

# What federal leaders are promising on child care and is it enough, advocates weigh in on party platforms <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Julie Mathien was a young student in the spring of 1970 when she and about 300 feminists and “other radicals” occupied the University of Toronto’s senate chambers to win support for a fledgling campus daycare.

Campus Community Cooperative Daycare celebrated its 50th anniversary Saturday and Mathien, now 72 and retired, laments how the broader battle for child care continues.

“Thankfully, we are no longer debating whether daycares should exist so mothers can work or study outside the home,” said Mathien, who went on to volunteer, work at and send her eldest child to the Annex-area centre.

“But it is frustrating that we are still fighting to ensure all families have access to high-quality, affordable child care.”

Across Canada, fewer than one in three children under age 12 have access to regulated care. And the costs are staggering. Parents in Toronto can pay as much as \$20,000 a year for toddler care.

Mathien takes some comfort that all federal parties appealing for votes in the Oct. 21 election are promising measures to help young families juggle the financial pressures of earning a living and making ends meet.

“Three of the four (leading) parties have promised to increase funding for child care, and one of them has said it will create a federal child care secretariat to work with the provinces. So that’s something,” added Mathien, who spent her career working on child care policy at Toronto City Hall and Queen’s Park.

Two of the parties — the New Democrats and Greens — say they are committed to a universally accessible system, the “Holy Grail” for child care advocates, she added.

“But we have seen parties come to power promising big things, only to be defeated and all the gains wiped out,” Mathien said.

The most recent example, federally, was former Liberal prime minister Paul Martin’s five-year, \$5-billion national child care plan, introduced in 2004 and axed two years later by Stephen Harper’s Conservatives.

Current Conservative party Leader Andrew Scheer told the Star’s editorial board earlier this month that if elected, he would continue to fund the Trudeau government’s 11-year, \$7.5-billion national child care program for kids under age five. But Scheer refused to say if he would spend more on the initiative that has been criticized by child care advocates as woefully underfunded, compared to Martin’s plan more than a decade ago.

To date, the Conservatives’ only campaign promise aimed at caring for children has been a pledge to eliminate federal taxes on maternity and parental benefits delivered through the employment insurance (EI) system. If he is elected, Scheer said new parents would be able to claim a 15 per cent non-refundable credit when they file their income taxes. The parliamentary budget officer estimated Scheer’s tax break for parents would cost the federal government about \$607 million a year in lost revenue.

Trudeau one-upped the Conservatives Tuesday by promising to make maternity and parental benefits tax-free “at source,” so families wouldn’t have to wait.

If re-elected, the Liberals also would boost the Canada Child Benefit for children under one year of age by 15 per cent, or up to about \$1,000, starting next July.

And in 2021, a Liberal government would introduce a guaranteed, paid-family-leave program for parents who don’t qualify for paid leave through EI, or who get very little because they are between jobs or haven’t worked enough hours.

The proposed new financial support would cost about \$800 million in 2020-21, according to Liberal party calculations. Costing analysis from the parliamentary budget officer has not yet been released.

Trudeau has promised to create an additional 250,000 before- and after-school spaces for children from kindergarten to age 10. Ten per cent of the new spaces would be designated for parents who work overtime, late shifts or multiple jobs.

For parents buckling under the cost of child care, the Liberals would reduce fees for school-age child care spaces by 10 per cent, a move Trudeau says would help more than one million families.

To support child care workers, Trudeau pledged \$25 million a year for more training and to lower tuition for those enrolling in university programs.

These new measures would nearly double the current support Ottawa sends to the provinces through the Early Learning and Child Care Framework, an increase of at least \$535 million each year, he said.

Toronto elementary school teacher Angela Molina, who is on leave in part due to the stress of securing after-school child care for her five-year-old son, is pleased the Liberals are focusing on older kids.

"But I have my reservations about how it will all trickle down," said the sole support parent who has been on a wait list for the after-school program at her son's school since last spring. "I don't know if it will benefit me or what it will look like once (the funding) goes down the provincial funnel."

Molina is especially frustrated because she will lose her child care fee subsidy if she doesn't get a regulated spot within six months. And she can't afford to pay a neighbour or unregulated caregiver to pick up her son after school.

"Kids are struggling and parents are stressed out," she said. "It shouldn't be this way."

While parents contemplate the prospect of increased financial support and new services, advocates and academics welcome Trudeau's promise to establish a federal child care secretariat to work with provinces, territories, Indigenous communities and others "to lay the groundwork for a pan-Canadian child care system" including national standards.

Child care advocates also praised the Liberals' focus on school-aged children as the "next step" in building a long-overdue national system.

"They now have a funding stream to age 10," said the University of Toronto's Gordon Cleveland, an associate professor emeritus of economics who has written research reports on child care funding.

"Although the money is still small, it says (the Liberals are) in it for the long haul. And (are) committed to it for all of the relevant ages," he said.

The pledge to boost financial support to parents with children under age one is an acknowledgment of how difficult — and expensive — it is to provide high-quality care for infants, added Cleveland.

"I think going the route of trying to make sure that everybody has the money to take time off during the first year of a child's life is actually quite sensible," he said.

Martha Friendly of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, who has been tracking the issue in Canada since the 1970s, said Trudeau's pledge to lower child care costs for school-age care is noteworthy because it is the first time the Liberals have actively addressed the affordability question for all families.

As for the other party platforms, the Greens win points from Friendly for portraying universal child care as "fundamental for women's equality" and key to broader equity and social justice goals, such as fighting poverty, supporting lifelong learning and boosting the local and national economy.

Both Friendly and Cleveland laud the Greens for promising to increase federal child care funding to the benchmark set by the international Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development of one per cent of GDP annually — the equivalent of \$17 billion — adding \$1 billion a year until that goal is met.

But the platform is not very specific — apart from removing the GST on construction costs for child care centres and ensuring centres are located along transit routes, schools, workplaces and transportation hubs — "probably because they have never been in government," Friendly said.

NDP officials say Leader Jagmeet Singh has not yet released the party's "full child care promises." However, child care already features prominently in the party platform, unveiled in June, promising "affordable not-for-profit child care that's available to all Canadian families" and fair wages for chronically underpaid caregivers.

The NDP is the only party promising to introduce legislation "that enshrines Canada's commitment to high-quality, public child care in law."

On the money front, the NDP would invest \$1 billion in child care in 2020 and promises to boost that investment annually, "along with the provinces and territories."

The party's plan to make EI maternity and parental benefits "more flexible" is not yet as specific as the Conservative and Liberal promises.

Morna Ballantyne of Child Care Now, a national advocacy association, says federal leadership is crucial to building a national system.

"It is especially important at a time when some provincial governments such as Doug Ford's Conservatives (in Ontario), are making cuts to child care services and instead redirecting public funds to tax credits and allowances that do nothing to make licensed child care more available and more affordable for anyone," she said.

While Ballantyne praised the Liberals for promising to double federal funding for child care to make school-age care more available and affordable, she said it will not give immediate help to parents with younger children.

“Licensed child care for children under the ages of four and five is the most expensive and in critically short supply, and that’s especially true for infant children,” she said. “We need the Liberals to commit additional funds for this age group.”

The problem of low wages in the child care sector is also missing from the Liberal platform, she added.

Mathien, who credits the early advocacy at Campus Community Coop Daycare for helping to birth a broader movement, says it will be up to the next generation of parents to keep up the pressure.

“So far, the funding promised (by the Liberals), while welcome, won’t get us where we need to be,” she said. “There is still much to be done.”

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** universal child care <sup>[4]</sup>

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