online program delivery Description of main barriers encountered to access and if and how they were overcome.	Parent survey, CNC staff/manager focus group
<i>What are the strengths of the program? What can be improved?</i>	Description of program strengths and areas of improvement.	Parent survey, CNC staff/manager focus group
<i>How does the online model compare to in-person CNC?</i>	Description of differences in remote and in-person CNC.	Parent survey, CNC staff/manager focus group
<i>What are the challenges with the shift to providing and sustaining alternative practices (e.g., technical, financial, cultural)? How were these overcome?</i>	Program staff/managers describe challenges in providing alternative CNC programming.	CNC staff/manager focus group
<i>How can you engage with families better to meet their childcare needs?</i>	Parents describe what other childcare supports they need.	Parent survey

Appendix B. Outcome Map

Evaluation Question	Outcome	Indicator	Data Source
<i>What very early outcomes for parents and children are we beginning to observe?</i>	- improved mental health for children	% and number of children reported by their parents to be happier due to participation in online children's activities	Parent survey
	-children have more learning options during the pandemic	% and number of parents reporting online children's activities increase options for learning during the pandemic	Children's art project/ photovoice project for parents
	- children continue to learn and develop	% and number of children reported by their parents to have learned new things through online children's activities	
	-parents are satisfied with online children's learning activities	% and number of parents reporting satisfaction with online children's learning activities	