

Pandemic proves more than ever the value of universal daycare ^[1]

The pandemic is as good a time as any to finally institute universal childcare

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EXCERPTS

We're tired, angry and disheartened and many of us are drinking too much.

We've had enough. We want a return to normalcy, regardless of how unlikely that will be.

Our world has changed. So why not make real, long-overdue changes to the "care" system for the most vulnerable — the very old and the very young? We have seen the horror visited on the very old. Why have we not reacted to the sometimes shoddy and unregulated care offered the very young with the same concern?

I have never raised a child, so as the sports fans say, I have no skin in this game. But I have seen the benefits; watched the stress vanish from the faces of colleagues with young children when the Calgary Herald opened a day-care centre in what had been an unused auditorium, retrofitted. From my office window, I watched their children playing outside. In a way, they humanized the place, made more important the work we did, as if we were responsible for making their world a better place. The lesson stayed with me.

That's a scene from the mid-1980s, all vanished now. Yet the benefits linger and it is ridiculous that it took a pandemic for people to pay closer attention to the world we are forging for today's children. We hear talk about social distancing in schools and how children may only be able to attend school half-days or half-weeks. Would somebody please tell the "experts" you cannot expect half the workforce to stay home and care for children when Canada's economy rests in the hands of working women. Almost half of Canada's workforce is female and that represents more than 61 per cent of all Canadian women.

Growing up in the 1950s, the women I saw working outside the home were mostly teachers and nurses. They were war widows, single women and nuns. Married women stayed home. (There were few exceptions: my aunt was a lawyer.)

Why, all these years later, is this country still not concerned with affordable, responsible, universal daycare for children? No less than former Bank of Canada governor Stephen Poloz urged that in a speech to Queen's University two years ago. But the call for government-subsidized daycare is nothing new: the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, tabled in 1970 after three years of study, recommended universal childcare. That's what civilized countries do and what this pandemic has revealed is the appalling lack of support for working mothers.

I don't blame the politicians alone; they sway in the wind. I blame the people who can afford nannies and private daycare; those men and women with pull and power. Where is their commitment to other people's children? Where are the voices of the wealthy and powerful in support? Or is this a case of the kind of closed-minded thinking that if I can afford decent childcare, why care about anyone else's spawn? (Hint: those children you casually dismiss may one day grow up to marry your kid.) The better care they get now pays off in the future.

North America is far behind the civilizations that realized years ago when only the rich can afford childcare, it results in a waste of economic potential. It's just not the Nordic countries such as Sweden that are the envy of working mothers. Countries as diverse as Australia and even Slovenia have recognized the need.

Canadians have been talking about this for generations, without any results because any "universal" program would mean higher taxes. That's a specious argument, easily offset by the improvement in the country's economy and household income.

The pandemic is a historic opportunity for women right now to prove to the unbelievers exactly how important their contribution to the nation's economy is: what happens if they don't return to work?

In the epilogue to her 2005 book, *Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution*, activist Judy Rebick evokes an old theme. "Women today face common problems. Feminists fought for universal childcare and for men to assume their full share of child-rearing but neither battle has been won." Today, 15 years later, the latter has surely changed. Today's husbands and fathers do their so-called "fair share," at least the evolved ones do. But universal childcare is still proving elusive. What will inspire that change?

To quote Nellie McClung, one of the Famous Five: "Get the thing done and let them howl."

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