

# Has COVID-19 created universal child care's moment in Canada? <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Before the pandemic, Fernanda Yanchapaxi already knew how difficult life could be without child care. The 39-year-old University of Toronto graduate student spent nearly three years on daycare waiting lists for each of her daughters, who are now seven and three. She schlepped them to her classes, tried to soothe them during lectures and pushed her studies late into the night. She managed as best she could, but it never felt sustainable.

"I just remember feeling like I didn't have a choice," she says today. "I didn't have another alternative than to do both at the same time, but sometimes it's too much to do both."

So even though she needed to use almost all of her scholarship money to pay daycare fees — which ranged from \$900 to \$1,300 per month — she jumped at spots for her kids as soon as they became available. (Since her partner works full time, they didn't qualify for fee subsidies.) It was expensive, but it let her continue her studies, complete a master's degree and start her PhD.

Then the pandemic hit and she was back to juggling everything. She tried to do it all at first, but eventually put her studies on hold. "It was really hard to do both things."

She said the pandemic reinforced for her the value of child care. "But more than anything, it reinforced my frustration with the lack of a universal, fully funded system," she said. "It's a gap that leaves parents alone."

Governor General Julie Payette is scheduled to make the throne speech on Wednesday on behalf of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government, and child care is expected to figure prominently. Yanchapaxi says she will be watching and looking for more than vague nods to supporting working parents.

"I've heard that before," she said. "I actually want to see a plan to have a universal and fully funded system across Canada that works in the same way that public school works, so every family does not have to make a choice between generating income for the family or taking care of the kids."

Yanchapaxi isn't alone. Child-care advocates are hopeful that this is their moment — that the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the necessity of universal child care, while also creating the political circumstances for it to be a major plank in the government's economic recovery efforts.

Advocates envision a national system that is funded primarily by the government and accessible to all families with low or no fees.

"This is the legacy program of the 21st century," said Armine Yalnizyan, an economist and the Atkinson Fellow on the Future of Workers. "There's absolutely zero bigger issue right now."

During the pandemic, women lost jobs at a higher rate compared to men, and their employment has been slower to recover. A recent study by the Royal Bank of Canada found women's participation in the labour force is at its lowest point in 30 years.

But Yalnizyan said affordable child care is not just about getting women back to work; it's about ensuring Canada's economy can grow to meet the needs of an aging population.

"This isn't a feminist issue or a children's issue," she said. "This is a macroeconomic issue. We cannot get recovery without having a 'she-covery,' and we cannot have 'she-covery' without child care."

Yalnizyan said there needs to be a "muscular" investment by the federal government in the provinces — in the neighbourhood of \$8 billion — and it needs to be tied to specific, measurable outcomes and timelines. "The money has to be buying change."

But first the government needs to preserve the existing child-care capacity, which has been threatened by declining enrolment and rising costs related to the pandemic. Earlier this summer, the feds announced \$625 million to support the child-care sector during the pandemic. But many child-care centres have yet to reopen, and advocates fear some may be forced to close permanently.

“Right now we’re seeing day by day, the disaster that comes from leaving child care to a patchwork market system,” said Carolyn Ferns, the public policy and government relations co-ordinator at the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. The throne speech should include a plan to shift toward a publicly funded, universal system, she said. “It’s never been more clear that that’s the direction we need to go than it is right now, because of what this pandemic has done.”

Ferns said she would like to see national legislation to enshrine the goal of building a national system and insulate it from shifting political winds. “We have to entrench some of these things so that we don’t continue this lurching (between governments), and all the starts and stops.”

Martha Friendly, founder and executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, has been through all the starts and stops on child care, going back to the 1970 Report on the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, which called for a national daycare act.

Friendly said that since Wednesday is merely a throne speech, not a budget, she knows it will only be a broad-strokes vision. But she will be looking for signals of the government’s intention to move toward a system that is more resilient, less marketized and not dependent on parent fees to “keep the lights on.”

Building universal child care may be a daunting task, she said. But so was building health care.

“It’s something that can be done,” she said. “We’re not the first country to do this — we’re also not the last, but we’re close to the last — and if Canada actually can’t start developing a serious, well-developed national child-care program now, after this pandemic, with everything we know about it, I mean, c’mon, what else do we need to do?”

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** universal <sup>[4]</sup>

economic recovery <sup>[5]</sup>

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