

# Deal on child care support said to be 'very close' <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

The federal government is on the verge of signing a bilateral agreement with the provinces to help support child care services across the country as parents begin to head back to work amid economic reopening.

The bilateral contract will extend the government's previous three-year arrangement that expired in March and will see \$400 million go to the provinces on a per capita basis in 2020-21.

A government source told CTVNews.ca that it's a matter of putting "pen to paper" to start rolling out funds to provinces, which are in addition to the \$7.5 billion the Liberals have promised to spend on child care over a decade, ending in 2026.

"We're very close," said the source, who added that this isn't support-specific to COVID-19 but more so a continuation of the status quo until more time can be spent on revitalizing the system.

"If we were to negotiate a more substantial change in the program, it will probably take a few more months. For provinces to actually turn around a program for September wasn't practical."

One of the longer-term goals is to create up to 250,000 more before-and after-school spaces and to cut those fees for parents by 10 per cent.

Kate Bezanson, the associate dean of social sciences at Brock University in Ontario, said there are a number of measures that can and should be taken more immediately.

"If we do not pay careful attention to this now, get it right, and do some pretty significant thinking, investing, expanding capacity, we are going to be stalled, thwarted, and delayed in any kind of economic recovery," said Bezanson.

Not only have women been impacted most by COVID-19 job losses, as Statistics Canada reported this month that 1.5 million women lost jobs in March and April, but those who are still working will face a difficult dance between professional and personal life as employers expect staff to return to work, said Bezanson.

"We could face a situation where we have a huge swath of the labour market – and it's probably going to be women – who can't go back to work or can only work part-time, which will have massive gender equality outcomes, which will have mass consequences for women and children's risk of poverty," she said.

"It will be like a 1950s-style recovery where we essentially privatize child care to the home, because we haven't figured out the public fix for child care."

Bezanson co-authored a report in April about the mounting need for a more comprehensive national framework as the country emerges from the pandemic, which outlines key social policy recommendations for the federal government.

In the short-term, rather than individual child care programs applying for support, the authors suggest amending the existing bilateral agreements between the federal and provincial governments to allow a streamlining of funds directly to child-care services.

It also suggests establishing a child-care secretariat to operate at the centre of the federal government to help build a pan-Canadian structure.

"It should be housed in the Prime Minister's Office or the Privy Council Office, right at the centre, because it will be one of the most important levers in thinking about stabilization, stimulus spending, and then recovery," said Bezanson in an interview with CTVNews.ca.

Reflecting on Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's media addresses over the past several weeks, she suggested that it's possible this position may be established sooner than later.

The government source confirmed the secretariat position is being considered.

As private and public child-care facilities look to reopen, Bezanson said they will have to deal with a host of operational and labour market

issues that will force governments to pay attention.

"The costs are going to absolutely go up if the ratios are different between staff and kids. So all of that put together is a macro-economic disaster waiting to happen."

She said the "Team Canada" approach to COVID-19 thus far has shown collaboration between the federal government and provinces on health policy is possible.

"We have various mechanisms at our disposal to think about a kind of co-ordinated, collaborative, thoughtful federalism that sets national standards, that sets benchmarks," she said. "We have seen the last two months that we're very able to do that as a nation and we're able to put aside partisanship and ideological entrenchment to work together for the greater good."

The prime minister raised the issue in a press briefing earlier this month, stating "the need for child care has never been made clearer." That was echoed by Minister for Women and Gender Equality Maryam Monsef and Social Development Minister Ahmed Hussen during COVID-19 press briefings.

"COVID has hit women hardest with jobs lost with additional unpaid care responsibilities for their kids or others. Women are the majority of those on the front lines of the crisis, personal support workers, child-care workers, food sector workers, nurses and health-care workers, and social workers," said Monsef on May 16.

Bezanson said that as Canada navigates through this recession, different from the financial crisis of 2008, the remedies will also need to be different.

"Many child care centres are simply not going to be able to open and I don't think we should think about child care the same way we're thinking about businesses because it really isn't a business. It's not a market system," she said.

"We need social infrastructure and that social infrastructure is child care which by the way creates jobs and stimulates female employment."

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