

No, Mr. Premier, child care doesn't happen organically ^[1]

Commentary

Author: Stevenson, Julianne & Taylor, Jennifer

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EXCERPTS

We were frustrated to hear Premier Stephen McNeil's comment at his Tuesday briefing, that child care has been dealt with "organically" for health care and other essential workers while most daycares have been closed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This was in response to a question from the CBC's Michael Gorman about why the province has not provided publicly funded child care for essential workers, unlike other provinces in Canada. The Chronicle Herald's Nicole Munro's story from May 28 is further proof that many parents will be unable to return to work in early June because daycares are not reopening at the same time as other businesses.

We are not frontline workers ourselves, but we are concerned feminists with close family members in the medical profession. We have heard their stories, and what the premier said about child care being dealt with "organically" just isn't accurate.

Some doctors have hired outside caregivers and felt like they were doing something illegal; others are reluctant to bring a new caregiver into their bubble and put them at risk. Another sent her child to stay with her sister's family several hours away. That was in March; it's now almost June.

Doctors' spouses have given up jobs and used up vacation time so they can stay home with their children; one doctor is even thankful her husband was laid off so he could remain home.

Leaving child care to happen "organically" leads to these gut-wrenching situations. It also raises countless questions: what about single-parent families, or families where both parents work in essential services? How could "organic" child care even happen, given the limitations of the two-family bubble? What about parents without close relatives or friends in Nova Scotia? Why can one parent go back to serving the public in a restaurant or hair salon on June 5, but not yet send their child back to a licensed daycare?

And are essential workers really supposed to spend their limited personal time lobbying the government to do the right thing?

To be clear, we are not advocating for daycares to open without the all-clear from public health, and we appreciate the premier's comments in this regard from Friday's briefing. But the fact remains that many more parents will be working outside the home — increasing the risk to themselves and their children — before licensed child care is back up and running.

No one has a perfect solution (as we often hear, these are unprecedented times), but Nova Scotians deserve consistent and honest messaging, especially when it comes to child care for essential workers.

Early in the pandemic, medical students at Dalhousie University made significant efforts to fill this gap by providing volunteer child care for health-care workers. Volunteer co-ordinator Clara Long described the program as being "flooded with requests" that, as a small group of student volunteers, they were simply unable to manage. The student volunteers soon realized that they were the only organized program offering frontline health-care workers temporary child care in all of Nova Scotia.

Medical student volunteers organized these child-care services to meet a temporary need until government stepped in — at which time the students would return to focusing on spring exams and their other responsibilities.

The student organizers submitted an open letter (which has been signed by hundreds of health-care workers) to the provincial government on April 9, highlighting the urgent need for emergency child-care services. The government responded by saying that unlicensed community supports were sufficient. On May 1, the premier said there was a lack of "uptake" for emergency child-care services in other jurisdictions, as a means of justifying the decision not to offer such services here. (In New Brunswick, there were over 1,000 requests for emergency child care.)

But the volunteers paint a very different picture of the need for child care in the province. At its maximum capacity of over 80 volunteers, the group was unable to meet the demand of health care workers seeking child-care services.

This case study demonstrates that, while Nova Scotians truly will support one another in times of crisis, the government cannot offload the oversight of child care to the community and expect all families' needs to be met.

Last week, the NDP called for the government “to require all workplaces to include accommodations for employees with dependents in their plans for reopening.” Hopefully, the government will act on this request, and also implement longer-term solutions like publicly funded daycare.

But a more fundamental shift in philosophy is required.

The premier’s offhand comment about child care happening “organically” revealed a dangerous underlying assumption: that child care is a private family matter when, really, it’s a public imperative. As we heard from one doctor, the province’s “organic child care concept” relies on the “informal network of unpaid women’s work that has always propped up everything.”

Finding child care is anything but organic; it takes time, energy and money, when our essential workers don’t have any more to give.

When translated into government policy, this kind of thinking will, as many have pointed out, end up increasing the burden on women and affect their ability to fully participate in the workforce, during and after the COVID-19 crisis. To those who share the premier’s philosophy, remember this: women’s choices are constrained by the government services available to them (or not) and the societal expectations placed on them (or not). No one is making these impossible decisions about work vs child care in a vacuum, health-care professionals and other frontline workers included. These are systemic issues that certainly require a government response, and government support.

Leaving child care to be sorted out “organically” is simply a way for the premier to avoid responsibility.

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