

Child care all but forgotten in Ottawa's gender budget ^[1]

Federal budget's use-it-or-lose-it parental leave for dads and second parents does not make up for lack of child care, advocates say.

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Child care was the elephant in the room when Ottawa unveiled its gender equity budget last week, parents and advocates say.

"We are astounded Finance Minister Bill Morneau has chosen to ignore the solid evidence that lack of access to affordable child care is the biggest barrier to women's equal participation in the paid labour force," said Morna Ballantyne, of Child Care Now, a national advocacy organization pushing for a publicly funded, non-profit system.

"Without universal child care, women's equality will never become a reality in Canada," she said.

Toronto mother Sara Ehrhardt, who founded Toronto East Enders for Child Care out of frustration over the lack of licensed care and financially crippling parent fees in the city's Riverdale, East York and Beaches communities, was equally shocked Morneau's "Equality + Growth" budget included no new funding for the service.

When queried by reporters on Tuesday about child care, Morneau pointed to last year's 10-year, \$7 billion budget commitment and the Canada child benefit, a monthly payment of up to \$6,400 a year for kids under age 6 and up to \$5,400 for those between the ages of 6 and 18.

But neither advocates nor parents were impressed — especially since cash payments to families do nothing to create licensed child care spaces.

"It is insulting," Ehrhardt said in an interview.

"For them to say they funded child care last year rings pretty hollow when you are still on the wait list," she added.

Advocates had urged Ottawa to commit \$1 billion this year for early learning and child care on top of \$540 million already allocated in the 2017 budget.

Current funding is just half of what the previous Liberal government under Paul Martin was planning to spend more than 10 years ago and falls far short of what is needed to address today's soaring parent fees and serious shortage of spaces, they note.

Just one-quarter of Canadian children have access to licensed care while costs to parents are rising faster than inflation. Licensed care in Toronto tops \$21,000 a year for an infant, the highest in the country, according to a national survey last fall.

As a woman, Ehrhardt said she is pleased the government is adopting gender equity policies, including five weeks of parental leave to encourage more fathers to take an active role in child rearing.

“But our top concern is child care,” she said. “So to have this budget move forward without making any further advancement on child care is hugely disappointing.”

Ehrhardt and her husband have been waiting for a licensed spot in their neighbourhood for their son since before he was born. Clarence will be 3 in May.

In the meantime, the couple is shuttling Clarence by car or transit every day to a child care centre kilometres away from their home near Coxwell Ave. and Dundas St. E. They are not sure what they will do when he starts junior kindergarten in another year, as the city’s east end is also facing a crunch in before- and after-school care.

Parents in the area have tried three times since 2016 to meet with Morneau on the issue, but have yet to be granted an audience, Ehrhardt said. In May, they presented a petition to Parliament signed by 1,158 parents calling on Ottawa to ensure all Canadian children have access to affordable, licensed child care by 2026.

But with no new funding, or federal commitment to build a universal system, that won’t happen, says child care policy expert Martha Friendly of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

“Yes there is money on the table. And yes there is a framework. But neither of them rises to the occasion,” she said. “And after all these years, a lot of us are very impatient to get started on this.”

As an example of Ottawa’s scattered approach, the child care workforce is the “poster child” for the gender pay gap, Friendly said. And yet provinces are prohibited from spending federal child care cash to boost wages, the key factor in determining quality.

Child care advocates have long supported parental leave for fathers or second parents as an important piece of the family policy puzzle, Friendly said. But with monthly benefits capped at just \$547 a week before taxes, and low-income workers receiving much less than that, many parents can’t afford to take it. Many contract and part-time workers are not even eligible because they can’t accumulate the required minimum of 600 hours of insured earnings over the previous 52 weeks.

“Unless the government does something about benefit levels and eligibility, it is still a limited response,” Friendly said.

“If you look internationally, the countries that have the best child care systems are also the countries with the best parental leave policies,” she added. “They really need to go hand-in-hand.”

Toronto father Ron Spreeuwenberg, who welcomes the budget’s new second-parent leave provisions, echoes the concern about child care. He and his wife Sarah, who is on maternity leave with their son Weston, 6 months, are like most parents who place their children on numerous child care wait lists with no assurance they will get a spot when their maternity/parental leaves are over.

“The lack of child care, particularly for infants, is very stressful for parents,” he said.

Nine provinces and territories have signed early learning and child care framework agreements with Ottawa to spend the federal cash.

Many provinces have spending plans of their own, such as Ontario, which has committed to spend \$1.6 billion by 2022 to build 45,000 new

child care spots largely in schools and other public buildings. But it is unclear how the province will make those spaces affordable for parents or how it will attract qualified staff when wages are so low, with most earning less than \$20 an hour.

Economist David Macdonald with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives said Ottawa is in the best position to boost child care funding because it collects more in personal income taxes than the provinces.

“The economic evidence is quite clear that this would increase female labour force participation and therefore increase income tax revenues with the federal government being the prime beneficiary,” he said. “The economic argument is pretty clear. It’s just a question of whether the political arguments will ever line up.”

-reprinted from the Star

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