



Reinstatement of Early Interventions Funding for Alberta's Children Urgently Needed This School Year

Alberta's children and families are facing unprecedented challenges

in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Added to these stressors are UCP announcements to reduce funding for early interventions, including occupational therapy (OT) services, for children who are most "at risk" of being left behind.

The Society of Alberta Occupational Therapists (SAOT) supports equality and access for all children living in Alberta. OT services are essential for children with disabilities as they often require support to integrate successfully into classrooms and communities.

SAOT defines "at risk" children as those children experiencing physical, cognitive and/or emotional barriers to success.

What's at stake?

1. Moderately 'at risk' children will be left behind – With the Special Education Coding Criteria changing, OTs no longer contribute to identifying children for eligibility under Code 47. This means many children with moderate delays in language and motor skills will no longer receive OT supports. Mental health challenges are captured under code 42, but OTs are not listed under a "qualified health professional" to support a child's emotional well-being despite in-depth education and training in mental health.
2. Decreased support and intervention during a child's "golden year" - In previous years, children have been able to access PUF support in kindergarten, setting children up for success in elementary school. Clinically, kindergarten is the "golden year" for foundational learning and skill development and it is found that 42% of children no longer require support or intervention after kindergarten completion¹.
3. Loss of valuable collaboration opportunities - The Family Oriented Programming (FOP) sessions used to strengthen family to school connection and build parent capacity have been cut from PUF. With the loss of this important OT service, it can greatly impact an OT and parent's ability to help support children with toilet training, feeding skills, sensory regulation, and many other self-help skills as strategies often need to be consistent across environments and contexts.
4. Overburdened system leading to a decrease in quality of services – The modifications to the calculation of the ceiling amount for one child receiving PUF and reduction in Education funding will result in many OT positions being eliminated. OT services are already stretched to capacity supporting children with ever growing complexities. This means there will be significantly less OTs available to support children and families that need their ongoing expertise.

Key Findings:

- Kindergarten is the 'golden year' for foundational learning and skill development. 42% of children no longer require support or intervention after completion of kindergarten¹.
- Research has proven that OTs working with children with delays during their early years can have a significant impact on helping them reach their developmental milestones².
- In Canada, on average, for every dollar invested into early education programming, \$6 in economic benefits is seen³.



Why Occupational Therapy Services?

OTs enable children to participate in meaningful activities in inclusive environments. In Alberta, OTs in early childhood services work with “at risk” children and their caregivers to develop emotional and sensory regulation, social and play skills, functional skills to be successful in school and in their communities and injury prevention practices to encourage safe activity. Some examples may be learning how to play, dressing oneself and teaching helmet use.

In the classroom, OTs help to empower teachers and educational assistants to incorporate strategies and simultaneously build their capacity to work alongside children with similar profiles in the future, ultimately leading to cost savings and greater outcomes for more children.

Research has proven that OTs working with children with delays during their early years (up to age six) can have a significant impact on helping them reach their developmental milestones and catch up to their same-aged peers². The financial impact of these supports in the early years is profound and early intervention has been linked to improved economic self-sufficiency and lower welfare usage both for parents as well as children with disabilities, along with gains in cognitive function⁴. In addition, investing in early education has financial benefits in the future. In Canada, on average, for every dollar invested into early education programming, \$6 in economic benefits is seen³.

SAOT Recommendations:

- 1. Reinstate the PUF programming that was slated to be eliminated in the 2020-21 school year and maintain funding support for ECS programming.**
- 2. Create a Special Education Code for Occupational Therapist-identified areas of support (e.g., motor delays and sensory regulation) and recognize Occupational Therapists as qualified health professionals that can comment on a child’s eligibility under code 42.**
- 3. Explore funding reallocation in consultation with service providers, schools and families prior to implementing program changes.**

References

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- 2 Whalen, S. S. (2003). Effectiveness of occupational therapy in the school environment. Retrieved from <https://www.canchild.ca/en/resources/201-effectiveness-of-occupational-therapy-in-the-school-environment>
- 3 Alexander, C., Beckman, K., Macdonald, A., Renner, C., & Stewart, M. (2017). Ready for Life: A Socio-Economic Analysis of Early Childhood Education and Care. <https://www.conferenceboard.ca/e-library/abstract.aspx?did=9231>
- 4 Karoly, L., Greenwood, P., Sohler Everingham, S., Hoube, J, Kilburn, M., Rydell, C., Sanders, M., Chiesa, J. (1998). Early Childhood Interventions: Benefits, Costs, and Savings, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RB-5014, 1998. As of June 29, 2020: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB5014.html

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