

EARLY LEARNING CENTRES

at the **Calgary Public Library**

THE EARLY LEARNING STRATEGY

The First Five Years

Children undergo the most critical period of brain development between 0-5 years of age. The Library strives to provide real life, hands-on experiences that develop tools for children to build critical thinking skills and influence their capacity and resiliency to face life's challenges. Opportunities for socialization, connection, and exposure to new ideas at Early Learning Centres (ELCs) build the foundation for kindergarten readiness, lifelong learning and success.

A Priority of the Calgary Public Library

Early learning has been a longstanding and key priority for the Calgary Public Library. Since the introduction of the first children's dedicated librarian in 1913, the Library continues to invest in developing smart, literate communities that uphold a healthy, vibrant, sustainable city. Library programs, services and spaces support the whole child with a multi-faceted approach, integrating principles of play, inquiry-based learning, social connection and hands-on practical experiences for more meaningful learning opportunities.

Calgary Public Library is pushing the boundaries of traditional library spaces for children with an innovative approach to ELC design. Our new and effective ways of creating dynamic environments for learning, collaboration, and social connection are establishing us as a leader in the sector.

FIRST GENERATION

Two Years of Evolution

The first ELC opened at Fish Creek Library in March 2016. Based on the successes and learnings at this location, we are developing a city-wide network of ELCs. There are currently 10 in place including our first nature playground at Forest Lawn Library. Each location is built around a distinct concept with special features to inspire child-led activities. Our programs are designed using current research and best practices in child development to support children and families, creating positive experiences where growth and healthy development can occur.



90%

OF BRAIN DEVELOPMENT HAPPENS BEFORE AGE 5

89,000

CHILDREN ARE UNDER THE AGE OF 5 IN CALGARY



27%

OF CANADIAN CHILDREN ARE VULNERABLE IN ONE OR MORE AREAS OF BRAIN DEVELOPMENT BEFORE GRADE ONE



An Environment for Learning

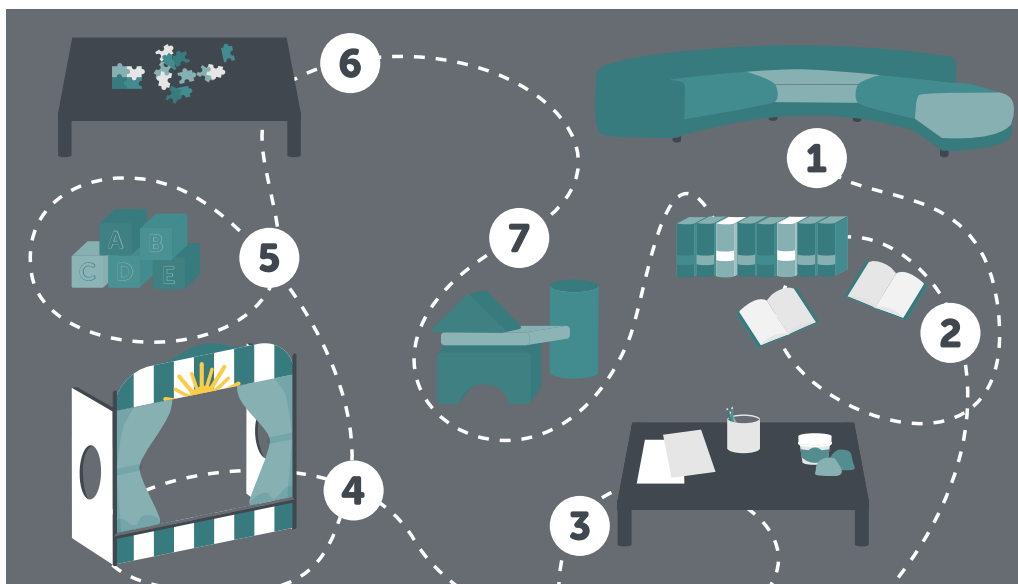
WHAT IS IT LIKE TO VISIT AN ELC?

These vibrant, inviting spaces are intentionally designed to be enticing for kids. Special attention is given to interactivity and flexibility to inspire new ways of learning. Unlike the familiar notion of a library being reserved for specifically quiet activity, ELCs are active and social. You will hear the joyful sounds of children playing, caregivers reading to their young ones, and imaginations coming to life through flexible activity centres, props, and games. We also know the importance of quiet spaces. Cozy, contemplative nooks and lounge areas allow for quiet, focused learning.



ELCs are designed to be open-ended and interactive, so play is freely chosen by the child. This opens up a multitude of opportunities for learning based on their interests.

The spaces are overseen by knowledgeable, experienced staff and supported by volunteer *Play Champions*.



- 1 Reading Centred Spaces:** Built-in nooks provide opportunities for rest, reflection, and quiet reading.
- 2 Book Selection:** Thematic book bins at child-friendly heights make for easy browsing and accessibility.
- 3 Creative and Art Space:** Hands-on practice in art, writing, and colouring provide opportunities for self-expression.
- 4 Storytelling and Dramatic Play:** Puppets, hats, scarves, and props inspire creativity and imagination.
- 5 Baby or Toddler Area:** Sorting and stacking activities, mirrors, and board books encourage the youngest learners to interact with new materials and discover how the world works.
- 6 Small Build Area:** Puzzles, small blocks, and loose parts encourage numeracy and problem solving skills.
- 7 Active or Large Build:** Items such as wooden blocks and foam bricks develop motor skills and spatial awareness.



