

Op-ed: Why we need universal child care in Canada ^[1]

Fifty years after the call for a national program, child care continues to be neglected, mismanaged and underfunded in Canada

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Source: NOW Toronto

Format: Article

Publication Date: 16 Sep 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

In 1970, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women released a report calling for the creation of a national daycare program. Fifty years later, child care in our country continues to be neglected, mismanaged and underfunded.

The resulting patchwork works for few families. Child care fees are exorbitantly high (often a second mortgage or rent payment for families). And licensed child care tends to be inaccessible due to a lack of available spaces and investment in infrastructure. As a result, families are left to cobble together unregulated arrangements.

The failure of policymakers to prioritize child care as a public good has come at an inordinate cost to women.

Women have sacrificed careers and promotions and exited the workforce altogether to assume care at home. These difficult decisions have long-term consequences in terms of lost wages and future wage growth and retirement assets, leaving many women in a financially precarious position. Indeed, women are overrepresented among the poor in our country.

Decades of research has repeatedly affirmed the long-lasting benefits of high-quality early care and education. High-quality, affordable child care benefits the whole of society.

Children enrolled in quality child care programs are more likely to have future educational success, attain employment and develop positive social and emotional skills than children who do not.

COVID-19 has delivered a near-fatal blow to a system that was already on life support.

In Toronto, the city with the highest infant and toddler fees in the country, 17,000 families were waiting for a subsidized child care spot before the pandemic.

But only about half of all child care centres have reopened. Many non-profit operators are running at a deficit at the moment and some have closed permanently. Enrolment is lower due to the pandemic, yet costs are higher than ever. The child care workforce, which is notoriously underpaid, now faces returning to work with increased risk and responsibility.

The best way forward is a radical overhaul.

Canada needs a universal, publicly funded child care system. This is particularly true for those who face higher rates of poverty and violence – Black, Indigenous, newcomer and racialized women, women with disabilities and LGBTQ2s+ parents.

Our recovery from COVID-19 depends on substantial progress toward a comprehensive system of regulated and responsive early learning and child care services for all communities and in all regions.

The lack of available and affordable child care means that some families rely on the labour of undocumented women and other private arrangements that are often exploitative.

The YWCA's COVID recovery plan recommends Canada implement the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) benchmark of at least one per cent of the country's GDP to early learning and child care. This would be a good starting point.

Policymakers should note that child care is a strong return on investment. For every dollar spent on early childhood education, there's a six dollar return in long-term economic benefits.

Publicly funded child care can also support economic growth by increasing the participation of women in the labour force and expanding the tax base. Child care is not an expense but an investment towards a more gender-balanced, resilient economy. COVID-19 recovery represents a genuine opportunity to change the national conversation.

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