

Part of Canada's recovery must be an overdue plan for universal child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Even as the federal government continues to manage the massive health, social and economic challenges of COVID-19, it must act now to lay the policy groundwork to aid a broad and lasting Canadian recovery.

This includes supporting child care like the national necessity it is.

Right now, child-care centres for all but essential workers are shuttered across the country. Many centres which are closed cannot and cover their costs will not have the resilience to survive the shutdown and reopen once the crisis passes. If parents cannot find child care when they are able to return to work, this will slow Canada's economic recovery.

But it's not just about the immediate term. Policy-makers should also use this period of social solidarity to establish essential foundations to our long-term social and economic well-being. This includes long-term measures to support and enhance child care services across the country.

The coronavirus crisis has enhanced our collective understanding of what is essential. We pay greater attention now to the often-invisible work and tasks that go into maintaining people on a daily and a generational basis. Over the past few weeks, many parents have developed a new awareness of the dedication and creativity demanded of child care workers.

More people now also realize that the bulk of this work is done by women — and is among the lowest wage work in the Canadian economy. We need to prioritize and support this essential work.

It is important to understand where we were as a country just before the onset of COVID-19. Unemployment was low. The federal debt-to-GDP ratio was comparatively low. But there were creeping concerns about slowing growth and affordability issues. And there were growing inequalities — among provinces but also along gender, race and other social lines.

The nature of our federation has allowed for the growth of what some describe as postal-code citizenship. The hard truth is that where you live in Canada often determines the kind of care and support available to you in crisis.

What we've seen so far from the government is a truly national response to the challenge of COVID-19. Federal leadership has been central to protecting workers and encouraging social solidarity.

That same leadership is required to support child care operators who will be key drivers of our economic and social recovery — and help build a truly national child-care system that will give millions of Canadian children the best possible start in life. The path to long-term recovery will be accelerated by investing in social as well as built infrastructure that stimulates both men's and women's employment. This includes access to regulated and adequately funded child care.

In the immediate term, however, two steps should be taken by government.

First, the child-care sector must be stabilized financially so it can reopen at capacity at the same time as the economy is ramping up again. This could take a number of different forms, but ideally the federal government would transfer funds to provinces and territories, which in turn would provide direct, immediate financial support to licensed child care providers. This would help them meet their costs while closed or operating at reduced levels — and be ready to go when the time comes.

Second, the federal government should move swiftly to create something it has already promised — a Childcare Secretariat. This office should be immediately looped into the government's wider stimulus and recovery planning measures, serving as a clearing house for efforts to support, shore up and build a much-needed child care system. Besides creating new jobs within the system, this will draw more women back into the labour market — essential to a strong sustainable recovery.

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