

Better public child care is the engine we need for recovery post-coronavirus ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

As of June 12, child-care centres in Ontario can open, following reopenings in most regions of Québec.

But while these child-care centres are doing their part to support families in the post-coronavirus recovery, and Ontario is offering some extra help, Canada needs to find economically efficient ways of supporting child-care programs while simultaneously incentivizing quality.

In so doing, it would follow some of the smartest approaches to economic recovery, development and social wellness already evidenced in parts of Canada and the world.

From private to social problem

When COVID-19 struck, child care was transformed overnight from a private responsibility to a social one. Suddenly all those parents who make up the army of first responders in times of emergency had a serious problem, and so did Canadians depending on their services.

When the government first put out the call for emergency child care, many authorities overseeing care centres struggled to find space and staff. Those with the greatest capability to respond had publicly managed programs, including municipally operated centres in Toronto and provincially managed child care in Québec. Undoubtedly, many community providers made stellar contributions but their efforts required significant government support.

Child care will have limits on enrolment, smaller group sizes and heightened hygiene protocols. (Shutterstock)

Now that the restrictions have softened, child care must be readied to do its part to help kick-start the economy. It won't be business as usual.

For now, the protocols in place for emergency care continue to apply, including limits on enrolment, smaller group sizes and heightened cleaning and personal hygiene protocols.

Staff will require new skills and techniques to adjust to being educators in this new normal. Smaller group sizes of children will require a large increase of the workforce in a sector where educators are already in serious short supply. This will tax both the financial and organizational capacity of most child-care operators.

Fundamental for economic recovery

Successfully providing child care is fundamental for the success of economic recovery and will need to rely on public investment, public management and enhanced public delivery.

New Zealand is leading the world in COVID-19 recovery and much of its continued success will be credited to its child-care policies. These include a big boost to child care paid out only to providers with 100 per cent qualified staff, along with wage subsidies to induce growth in the workforce.

Canada needs to look to such models. Parents need to trust that their child-care program is able to comply with emergency protocols, and children need safe and supportive environments to continue their learning while healing from the disruption or trauma these past few months have brought.

Mitigates impact of pandemic on children

High-quality child care is crucial for the recovery process in two critical ways. It allows parents to return to work but perhaps more importantly, it will mitigate the effect of the pandemic on the children's development and health. The pandemic has been a huge challenge to children.

Their academic progress has stalled, inequalities have widened, mental health has deteriorated and many are coping with household situations that are precarious, stressful and even dangerous. Educational child care has been shown as a cost-effective tool to mitigate

many of these disadvantages and post-COVID it will be more important than ever.

In Canada, bilateral early learning and child-care agreements are already in place between the federal, and provincial and territorial governments. These have been extended to 2021 when they are scheduled for renewal.

Canada could emerge out of this pandemic with a better quality and more efficient childcare system. (Shutterstock)

Quality improvements needed

This is an ideal time for the federal government to fund programs to meet COVID-19 procedures but also to insist that provincial and territorial governments implement quality improvements, invest in a professional workforce and increase public management and accountability for their child care services. Done well, Canada can then emerge from this pandemic with a better quality and more efficient childcare system nationwide.

There are many made-in-Canada examples to emulate. Québec's "centres de la petite enfance" and Prince Edward Island's early years centres are good models of public management, where the province sets salaries, fees, curriculum, staff training and program accountability.

Education ministries are expanding school mandates, opening early learning opportunities to all children. These systems were put in place quickly and are highly popular with families and educators.

The chronic weakness of private and community child-care services already indicated a need for public leadership. The child care we have did not provide the outcomes that Canadians deserve prior to this crisis and will certainly not in our new normal.

Child care can not succumb to the pandemic. Families need support and businesses need their workers back. The public response needs to be widespread, urgent and comprehensive to promote quality care. We need to view expanded public child care not as a cost, but as an engine for immediate recovery and growth and an investment with returns into the future.

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