

Increase funding for a national child care program: Editorial^[1]

Author: Star Editorial Board

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EXCERPTS

The good news, according to the signals early childhood education advocates are getting out of Ottawa, is that next week's federal budget will include multi-year funding for child care.

The bad news, they say, is that it could be as little as \$500 million a year for the next 10 years.

That's not good enough.

The Trudeau government must change course if it is to create the "affordable, high-quality, flexible and fully inclusive child care" program that the Liberals promised in the 2015 election campaign. It is, after all, a commitment that study after study has shown would improve the economic well-being of families, boost the country's economy, and enhance the health of children.

The problem isn't with the initial promise of \$500 million. That's enough to get started, experts agree. But it must be ramped up considerably each year over the next decade to build the necessary infrastructure, increase the number of child care spaces each year, and educate and hire enough teachers.

Indeed, Ottawa should be looking at spending billions, not millions, on early childhood education each year.

First, the \$500 million is only half of what was promised in a five-year plan the previous Liberal government of Paul Martin committed to way back in 2005. (Sadly, that billion-dollar-a-year plan was scuttled by the Harper government in 2006.)

Second, it is nowhere near the 1 per cent of GDP that UNICEF and European Union countries agreed decades ago should be spent on educating children up to the age of 5. Currently, various levels of governments in Canada spend about 0.34 per cent of GDP (or \$6.8 billion a year) on that, leaving a gap for the federal government to fill of \$13.2 billion, says David Macdonald of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

While that may seem like a lot, some other countries are spending more than 1 per cent of their GDP on early childhood education. In fact, under the Harper government the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development ranked Canada dead last out of 25 countries for the quality and accessibility of its child care programs.

It should be no surprise, then, that anyone with young children knows how tough it is to access affordable, licensed child care. That's because while three-quarters of mothers of young children are in the workforce, there are licensed spots available for less than a quarter of children under 5.

And those that are available are incredibly expensive. A 2015 study found that average families with two children in Toronto were paying a staggering 48 per cent of after-tax income on child care. It's no surprise, then, that there are currently 17,000 children on the waiting list for subsidized daycare in this city.

It's not just families that suffer. The economy would also benefit from an accessible, affordable child care network. A TD Bank study found that for every dollar invested in child care, provincial and federal governments receive \$1.50 in increased tax revenues alone. And an Ontario government study found that every dollar invested in child care adds \$2.47 to the province's economy.

Most importantly, children would benefit. How bad is it? The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada says the lack of affordable child care is actually putting the health and well-being of children at risk.

And the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development points out that quality daycare can reduce inequalities that result from poverty and decrease the number of children in special education classes by identifying problems and encouraging early intervention.

It's long past time that Canada joined other countries by creating an affordable, accessible, quality child care network. Ottawa should commit now to a long-term plan to achieve it.

-reprinted from The Toronto Star

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