

Every \$1 spent on early childhood education pays back \$6 later, report finds ^[1]

Conference Board study finds Canada lags when it comes to programs for preschoolers

Author: Evans, Peter

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Canada is lagging the world in spending on early childhood education — and it's going to cost the economy in the long run, a new report from the Conference Board of Canada suggests.

In a paper published Thursday, the think-tank argues that for every dollar spent on early childhood education programs, the economy gets about \$6 worth of economic benefits down the line.

Not only do such programs give kids a head start, but they free up parents to work and increase the family's income, too.

"The science is unquestioning," said Craig Alexander, the group's chief economist and one of the authors of the report.

"There's clear evidence that kids develop better and stronger essential skills," he said, "and we can basically show that this does act to reduce income inequality."

Currently, public education starts at around six years old but "an awful lot of brain development happens in the early years before five," he said.

Recent changes to parental leave policies now allow some parents to stay off work for up to the first 18 months, but between that and the school years, "we have a gap where parents are left to their own."

The Kenny family of Calgary knows all too well the benefits that come from filling in that gap. The Kennys pay out of pocket for one child in junior kindergarten and one in senior, and they see the benefits of that decision first hand, in terms of helping their kids — as dad Patrick puts it — "to hit the ground running."

"Education is paramount to any child development and what we've experienced is, 'the earlier the better'," Patrick says.

The numbers back that up.

While Canada does a pretty decent job once kids reach about five, only about 58 per cent of Canadian kids between two and four have access to some sort of educational program. Among developed OECD nations, the average is 69 per cent. In some places — like Belgium, Germany, Croatia, Ireland and France — it's 90 per cent.

"We should be aiming for more than that," Alexander said.

Publicly funded programs to help get Canada up to the average for kids between two and four would help 134,000 Canadian families. Jumping to among the leaders would boost almost 400,000.

But a key consideration, Alexander says, is that such programs need to be educational focused — not just child-minding.

"Many people see investments in early childhood education as glorified babysitting," Alexander said. "But we're not talking about kids sitting in school rooms. We're talking about play-based learning."

"There's an awful lot that kids can learn through play if you have a good curriculum and a good qualified teacher helping them develop."

Vicki Chamberlain-Polson, a junior kindergarten teacher at Calgary's Webber Academy for the past 15 years, is one such educator who knows the value of play.

"We like to think of play that's like building blocks," she said in an interview. "[They're] learning and building upon what they've already learned."

And the kids aren't the only ones building better foundations for their lives. Early childhood education programs help families by giving them the option of two income providers.

The Conference Board's report shows that after Quebec implemented its subsidized program in 1997, over the next two decades work force participation rate for women in the 20 to 44 age cohort increased from 76 to 85 per cent – much more than it increased by in the rest of the country.

That helps buoy the entire economy. In 2015, Canadian families with young children where the mother didn't work made up 43 per cent of low income households, compared with just 12 per cent of those with working mothers, the board noted in its report.

Costs can seem prohibitive to families, but as with many government programs, when they are scaled up to a national level the price comes down.

The Conference Board calculates that creating enough early childhood educational spots to get Canada up to the OECD average would cost \$8,162 for every child between two and three, and \$6,219 for older four and five year olds.

Add it all up and the report calculates that full day kindergarten for every four-year-old in Canada would cost about \$1.8 billion to set up, and about \$2 billion a year to run – but it would benefit at least 316,500 kids that are currently disadvantaged.

Alexander says early childhood education is one of the best tools policy makers have at their disposal if they want to make a more equitable yet growing economy.

"We want the economy to expand," he said, "But we want all Canadians to benefit."

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