

Pierre Fortin: Now is the right time for a national childcare policy

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EXCERPTS

There is no question that the family should remain the bedrock on which child education is built. But for scientific and practical reasons, there is also a need for early childhood education and care programs.

The scientific reasons cut across disciplines. Neuroscientists have found that early years are critical for brain development. Psychologists warn us that a bad start has persistent negative consequences that are often prohibitively costly to remedy later. Economists have calculated that investment in early childhood is the most profitable of all investments in education.

There is also a practical justification for high-quality childcare. Currently in Canada, 75 per cent of mothers with children five years and under work. The question is not whether this is acceptable in theory, but how to ensure their children get high-quality childcare to complement the care they receive at home.

Quebec's universal childcare program is 20 years old and it can provide clues about what to do in developing childcare. The basic idea of Quebec's program was that childcare providers charged a modest daily fee to parents (\$5 until 2003, \$7 until 2014, and between \$7.55 and \$20.70 now), agreed to conform to basic standards, and received a subsidy in return.

Since 2009, the program has undergone major changes. The province intensified its control over costs by enhancing its refundable tax credit to users of full-fee private garderies. Then, it increased the parental fee, based on family income. These measures were meant to entice parents away from low-fee, subsidized care and towards full-fee private garderies. Since a tax credit is less costly than a subsidy, the government could save money. The campaign has been successful: the number of childcare spaces in full-fee garderies has increased from 5,000 in 2008 to 55,000 in 2016. Unfortunately, research has repeatedly found that, on average, these garderies are of low quality.

There are three lessons to draw from the Quebec experience. First, a childcare system must be universal and not targeted at children from low-income families. Two-thirds of vulnerable children come from middle- to high-income families and, therefore, the system must "catch" all vulnerable children. The universal system generates a fiscal surplus because it has attracted so many mothers into the labour force that the additional taxes collected by governments exceed the subsidies the province has to pay.

University of Sherbrooke colleagues and I have estimated that in 2008 the total fiscal surplus that Ottawa and Quebec City got from the Quebec program was \$900 million. This could have been partly reinvested for the special needs of disadvantaged children in care. Hence, a universal program with added emphasis on these special needs would be more effective and less costly than a targeted program.

The second lesson pertains to something to be avoided. The recent incentives to use private garderies risk locking the system in a low-quality trap and not achieving the core task of healthy child development. Since lower-quality family-based care and full-fee private garderies already receive two-thirds of children in care, further increasing the use of low-quality private garderies does not contribute to positive child development.

Third, the fiscal surplus generated by Quebec's childcare system justifies Ottawa's participation in a Canada-wide childcare policy. More than 80 per cent of the fiscal surplus generated by the Quebec system winds up in Ottawa. The federal government receives additional tax revenues, but Quebec pays for the system.

Premiers outside Quebec understandably hesitate to commit a significant share of their budgets to universal childcare. If Ottawa helped to pay, they might support a program. The Liberals' election platform promised "to deliver affordable, high-quality, flexible, and fully inclusive childcare for Canadian families." What we need is an interprovincial coalition of premiers to help the federal government make good on this commitment.

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