

Hot potato can be fun — but not when it's the baby who might get dropped ^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

Playing Hot Potato used to be a thing. You took an object (say, a beanbag) and tossed it back and forth. The point of the game was not to get caught holding it when the game was finished.

For me, having children was a lot like that. From the minute my eldest was born, I felt like his father and I had started the world's longest game of Baby Hot Potato. We came home with him, and it was just us. Two stressed-out baby newbies, constantly checking in with each other: "I've got the baby. Who wants the baby? Do you want the baby? Here, take the baby. Fine, I'll take the baby."

Over the years, we learned how to play BHP with grandparents, babysitters, doctors, nannies and daycare workers. I admit that at some points, I was quite open to the idea of including total strangers in our game, as long as they were upright and had a pulse. Sleep deprivation and lack of adult social interaction will do that to a gal.

Quality, affordable child care is crucial to a family's ability to function properly nowadays. In tough economic times, two incomes are a necessity rather than a luxury. There needs to be a reliable, safe and welcoming place to take your child during working hours.

Why isn't this a priority?

Why, then, are we still treating these crucial institutions and the people who work in them like an afterthought? Why does the idea of a national affordable daycare strategy keep bobbing up like a buoy in Lake Winnipeg, only to disappear under the surface without so much as a blip until the next federal or provincial election?

It's not like this is a new challenge. Eighteen years ago, when I was a not-so-young mom coping with severe post-partum depression and longing to get back to work, affordable daycare spaces were about as rare as tactful behaviour at a Trump convention. Yet I still hear from young parents struggling to find daycare spaces, waiting lists that are years long and daycare staff that are grossly underpaid for all they do. Why isn't this a priority for our politicians?

Before I had kids, I thought the difficult part of daycare would be paying for it. After our first child was born, I learned that just finding a space was a killer. When my second pregnancy revealed we were having twins, my first worry was how we would find two infant spaces, never mind afford them. It didn't take long to realize there was no point in me working, considering nearly my entire monthly salary went to daycare fees. As a result, I quit my job as an admin assistant and stayed home for the next several years.

It's approximately \$30 per day for one licensed infant space in Manitoba. Let me be clear: I in no way begrudge daycares their fees or child-care workers their salaries. There is no amount of money on this astral plane that would induce me to spend eight or more hours a day in a room full of infants and toddlers. Child-care professionals are worth every penny they are paid, and plenty more. My question is, why are parents responsible for paying so many of those pennies on their own?

Daycare fees cost the house

For us, two infant spaces and a pre-school space were required. Nowadays, they would cost more than \$1,600 per month. Basically, we could have bought another house for what daycare fees cost us. Does our government somehow think that the minute a couple has a child, they become independently wealthy? If anything, you have far less available cash once you have kids, what with all the extra costs (diapers, formula, clothing, gear of all sorts) you incur. The point is, most families are not wealthy. Finding that kind of money isn't easy.

And before you say that nobody forced us to have children, I'd like to say "You're right." However, I'd also like to point out that no society is built on people NOT reproducing. Part of a healthy society and a growing economy involves couples having children, and they shouldn't be penalized for doing so. Women shouldn't have to give up on their careers. Men shouldn't have to miss out on parenting because they're working overtime to pay the bills. Neither should have to consider selling a kidney to afford daycare. Having children is in an investment in

our future, not a luxury for the wealthy.

How is it that in Sweden, daycare costs a fraction of parents' take-home pay, while here you could lease a Mercedes for the cost of a full-time infant space? Where are our governments' priorities? I'd like to speak to Premier Brian Pallister and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau about all this. In fact, maybe I should try to get a conference call going.

I wonder if they remember how to play Telephone?

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Region: Canada ^[3]

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