

Opinion: As Manitobans head back to work, more accessible quality child care needed ^[1]

Investment in child care leads to economic returns as parents can access work, education

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EXCERPT

Whether you have children or not, I believe that you benefit somehow from child care.

The doctor you called when you were feeling sick, the store clerk who has been stocking the shelves with the food you buy and the home care provider who has been checking in on your elderly parents – these people may not be at work without child care.

It is a model that makes sense.

I was an earnest 21-year-old when I told my mother that I wanted to become an early childhood educator. She was usually my biggest cheerleader – but she tactfully told me this wasn't a great idea.

Don't get me wrong. My mom is always in my corner. But I was a fresh graduate from a coveted college communications program, and she was an early childhood educator (ECE) herself.

She knew what I was in for – a job I could adore and pour my passion into, and a career where I would have to fight to be seen as an educator, work long hours in a physically and mentally exhausting job, and sometimes struggle to pay my bills.

She was not trying to crush my new dream. She was trying to protect me from what she had experienced in her own lifetime, and felt that a nice entry-level job in the advertising field was just the ticket.

But my mom supported me anyway (as moms tend to do) and I returned to school to complete my early childhood education training.

Now, many parents have been given the green light to reenter their workspace and are now feverishly searching for child care so they can do so.

With spaces already scarce prior to COVID, it is no easy task.

Yes, Manitoba has a plan that allows essential service workers to access child care spaces in the city.

No, it does not mean they will have long-term care or space at the usual centre their children know and trust.

This development has brought child care back into the spotlight and reignited the debate that ECEs have argued for decades: Manitobans cannot work without accessible, quality child care.

Fostering bonds in child care

I am lucky to be an ECE who works in a school division that values early childhood education, and understands that as a parent I may need to remain working at home for now.

But even with a supportive workplace, my only child is missing out on a big piece of what he gets from his school and child care centre: social/emotional development, courtesy of bonds with his teachers and classmates.

Children are remarkable little beings, and they are resilient.

But quality child care is not just space in a centre. It is an environment where all children – regardless of their socioeconomic background – foster strong, nurturing bonds with caregivers who are experts in the crucial first years of development.

Parents who can access quality early years care for their children are in turn able to access education and employment opportunities. That, in my opinion, means a much greater economic return on those child care dollars.

After 15 years of working with families and children in various capacities, I can say that I have never been so proud to be part of this field. But the tiresome struggle my mom tried to warn me about hasn't changed much.

ECEs are still arguably underpaid, often with a starting wage that nowhere near reflects the two-plus years of studies they took part in. They leave their own families each day to foster social, emotional and educational growth in the children across our province, nurturing additional support needs and scraping together an enriching curriculum on a shoestring budget.

They are often on a split shift that gets them home well after dinnertime, or leads them into a second evening job they take on just to pay their bills.

Despite this, they keep stepping up each day for our children.

Manitoba has much to be proud of. But I think we can become trailblazers and finally give early childhood education (as a whole) the recognition it deserves.

So if one day my son tells me he wants to become an ECE, I can look him square in the eye and tell him "it's a fantastic idea."

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