

# Is Canada finally coming of age over child and family policy? <sup>[1]</sup>

It's about time for this strong, progressive step for women, children and families.

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## EXCERPTS

No longer tinkering around the edges, last week's announcement of Ontario's investment of a new \$2.2 billion to help support the implementation of free child care for preschool children, provides real choice for families.

It's also a strong and progressive step for women, children and families. Not just in Ontario, but in Canada.

Along with British Columbia's recently-announced, Child Care B.C. Caring for Kids, Lifting Up Families - The Path to Universal Child Care, we are witnessing important strides for modern Canadian society.

There is a coming-of-age being fully embraced by these long overdue, compassionate and progressive family policy announcements.

But this commitment and investment reaches above and beyond children and families — it builds our economy and evolves our society to be more productive and egalitarian.

And it provides a pathway to women's equality and economic security.

Access to affordable, inclusive and high-quality child care helps working families.

Government spending on early childhood care and education has the single biggest effect on boosting women's employment, earnings and on decreasing gender pay gaps.

Free child care for children from age 2.5 until they start kindergarten is exactly what Ontario families need.

And Ontario is addressing quality like never before.

Take notice that this includes the commitment to create a transparent and competitive wage scale for early childhood educators and child care staff — professionals who are predominantly women.

This measure actively addresses the long-standing issue of the historically low wages and through this, the inherent gender-based wage inequality that has pervaded the child care sector.

Helping parents afford this care through a well-funded child care system might appear to be expensive for society. Yet many Canadian studies and reports show that of any policy geared to help struggling families, investments for high-quality child care have the biggest economic payoff for parents and their children.

Investment in child care pays for itself.

It has compounding positive effects on women's employment and pay.

And it goes even further for low-income families, because it can move generations of children toward increased earnings, better jobs, improved health, more education and decreased social costs as adults.

The Ontario plan is expected to save families about \$17,000 per child per year.

Investment in the cost to administer child care will help keep costs more affordable for all children.

In addition to the free child care for children ages 2.5 until kindergarten, there is also significant investment in the costs to administer child care for children younger than 2.5 years, moving to supply-side funding rather than demand-side funding.

This investment will be game-changing for Ontario families.

Affordable child care, long a dream of parents and a goal of child care advocates, is now being championed by Ontario.

Other provinces and territories such as Quebec, B.C. and P.E.I. are following suit or have made huge strides in funding commitments to what is only good and fair for society — family policy and child care.

Congratulations to the Ontario government for committing to support families and enrich care and early learning for children.

It is no coincidence that supporting the early years is due in part to the federal leadership we have seen with the federal government over the last year, resuming its support of policy and investments for children.

New investments in child care and signing agreements (and pending agreements) with the provinces, territories and Indigenous communities has started the ball rolling.

But greater and more meaningful investments in child care are required from our federal government, especially if it wants to realize closing the pay equity gaps for women and eliminate barriers for mothers to enter and excel in the workforce.

According to OECD recommendations, Ottawa should be spending one per cent of Canada's GDP on child care.

Our government currently invests only 0.25 per cent. The efforts of the province of Ontario, B.C. and others most certainly bridge the funding gap and provide significant and needed leadership that will send ripples across Canada.

Change is upon us. It has taken time to arrive and make no doubt about it, it is political will that is a game-changer.

We are moving past the historic rhetoric and are better embracing women's equality and the well-being of children — ushering in policy and investments based on evidence and system-building rather than one-off solutions and hunches.

It's about time.

Don Giesbrecht is CEO of the Canadian Child Care Federation. Marni Flaherty is chair of the CCCF and CEO of Today's Family, a not-for-profit child-care organization that operates in southern Ontario.

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