

First Ministers agree to make young children a national priority, but... ^[1]

Response to the First Ministers' agreement

Author: Campaign 2000

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Today, the First Ministers announced that they had unanimously agreed to make young children a national priority. Campaign 2000, a national children's advocacy group, said that today's long-awaited announcement on Early Childhood Development Services is a positive step that shows that governments of all stripes can work together on behalf of families and children. At the same time, the group's spokespeople expressed concern that there is neither sufficient money nor an action plan to ensure that children and families across Canada will experience the benefits of the stated national commitment.

The federal government has announced an initial \$300 million as of April 1, 2001 as part of a cumulative investment of \$2.2 billion over five years. The provincial and territorial governments have made a five-year commitment to expand early childhood development services in four key action areas:

- promoting healthy pregnancy, birth and infancy;
- improving parenting and family supports;
- strengthening early childhood development, learning and care; and
- strengthening community supports.

"The agreement has the potential to be a good beginning for a comprehensive National Children's Agenda and we are pleased to see the five-year commitment of sustained funds", said Laurel Rothman, National Coordinator, "But there is no guarantee that provinces will, in fact, enhance all four key action areas."

Last year, in the Throne Speech, the Prime Minister committed to ensuring a healthy start for all children, a commitment with which the Premiers have concurred. There is widespread agreement among experts that success in the early years requires a coherent plan to address all four key areas. "There is nothing to suggest that children in one province need parenting programs whereas children in another need child care and early childhood education" added Rothman, "Families in all regions of Canada have a variety of needs, and good public policy would ensure that a range of services are available to them."

Campaign 2000 welcomes the First Minister's commitment to consult with non-governmental organizations. "Canadians will be watching to see how services are improved in their communities, large and small, urban and rural," said Pedro Barata, Ontario Coordinator, "The real test of today's announcement will be whether a baby born in January 2002 is any more likely to have a space in high quality child care than her sister born in 1999".

Ms. Rothman concluded: "We are pleased that our First Ministers have agreed that children are a national priority. This is clearly a "first" and a considerable leap forward for the process of federal/provincial negotiations. For children and their families, though, the jury is still out. There are still a few months until the December 2000 deadline during which we hope to see action plans that will detail how this agreement will really help families across Canada."

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