

COVID-19 crisis shows us childcare is always an essential service ^[1]

Childcare is an essential service in good times and bad and must be treated like one. Here's what a smart COVID-19 childcare plan could look like.

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Excerpts

Manitoba announced last week that it would be closing public schools, but leaving childcare centres open. Officials explained that childcare centres provide essential support to parents working during the COVID-19 crisis. A question soon began making the rounds on Twitter and Facebook: "Why are childcare programs in Manitoba not important enough to get adequate funding, but too important to close?" The question, credited to an early childhood educator, is reasonable. It has taken a pandemic to put the paradox of childcare in 21st century Canada in sharp relief: our provision of childcare is exceedingly fragile yet childcare is an essential service critical to economic activity.

Governments in Canada have never considered childcare important enough to fund it properly. As a result, licensed childcare is in short supply and unevenly distributed, it costs parents the earth, and the women who work in the sector are paid abysmal wages. In the absence of adequate public funding, parents' fees and educator's wages are inextricably linked: staff wages are by-and-large paid by parents. Fees are high but childcare centres are financially precarious, sometimes a month or two away from collapse.

Paradoxically, childcare is an essential service even at the best of times. Parents depend on reliable childcare so they can work. By extension, childcare is also essential for their employers, who depend on them to be at work at the hospital, public transit agency, power plant, medical lab or elementary school. Perhaps most importantly, it is essential for the broader public and the economy, which depend on the labour of parents, including mothers. After all, women are now employed in numbers approaching those of men. If childcare were more available and affordable, the numbers could be more equal, and more equal participation in the paid labour force would strengthen the economy and gender equity.

And yet, Canadian parents are forced to accept the mid-century canard that finding and paying for childcare so they can go to work or school is their private responsibility. It is their shortcoming if it's difficult, and their good luck if they hit the jackpot of an affordable, high quality regulated childcare space.

Pandemic sparks childcare chaos

We know – from research, international comparisons, and everyday lived experience – that Canadian childcare is fragile and inadequate because it is not publicly funded or publicly managed. The fact that childcare in Canada is mostly a patchwork – privately funded, market-driven, and piecemeal – yet must meet an essential societal need is at the root of the childcare chaos brought on by the pandemic.

As most provinces and territories finally closed some or all licensed childcare services – in part in response to community demand and in part in response to medical advice – finding childcare for both preschool-age and school-age children has become a preoccupation for parents. Across Canada, "balancing work and family" has become a daily struggle in a new way. And asking grandpa to step in to provide childcare (common enough in many families' childcare arrangements) is contraindicated in the new world of the pandemic, as The Guardian has reported.

Every day, Canadian news headlines and anecdotal community reports are identifying childcare-related issues: essential medical personnel are scrambling to find childcare; shuttered childcare centres continue to charge fees to cash-strapped parents, many of whom might also be paying for alternative childcare; there are widespread childcare staff layoffs; and one chief medical official has urged parents to be cautious about new unregulated online emergency childcare services that have appeared.

Safe responses to the current challenges

While federal and provincial/territorial governments scramble to figure out workable and safe responses to the outbreak, we at Childcare Resource and Research Unit, Child Care Now and other childcare organizations are proposing broad comprehensive recommendations to

ensure childcare services survive, and that cash-strapped parents and educators aren't asked to bear the whole burden of the pandemic, and to ensure the necessary childcare provided for essential workers is as safe and healthy as is possible.

We're calling on the federal, provincial/territorial and local governments to collaborate on a COVID-19 childcare plan that includes the following elements:

1. Close all licensed childcare for regular use until social distancing is no longer necessary;
2. Continue to pay all childcare staff as if they are still working;
3. For parents required to work or those working in essential services, broadly defined, establish free age-appropriate emergency childcare programs for children 0-12 years in existing centres, licensed family childcare or schools during the closed period;
4. Ensure that parent fees are suspended during closings;
5. Maintain all government funding to service providers during closings and provide additional funding to compensate for the loss of income from parent fees and/or parent subsidies.

How Canada addresses childcare during the period of the COVID19 crisis is unquestionably important not only for families but from a public health perspective and for how the country continues to function and prosper. However, what Canada does about childcare now and what we learn from this crisis can serve us in the long term as well.

Issues about childcare staff facing pay interruptions or wholesale layoffs have not arisen in jurisdictions that help fund childcare. The issue of childcare centres being on the brink of collapse has not arisen because they do not rely primarily on parent fees. For example, European countries and Quebec are doing a much better job than the rest of Canada. Quebec has announced that 400 childcare centres will provide care for 60,000 children of health care providers and other essential workers free of charge. In the Netherlands, an announcement that childcare would be provided for workers in a long list of essential occupations quickly followed the country's closing of childcare and schools. Norway has closed schools and childcare but left a "skeleton system" to care for essential workers' children.

Thus, an important takeaway from the COVID19 pandemic is accessible, affordable, high quality childcare is a lynchpin in any 21st century country, and it must be treated as the essential service it is in good times and bad. This means public funding, public management and recognition that childcare is part of the social infrastructure we all depend on.

Can this happen in the liberal-democratic Canadian federation? Perhaps. French President Emmanuel Macron, a centrist free market promoter, last week argued that social programs and services should be re-embraced. He said, in a speech, "there are goods and services that must be placed outside the laws of the market. To delegate our food, our protection, our ability to care, our living environment, basically, to others, is madness. What this pandemic is already revealing is that free health care (and) our welfare state are not costs or charges, but precious goods, essential assets, when fate strikes."

Childcare, an essential service for all in good times and in bad, fits right into this "new" thinking.

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