

Investment in child care yields countless social and economic returns ^[1]

A child and family's access to high-quality child care is an issue that impacts all of society

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EXCERPTS

Children are born with a desire to learn about the world around them. Infants learn and develop by exploring their environments with their senses. In the first few years of life, a baby's brain makes one million neural connections per second.

Positive relationships are what build these neural connections and set children up for success beyond childhood. The relationships between early childhood educators and children in high-quality early learning and care programs help establish these neural connections – and are important for the future of humanity.

A child and family's access to high-quality child care is not just an issue for families: It is an issue for all of society.

Ripple effects

Let's consider what happens when you throw a stone into a body of water. The stone creates ripples that spread across the water.

Responsive and stimulating high-quality early learning programs influence children's development and long term well-being. Quality early learning and care programs should be designed to foster critical elements of a child's development, including: self-regulation, empathy, the ability to gain and take new perspectives, creativity, critical thinking, acquiring knowledge and developing skills.

These elements influence a child's school readiness. School readiness before and throughout kindergarten matters because it helps to prevent adverse outcomes associated with early academic failure and school behavioural problems: these include dropping out of school, unemployment, psychological and physical illness in young adulthood, and involvement with criminal justice systems.

Family learning

Positive partnerships between families and early childhood professionals impacts the family's understanding of their child, through understanding the child's development, behaviour and learning styles.

The parents can observe professionals who model successful techniques for teaching and guiding behaviour, which can impact the way they parent.

More importantly, when families have meaningful relationships with the child's early childhood educators, these professionals help families see themselves as a vital part of their child's life and learning. That understanding lasts a lifetime.

Economic investment

High-quality early learning and care programs also impact personal finances and the economy. These can increase parental earnings and employment, by providing the opportunity for both parents to work, thus reducing the wage gap.

This leads to greater educational attainment and earnings for children in adulthood. These programs also benefit taxpayers and strengthen the economy.

The benefits of quality early learning and care as prevention and intervention programs boost the child's capacity to manage future adversity. Such interventions are less costly than when people are older and behavioural patterns are ingrained and change is more difficult.

Economists estimate that for every dollar spent on early childhood education, there is up to a seven-dollar return on investment for at-risk children.

National child-care strategy

There is an established and growing body of evidence demonstrating that early engagement with children and their families delivers

strong outcomes for whole communities. In response, federal, provincial and territorial ministers have agreed on principles for early learning and child care across the country: it should be high-quality, affordable accessible, flexible and inclusive.

But governments haven't forged a national child-care policy. That means there are no agreements and related financial commitments that would translate this vision into a cross-Canada reality.

Many provinces have taken steps to increase the quality of early learning and care programs. But these initiatives are compromised by inadequate funding to develop and support the childcare workforce.

High-quality early learning and care programs, and the experiences offered to the children are defined by the value, respect, confidence and experience of early childhood educators.

Ontario realities

In Ontario, early childhood educators are required to register with a professional body. Ontario's registered early childhood educators (RECEs) are responsible for developing and facilitating inclusive play-based learning programs to promote holistic development of children.

In Ontario, 16 per cent of RECEs working in licensed child-care programs earn between \$11.40 and \$15 per hour, and 45 per cent earn between \$15 and \$20 hourly. Hourly wages in full-day kindergarten programs are higher, but educators are laid off in the summer and face challenging working conditions.

The expectations and responsibilities of RECEs have increased through legislative and regulatory changes, but there have been few improvements to wages and working conditions. A lack of adequate compensation for RECEs undermines the quality of education and care children receive.

Undervalued

Early childhood educators are overworked and undervalued. The profession is primarily represented by women and issues of equity and equality are often discussed.

Female early childhood educators represent 98.2 per cent of the industry's staff and directors across Canada. They are among the professions with the lowest wages and poorest working conditions. Additionally, child-care staff earn only 69 per cent of the average wage for all occupations, despite being part of a regulated profession.

These conditions lead to a high employee turnover rate which impacts the quality of children's experiences. Children require strong and reliable relationships. When they are able to trust in their caregivers, they are able to feel confident in their environment and themselves, thus allowing them to explore and grow.

Children require experiences with both men and women to understand who they are and how to develop relationships in life. Men and women bring different and diverse perspectives and experiences. Where there are still gender norms expecting men to be primary bread winners, or enter occupations of prestige, many men perceive that they cannot afford to work as early childhood educators. Men are often regarded suspiciously for transgressing such gender norms.

Society needs to value the women and men who so enrich children's learning and development in quality early childhood programs. So let's celebrate and appreciate the dedicated work of their profession!

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