

Rebuilding childcare for a fair recovery and a stronger economy ^[1]

Author: Bezanson, Kate., Bevan, Andrew., & Lysack, Monica

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EXCERPTS

We are seeing in real time how critical childcare is for Canada to reopen and rebuild from the COVID-19 crisis. In early June, the national labour force survey revealed that the employment of women with pre-school children recovered at half the pace of women with school-aged children and less than half the pace of men with pre-school children. This month, Statistics Canada starkly concluded that “in all age groups, men are closer to pre-shutdown employment levels than women.”

When the crisis hit, women were the first called, or pushed, out of the labour market, making this Canada’s first care and service sector led recession – what some call a “pink collar recession” or “she-cession.”

Without immediate investments and planning for childcare system building, women will be both the first out and last back. Such a debilitating outcome yields massive consequences both for households and our economy, including stalled growth, decreased taxation revenues for governments, and increased poverty for women and children.

At the same time, as provincial and territorial governments grapple with how to safely reopen schools in September, a nimble and coordinated working intersection between schools and child care for children aged 0-12 is crucial if parents – and especially women – are to return to work. Absent this, any economic recovery will not only be stunted and slowed, it will also be deeply unfair.

As Canada emerges from lockdown, new childcare challenges compound pre-existing ones, especially the absence of a developed national childcare system. Federal government leadership is urgently needed to stabilize existing childcare spaces and build toward the system we need, both for economic reopening and a long-term recovery.

Improving on the existing lack of accessibility, affordability and variable quality will generate and sustain economic recovery. It will stimulate employment through built infrastructure spending (including centre construction and retrofitting), and social infrastructure spending (such as employment in the childcare sector as well as women’s ability to rejoin the labour market).

Crucially, building a childcare system will also protect Canada’s economy against the care vulnerabilities revealed by the pandemic.

So, what needs to be done? As we articulated in June, five steps should be immediately taken:

Restore pre-COVID childcare capacity by investing in necessary operational, safety, wage, and staff funding for regulated spaces;

Build satellite-to-permanent spaces by investing in alternate additional sites to provide safe delivery within required reduced child/staff ratios, then begin repurposing these new sites for long-term system expansion;

Employ flexible, safe, and smart improvisation for what is left of summer 2020 by assisting summer programming for school aged regulated childcare and camp programs;

Plan school to care coordination that expands childcare capacity to full days for school aged children where full-time school attendance is unavailable in the Fall due to physical distancing requirements; and

Immediately form the promised federal Childcare Secretariat to develop, collaborate, and build toward a national system of childcare for all Canadian children that need it.

In the short term, federal funding and leadership should focus sharply on helping provinces and territories be responsive to the fluctuating childcare needs of families and children due to the crisis. It should support the financial sustainability of centres as they work with varying numbers of children, and also support affinities between childcare and school systems, neither of which will likely return to normal in short order.

This will all take new additional funding and coordination, which is one of the reasons why governments and regulating bodies have sorted out how to reopen golf courses and barber shops, while working parents have largely been left to figure out how to do two jobs at once. Parents are becoming increasingly frustrated by the day, and as recent employment data show, our current approach isn’t working for our economy either.

For this fiscal year, we estimated in June that \$2 billion of the then-planned \$14 billion Safe Restart transfer to provinces and territories should be directed to childcare, to be spent on restoring the regulated childcare sector to pre-COVID availability. In addition, the \$535 million previously promised for before and after school care is now essential – and likely sometimes full-day – for school aged children owing to physical distancing rules and potentially reduced school schedules in the months to come.

In the Safe Restart agreement announced July 16th, \$625 million of the now \$19 billion in short-term emergency funding has been allocated to childcare. While details beyond the dollar amount remain forthcoming, we are concerned that federal, provincial and territorial governments need to dedicate much more to restore childcare capacity to pre-COVID levels of regulated spaces, to confront the potential care crisis for school aged childcare, and to build parent confidence. The federal government should immediately establish what we term the Canada Emergency Childcare Ensure Fund (the Ensure Fund). This will be a flexible and substantial set-aside reserve fund for regulated pre-school and school-aged childcare. It will be capable of being quickly deployed to respond to emerging and varying paths to school reopening structure and day length, as well as challenges in achieving a full return to pre-pandemic childcare capacity. The fund would ensure women's labour market participation and full return.

There is tremendous uncertainty, imperfect information, and fear about what fall and a potential second wave mean for parents, children, workers, and the childcare and school sectors; building confidence requires careful planning, sufficient funding, and nimble policy response. Parents, businesses, employers, and experts have been sounding an escalating alarm for many weeks about this problem that has a clear immediate solution. The moment – and the legacy it will leave – requires that politicians at every level summon the political will to take the necessary action.

Securing alternate satellite sites to restore preschool childcare to pre-COVID capacity levels will strategically support system building, and form a foundation for expansion as the pandemic recedes and staff/child ratios return to pre-COVID levels. That expansion, and building a national childcare system, also requires establishing the Childcare Secretariat to work with provinces and territories to aggressively build capacity in childcare workers and physical stock, and in balancing accessibility, affordability, and quality.

This Secretariat will be crucial to economic recovery and stimulating women's employment, in terms of returning to the labour market, the supply of early childhood educators, and girding the economy against the care vulnerabilities exposed by the crisis.

Beyond the priority of driving a fair economic and social recovery, the elements of a renewed and rebuilt childcare system compel additional government investments which the Secretariat should be charged with defining for the 2021-2022 fiscal year and federal budget. Then Canada will be put on a path to build out the sustainable recovery we urgently need.

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