

Opinion: For women, kids and families — we need universal child care ^[1]

For my family, daycare allowed us to develop careers and helped us raise a son who is smart and empathetic

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EXCERPTS

My son's daycare is nestled down a hallway in a tiny downtown Toronto public school, right across the street from our home. He's been going there every weekday since he was 16 months old. He's eight now. (Sorry kid, eight-and-a-half.) We put him on the waitlist before he was even born because our city, like the rest of the province and most of the country, has an acute child care crisis.

Toronto has about 37,000 licensed spaces for infants, toddlers and preschoolers, covering a third of the city's children under four. Income-based subsidies, which usually come with long waiting lists, are available for only eight per cent, while the rest pay the highest child care costs in the country. If they can afford to. Three-quarters can't.

Infant care in Toronto costs a median monthly fee of \$1,758 according to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA). That's over \$21,000 a year in a city with a median household income of \$65,000. Preschool care for ages 2.5 to 4 runs slightly cheaper at \$1,212 a month, though the cost has spiked 21.4 per cent since 2014, six times faster than inflation.

In most other Ontario cities, from Brampton and London to Ottawa and Kitchener, the cost is about \$1,000 a month. CCPA research has found that rural fees are "not significantly cheaper," but two-career families and single parents have little choice but to shell-out to for-profit providers.

Budget promise

That's the unsustainable status quo Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne is promising to upend with her controversial free child care for preschoolers plan.

Some have complained that Wynne is simply throwing tax money around to sway the upcoming election. The timing of her announcement is indeed convenient, but no more than PC leader Doug Ford's promise to save \$6 billion in finding "efficiencies." It's what politicians do.

But it's also not out of the blue. This is part of a five-year plan that began with a September 2016 throne speech promising to add 100,000 daycare spaces by 2021, doubling access to 40 per cent of Ontario families. In last spring's budget, the government earmarked \$200 million for new spaces and fee subsidies, and also enlisted economist Gord Cleveland to develop an affordable child care strategy. This plan is that strategy.

Another argument against this is affordability. Wynne's budget earmarks \$2.2 billion for child care: \$930 million for free preschool, while the rest will go toward new licensed spaces, subsidies and fee reductions. Lots of folks are inherently opposed to supporting so-called

freeloading parents.

But there's evidence showing that universal child care pays for itself. Yes, really.

Our child care crisis is largely a product of progress in gender equality, particularly since the 1950s when only 24 per cent of women worked outside the home, according to StatsCan. As of 2014, the labour force participation for women hit 82 per cent, compared to 91 per cent for men. The more women who work, the more child care is needed — but more women in the workforce also means more people paying income taxes and money in the economy.

A provincial study on Ontario's gender pay gap launched in 2014 found women earn 29 per cent less than men on average, and the best way to reduce that is through investing in child care. (A 2017 StatsCan report found "the gender employment gap is greater in [cities] with high day²care fees.")

Experts have also estimated every tax dollar spent on child care would add \$2.47 to the Ontario economy. That might be just a theory in Ontario, but we've seen it in practice in Quebec, where subsidized care costs a fraction of what it does in other provinces.

Daycare in Quebec

Bank of Canada governor Stephen Poloz recently explained that Quebec's universal child care program has increased the "prime-age female workforce" from 74 per cent to 87 per cent over its two decades. "The provincial government identified barriers that were keeping women out of the workforce and they acted to reduce them," Poloz said, adding that if Quebec's participation rate was matched countrywide, it would add around 300,000 women to the workforce.

A 2012 TD Bank study also found that for every dollar spent on early childhood education, the economic return is between \$1.50 and \$3, adding that "the benefit ratio for disadvantaged children [is] in the double digits" and that "investment in education is the great enabler that leads to a stronger economy and society." It also praised the Quebec program for its impact on women's employment and poverty reduction. More recent research by Quebecois economist Pierre Fortin also found Quebec child care is "paying for itself," though a study from conservative think tank the Fraser Institute refutes these claims.

[Video available to view online: "Ontario promises free daycare ahead of pivotal election"]

The Quebec system is by no means perfect. It's gone from \$5 a day in 1997 to today's sliding scale between \$7.75 and \$21.20 depending on income. But Montreal's \$168 a month average for infant care is still 10 times (!) cheaper than in Toronto.

It's also become so popular that, in order to meet demand, the government offered tax credits for full-fee private garderies, which have been criticized for providing inadequate care to disproportionately lower-income children compared to the publicly funded Centres de la petite enfance. So obviously, there is room for improvement. This issue would not be encountered by Ontario's free universal program but it, in turn, will lack support for more expensive infant and toddler care. Perhaps an answer lies in some sort of synthesis of the two provincial programs.

There's one other anti-daycare argument that often crops up: that it's harmful to kids who'd be better off staying at home with their moms. (Never dads, funny that.) This is about more than economics, after all — it's our children.

Well, over the years, early childhood educators helped our son develop his physical and cognitive abilities using specialized teaching techniques. Having never parented before, we just winged it on the evenings and weekends, focusing on having fun. (Daycare even helped with his toilet-training, which was very much appreciated.) Though we'd decided early on to have just one child, we were worried about the purported potential for only children to be selfish and self-absorbed. We needn't have. The daycare experience taught our son emotional intelligence as he's navigated social groupings while having older kids to look up to and younger ones to look out for.

Daycare not only allowed us to develop careers, but also helped us raise a son who is smart and empathetic, even though it came at a financially punishing cost for our young family. That's an important piece of this puzzle and why we need universal child care.

Joshua Ostroff is a writer and editor raising an eight-year-old breakdancer in Toronto. He covers everything from politics to pop culture to parenting. He also loves alliteration.

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