

Rebuilding childcare in Canada must include a national strategy ^[1]

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It's been almost five months since provincial and territorial governments closed childcare services. Now they are allowing them to reopen. Reopening – like shuttering – has been chaotic, anxiety-producing and inequitable for families, service providers and the childcare workforce alike. Childcare programs and parents (particularly mothers, who have been picking up a disproportionate share of the fallout) have emerged from the pandemic's acute phase much the worse for wear.

Policies, guidelines and funding around childcare services have varied extensively across Canada, with vocal objections ^[5] by service providers and parents ^[6] to some provincial actions ^[7] – or to absence of action. An online Canada-wide survey ^[8] of more than 8,000 regulated childcare services found more than one-third of closed centres reported uncertainty about whether they would reopen. Surveyed centres overwhelmingly identified new COVID-19 related health and safety practices, low enrolment and difficulty hiring staff as significant threats to viability.

The survey showed diverse approaches to childcare during the outbreak. Some provinces closed childcare to all but essential worker parents. Others didn't. Essential workers received free childcare in some jurisdictions but paid full fees in others. Parents paid fees to reserve post-COVID spaces in closed programs in some provinces. Others disallowed this, with several provinces providing additional funding to offset lost parent fee revenues. Some provinces closed all centres but kept family childcare open. Others closed both, while one province (Saskatchewan) closed childcare centres in schools but not other locations.

Difficult as the pandemic has been for Canadians needing or providing childcare, it has generated new evidence about why and how to transform childcare policy. Looking beyond the pandemic to future reconstruction of the economy, four noteworthy lessons have emerged from COVID19's acute phase.

Lesson One: Childcare is essential.

This has been thoroughly demonstrated and widely embraced: for mothers of young children to participate in the Canadian economy, there must be quality, reliable childcare. In pandemic-times, governments recognized that essential workers – medical workers and others – needed childcare so they could do their jobs.

But it is equally apparent that affordable childcare is also essential for all parents in the paid labour force. Parents who had to work from home found it arduous (or impossible) to work productively. Mothers in particular, had to balance their paid work with the unpaid work of caring for, or schooling, their children. Canadian sociologists Yue Qian and Sylvia Fuller's research ^[9] shows the gender gap in employment widening during the pandemic, while a Statistics Canada survey found parents reporting their “top concern was balancing childcare, schooling and work” (74 percent were very or extremely concerned).

Lesson Two: Parents with school-age children depend on schools both for education and childcare.

During the pandemic, school closures forced parents into untenable work and family situations. Quebec reopened many elementary schools before the regular summer break but in most other jurisdictions, what will be available for school-age children in September remains an open question. Ontario's failure to set out clear province-wide direction on reopening schools has sparked outrage.

Policy analyst Laura Dobson-Hughes ^[10] summed it up: “The lack of affordable childcare, especially for low-income and racialized families, was already unsustainable and is now a crisis for many. We must make the safe return to school a political and national priority.” However, with a month to go, whether or not schools will be operating fully after Labour Day is still a wide-open question in most of Canada.

Lesson Three: A market-model works poorly for delivering “care” services necessary for well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the outcome of decades of failure to develop robust care provisions for children and the elderly, the latter which suffered grievously due to system breakdown in long-term care. Childcare and long-term care share many characteristics. Both depend on low-paid women's labour. Service quality depends on the number, education and management of staff. Both are provincially regulated. And both are market-driven, rather than coordinated service systems designed with the well-being of those cared for as the primary consideration.

The pandemic revealed the fragility of Canada's parent fee-funded childcare patchwork of services, delivered by an underpaid, almost all female workforce. The national survey found 70 percent of centres reported laying off some or all staff.

Given the low wages in the sector, there is a fear that many will not return because other, higher-paid jobs will become available. Or

childcare staff may be better off financially by remaining on government income replacement programs, especially if they have to pay high childcare fees for their own children. The national survey [11] on the effects of COVID-19 on childcare found that of the 71 percent of centres across Canada that had laid staff off, 87 percent reported those staff members had applied for Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). Thus, as they reopen, centres are struggling with lower enrolment due to COVID-related restrictions on the number of children (and fewer parent fees), extra safety-related costs and shortages of trained educators to deliver quality childcare.

The pandemic provides a lesson that childcare – like other services in the increasingly important care economy – must be regarded as a public good. Thus, they should be publicly managed and publicly funded. If childcare continues to be left to the market, it will continue to fail.

Lesson Four: The federal government can, and must, step in.

The chaotic childcare situation during COVID-19 reinforces why a stronger federal role in childcare – constitutionally under provincial jurisdiction – is warranted. The current fragmented approach – with its accompanying inequality and absence of options for families – will continue to undermine economic recovery and reconstruction. As economist Armine Yalnizyan [12] noted, childcare “is not a provincial matter but a national one. It is of national importance and we need a national plan.”

Childcare advocates have proposed a two-phased federal strategy [13] for moving from laissez-faire policy to begin building a childcare system as a central pillar of Canada’s social infrastructure. Phase 1 was to have started immediately, with the federal government earmarking a significant portion of the more than \$19-billion Safe Restart agreement to help the economy reopen for early years and school-age childcare.

Advocates asked that these funds be used to restore licensed childcare to pre-pandemic levels, with full evidence-based consideration of children’s and staff’s health and safety. They said federal funding was required to provide both childcare for children younger than school-age and childcare for school-agers to 12 years through summer, fall and winter, before and after school hours, and during regular school hours if school is not available.

However, the Safe Restart Agreement provides only \$625 million [14] in federal funding for childcare, without specific conditions for the new transfer. This makes the second phase of the proposed federal strategy that much more important, including immediate establishment of the promised federal early learning and childcare secretariat to steer policy development. [15]

In Phase 2, the advocates’ strategy proposes that the federal government boost annual childcare spending by \$2 billion each year beginning with \$2 billion in 2021-22 (to \$4 billion in 2022-23, \$6 billion in 2023-24, and so on). As has been the understanding since the 2017 federal budget, 20 percent of federal funds would support implementation of the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework agreed to by the federal government and Indigenous governing bodies.

The strategy proposes that future agreements with provinces and territories require transferred funds to be used to move toward a fully publicly funded, publicly managed childcare system, with demonstrable improvements in accessibility, affordability, quality and inclusivity. The federal secretariat would support system-building across Canada, working with provinces, territories and Indigenous governments and communities on a childcare workforce strategy, ongoing consultation with the childcare sector and policy experts, data collection, a research agenda and sharing best practices. Importantly, the federal government must draft legislation to enshrine a right of all Canadian children to quality childcare, as the Canada Health Act does for basic health care.

As Kate Bezanson, Andrew Bevan and Monica Lysack recently wrote [16] for First Policy Response: “Childcare is key to Canada’s capacity to reopen and rebuild from the COVID-19 crisis...The decisions governments make in the coming months about childcare system-building will be era-defining, and will have generational ripple effects.”

COVID-19 has disrupted Canadians’ family lives, employment, finances and public and social programs on a scale most of us have never before experienced. It has also created an opportunity for rethinking, rebuilding and recreating. What is being proposed for childcare is not new – what is new is the opportunity to actually move to create what Canada has long needed – a full national childcare program for all. The consequence of not moving forward on childcare is more serious than ever before, as recovery is now not only about recovering childcare but about a just and effective recovery for Canada.

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