

# Ottawa urged to spend on child care to help economy emerge from pandemic <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

A parade of 150 honking cars and minivans, festooned in balloons and messages of thanks for emergency child-care workers, made the local news in Peterborough recently.

Meanwhile in Toronto, where some emergency child-care staff and children have tested positive for COVID-19, staff supervising outdoor play have been met with scorn.

"I was watching my children through the fence in the playground, and a man asked me why this daycare is open. He said there shouldn't be kids outside," said Toronto labour-room nurse Marianne Ryan, an essential worker who has relied on emergency child care for her two sons, ages eight and 11.

"The caregiver told me that people frequently approach the staff with comments about how they shouldn't be open," Ryan said.

The public's lack of understanding — and respect — for child care is troubling for Sheila Olan-MacLean, president of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, who helped organize the show of appreciation in Peterborough.

Across the country, child care has been deemed an essential service for health-care workers, grocery store clerks and others on the front lines during the coronavirus crisis, she noted.

"And yet, early childhood educators have been feeling quite left out in all the political praise for front-line staff during this pandemic," Olan-MacLean said in an interview.

That could be changing. As provinces plan to reopen their economies, politicians like Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce are calling child care a "prerequisite" for parents — particularly women — to participate in the workforce.

Advocates and academics couldn't agree more and say now is the time to move child care from the fringes of public policy in Canada to centre stage.

Child care is "kind of a magic bullet" because it provides jobs for women and lets women return to work in other sectors, said Brock University associate sociology professor Kate Bezanson, who specializes in social policy, gender, political economy and constitutional law.

And in Quebec, the only province where child care is widely available and heavily subsidized by public funds, research shows it more than pays for itself through increased tax revenue from women's employment. Child care also has the benefit of boosting the local economy, cutting child poverty and reducing the need for social assistance, Bezanson added.

But in the rest of Canada, child care is largely an ad hoc service, delivered in homes and centres run by non-profit and private businesses. Chronically low pay and staff turnover is rampant. Quality varies widely and the lack of public funding makes it ruinously expensive for parents, said Bezanson.

Many child-care centres are teetering on the edge of collapse thanks to the lockdown. Even if they survive, thousands of laid-off early childhood educators (ECEs) may be reluctant to return to their low-wage, low-status work, she warned.

In the short term, Bezanson and other academics and advocates urge Ottawa to work with the provinces to stabilize the sector so child care is available when the pandemic lifts.

Longer-term, Ottawa should consider investing in "social infrastructure" such as child care as an economic stimulus, said Bezanson, who has co-authored a report on the issue.

After the global recession of 2008 — a crisis that disproportionately impacted men — Ottawa unleashed billions in capital infrastructure spending that created thousands of construction jobs. But with the current crisis slamming retail, hospitality and service industries — and their largely female workforces — the country needs a response aimed at helping women, the report argues.

To get the ball rolling, Bezanson and her co-authors want the Trudeau government to appoint a Child Care Secretariat, promised by the Liberals during the 2019 election, to begin creating “a generational fix for the deeply entrenched inequalities and social vulnerabilities revealed by the current crisis.”

The secretariat could be a national clearing house for best practices in the pandemic era. For example, Ottawa is reviewing preliminary research in Europe and Australia that suggests children are less likely to become ill from the virus and are unlikely to spread it; such findings could help guide how child care operates, advocates say.

Such a secretariat could also help provinces share practical lessons learned during the pandemic, said Marni Flaherty, executive director of Today’s Family, a non-profit child-care agency in Hamilton, where all the emergency child care is happening in licensed home child care; child-care centres remain closed.

Flaherty says licensed home child care, with an average of three or four children per home, has some advantages over larger, centre-based care during a health crisis. If there is an outbreak, the small number of children and staff prevents the kind of disruption seen in Toronto, when an outbreak closed Jesse Ketchum Child Care Centre on April 28.

So far, 11 staff and four children, including an eight-month-old baby, have tested positive at the centre near Bay St. and Davenport Ave., one of seven city-run centres providing emergency care in Toronto. As a result, 43 child-care staff along with 55 children and their families have been forced to self-isolate for 14 days.

As advocates press Ottawa to launch a national child-care stimulus, Flaherty — whose agency also includes child-care centres — says the pandemic shows why informal home child care should be regulated, subject to public health measures and fully integrated with a larger national system of centre-based care.

“What if the next pandemic targets children?” she asked “Shame on us if we don’t learn from this and make change in this country.”

ECE Jessica Henderson, 21, who usually works in a Hamilton EarlyON parenting centre and in a before- and after-school program run by Today’s Family, volunteered her parents’ bungalow as an emergency child-care home. She says she has “loved” the experience.

As with all emergency child care during the pandemic, parents, kids and caregivers must have their temperatures taken every morning. Anyone who feels unwell or has a fever, runny nose, cough, nausea, diarrhea is prohibited from entering the home, and enhanced cleaning, disinfecting and hand-washing are mandatory.

Because Henderson is working with three sisters, ages two, five and six, the children can play together. “But we practice social distancing (with others) when we play nature ‘eye spy’ on our neighbourhood walks,” Henderson added.

In Toronto, where all the emergency child care is run out of city-operated centres, ECE Maiya Rambarck, 55, is also adjusting to a new routine. She usually works with up to 24 preschoolers but now provides emergency care for a maximum of seven children whose ages range from three to eight.

“It is a very different arrangement than before,” she said, adding the room is large enough to allow for physical distancing among staff and children who are not related.

Since such distancing is not possible with smaller children who need to be held, staff are required to use a sheet or blanket between themselves and the child and it must be laundered after every use, according to provincial pandemic protocol.

City officials are not sure what child-care programs will look like post-pandemic, but it’s expected that they “will have additional public health expectations and screening,” said Dr. Vinita Dubey, associate medical officer of health.

But even before the COVID-19 cases at Jesse Ketchum, many ECEs worried about their safety, said Erin Filby of the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario.

The association, with 1,800 ECE members across the province, tracks Facebook groups and social media and has noticed a lot of fear and uncertainty in the profession, she said.

“How do you do physical distancing with a baby? Infants need to be held, for their brains and their health,” Filby said. “We don’t want to lose the developmental and caring aspect of child care amid all of the safety precautions.”

Toronto labour-room nurse Marianne Ryan says she and her two sons who attended Jesse Ketchum “thankfully” tested negative for COVID-19. But now she is off work and says she won’t send her kids back to the city’s emergency child care again “because the risks are too great.” When she’s cleared to work again, her father will drive from his home in Richmond Hill to care for the boys.

“I know I am very lucky,” she said. “But I would have sent them back if I didn’t have my dad because I would have no other choice. We have to get this right for the future.”

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