Reviewing the ELCs

A PARTNERSHIP WITH VIVO AND MRU

Goals of Evaluation

Our goal was to determine how changes to ELC spaces and programming have affected Library visitors, and to identify whether the needs of families are being met through their visits. Our aim is to continue to evolve our services to better serve Library members now and in the future. We partnered with our friends Vivo and Mount Royal University to develop a measurement system to evaluate ELC design and use in order to identify what needs are being met and where creative improvement can be applied.

Methodology

There were 216 Library visitors interviewed and surveyed throughout the study. Qualitative interviews were used to understand families' experiences, satisfaction, needs, and hopes within the space. Systematic Observation was conducted to determine the number of participants who use the space, types of social interactions, play activities, and levels of movement.

What Are We Learning?

64% OF KIDS ARE TRANSFERRING NEW WAYS OF PLAY AT HOME AND SCHOOL.



Results show that children demonstrated increased constructive, dramatic, and physical play after visiting ELCs. Many families noticed their kids playing in new ways at home and school such as more role playing, sharing games and toys with their siblings, talking about their experiences with others, willingness to try new things like scavenger hunts outdoors, building from their imagination, and playing with new kids from the neighbourhood. This demonstrates a continuum of learning that supports the development of lifelong learning habits and skills and contributes to the building of resiliency within children.

MORE CHILDREN ARE INITIATING FAMILY TRIPS TO THE LIBRARY



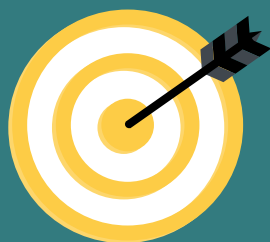
Libraries saw an increase of 4 times the regular attendance, with families spending more time at the library per visit when an ELC was introduced. These spaces have captured the attention of children who want to visit the Library to play with other children and explore new types of activities, toys, books, and places outside of their home. They are experiencing the first spark of excitement for lifelong learning as they gain early access to materials for literacy and creativity. This exciting discovery points to a bright future in Calgary with vibrant, engaged young people investing in their own future.

SOCIAL VALUE: COLLABORATION, CONNECTION, CURIOSITY, COURAGE



ELCs are welcoming and accessible, helping to reduce social isolation. During the survey process, parents communicated a high level of satisfaction with the space. Responses have indicated these spaces have nurtured skills in positive social interaction where children can learn how to play, share, create, and dream. Value was also placed on the child's ability to choose how they use the space - alone, with others, active, quiet - and the benefit of personalized learning experiences as a tool for building confidence. Parents enjoyed getting out of the house and meeting other families from the local community.

NEW EXPECTATIONS EMERGE



The ELC experience could be enhanced with more diverse, drop-in programming, an evolution or exchange in activities, and the addition of outdoor elements and spaces that translate learning into neighbourhood settings. There is opportunity to increase engagement from staff and volunteers, including welcoming, helping to navigate the range of possibilities, and interactive play. The spaces could benefit from the addition of more storage, adult seating, and designated snack areas to create an environment that is more like a 'second home'. Parents want the space to remain tech free in order to promote imagination building beyond the screen. However, with the prevalence of technology in today's world, figuring out a way to intentionally integrate tech for learning opportunities at the appropriate age is an interesting challenge for libraries and ELCs.



What's Next?

SECOND GENERATION

Strategy 2019-2022

In 2019, the Calgary Public Library will launch a new strategic plan with a new vision: **Potentials Realized**. We believe that engagement in early learning opportunities is a critical first step in igniting human potential and setting the stage for lifelong achievement. Through our growing network of ELCs and community libraries, the Library will leverage our extensive reach into the community to ensure that young children and their families have access to free, accessible and inspiring opportunities for play, learning, and socialization throughout all stages of life.

We aim to achieve this vision by establishing an ELC in every Calgary Public Library location, integrating outdoor spaces where possible, and increasing opportunities for staff and volunteer engagement that develop strong community bonds. We will enhance our spaces for parents and caregivers to build social connections, and ensure ELC spaces remain dynamic through continued evolution of concepts and introduction of new activities inspired by community needs and innovative models of practices.

Our achievements in ELC design and implementation will also translate into new ways of integrating play into spaces and programming for school-aged children, creating a stronger continuum of learning and engagement.

Early Learning Centres are proudly supported by Friends of the Library Foundation, BURNSWEST Corporation, Government of Alberta Community Facilities Enhancement Program, and Canada 150 Community Infrastructure Program. A special thank you to the Calgary Foundation and an anonymous donor, whose transformational \$1 million gift supported this research project and helped the Library open four ELCs.



CONNECT

Visit a Calgary Public Library location and explore one of our ELCs.

VOLUNTEER

Become a *Play Champion* and help the Library make a difference in the lives of young children and their families.

Visit calgarylibrary.ca

DONATE

Visit addin.ca to learn how you can support the Calgary Public Library and help us build the next generation of Early Learning Centres.

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