

Checking up on child care on Cross Country Check Up ^[1]

Posted on 26 Apr 2017

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Last week, CBC's Cross Country Check Up ^[3] devoted its two hour weekly show to child care policy. As is the show's normal practice, the content was framed by a question, which was a good one: "Why is the solution to affordable daycare so elusive in Canada?" Although this wasn't directly answered in the many insightful comments, personal stories and observations by the parents, ECEs, grandparents and others who called in, an analysis of the responses points to a somewhat obvious answer. While a call-in show doesn't necessarily provide a representative perspective, the CBC discussion has yielded multiple interesting and noteworthy points, four of which especially stand out.

First, while the callers represented the full range of opinion—from an absolute "yes, universal child care" to a categorical "no, parents should "raise" their own kids", and most of them — about three-quarters— were supportive of child care, many strongly supporting a universal approach.

Second, although the callers were primarily parents, with some grandparents, service providers and others, the age and gender differences between the "yes's" and "no's" were particularly striking, although not surprising. That is, most of the young mom callers were "yes's", while the most firm (and rather cantankerous) "no's" were from three male senior citizens who voiced the "back in my day we didn't get help with child care, so why should families expect it now" viewpoint. There were few young dads speaking about their experiences with child care, although one dad called to say that having his wife stay home was his preferred option. These age and gender differences with regard to attitudes towards child care have been identified in other Canadian illustrations of public opinion, for example, in a 2013 *Globe and Mail* online poll ^[4].

A third point of note is that while the callers were reasonably distributed across Canada, the most discussed "wicked issues" were very similar across the regions: I can't find a space; I find the quality is weak and—most of all—I can't afford the sky-high fees. At the same time, a broad range of specific topics were raised by individuals: difficulty finding child care for shift workers ^[5], lack of child care for Indigenous families, concerns about weak or poor quality especially in for-profit centres, school-age child care—even the positive role child care can play in timely identification of a special need or disability.

Some topics—for example, the role and importance of early childhood educators and the centrality of child care to women's equality—were addressed multiple times by callers from different regions. An eloquent Charlottetown woman talked about the gender wage gap and argued that women should not be the ones stuck having to make do without child care support, while a Vancouver caller talked about how essential child care is for women's equality. And several people—including one of the on-air guests, Louis Senécal, the CEO of the key Quebec non-profit child care association, talked about how child care should be treated as education (although one parent remarked that "not many parents see numeracy and literary skills as barometers for success at such an early age") and another emphasized that it should be universal "like elementary education".

Fourth—although callers were not labeled or chosen by socio economic status—it was plain that many of the parents who called to tell their stories about struggles with the high cost of child care were middle class. Several talked about their alternatives—giving up a career or not being able to return to work. Although the issue of poverty was not highlighted, affordability was the main "on the ground" issue raised again and again by under-pressure, stressed-out parents. As one mom—a founder of East Enders, a child care advocacy group in Toronto's east end neighbourhood said: "There are RRSPs and CCP for major milestones in our lives but we have nothing for this major phase of parents' lives to deal with the magnitude of child care costs". One service provider-caller explained the tension between affordable parent fees and quality, while Louis Senécal explained that—while work needs to be done in Quebec to improve quality—public funding had generally mitigated high fees as a main barrier to access for many.

The main policy analysis was provided by Gordon Cleveland, a University of Toronto economist whose area of research is child care. In addition to describing his Toronto research that illustrates how unaffordable child care is for most people, not just those below the poverty line, he underscored that investment in child care is long term and is therefore pitted against the short-term workings of our fairly transient governments. As well, Cleveland reflected on the research on the quality differences between non-profit and for-profit child care ^[6], concluding that "we have a tremendous social interest to make sure that child care is not a market service". Overall, he, like Louis Senécal, emphasized that governments have a strong responsibility to make sure child care is of a strong quality.

In listening to the callers who got through to tell their child care stories on-air, it would be very hard to draw a conclusion other than that Canada's lack of policy attention to child care is causing enormous hardships for young families. It also means that we are failing to make the grade on the women's equality file and that we are failing to provide the foundation that is a key ingredient in raising the next generation of Canadians in a successful 21st century country.

In 2017, when, as CBC accurately notes, "parents still struggle to find the right support", Cross Country Check-Up's framing question is a good one to ask: "Why IS the solution to affordable daycare so elusive in Canada?". Looking outside our borders at the excellent parent-

sustaining, child-nurturing, woman- supporting early childhood education and care programs that some other countries less wealthy than Canada have been able to fund and design for their populations, it is hard to conclude that the simple answer is anything other than "It's the lack of political will, friends".

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/blog/checking-child-care-cross-country-check>

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