

Families need emergency child care support right now ^[1]

COVID-19 has revealed the cost of governments' failure to support and manage early learning and care as a foundational need of Canada's economy and society.

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EXCERPTS

One day recently, I wiped my two little girls' noses extra thoroughly and sent them off to day care, questioning whether I had done the right thing. Forty-eight hours earlier we had received their COVID-19 negative test results and they had been home since with lingering runny noses. But I needed to get back to work.

Spring brought attention to our disturbingly poor public management of long-term care; this fall, attention should turn to our failure to support child care in a meaningful way. No, the kids aren't dying, but their mothers' careers are.

Yes, parents of young and school-age children alike are at their wits' end with "runny nose regulations" and poor testing procedures. However, for parents reliant on child care, the pandemic has revealed the cost of governments' failure to support and manage early learning and care as a foundational need of our economy and society. We treat child care – based on who's providing it – as a business, a charity or a private concern, but never a public responsibility. As a result, during this pandemic child care providers have been given scarcely more public support than yoga studios.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Ontario, with support from the federal government, has announced \$381 million to support the child-care sector. That's approximately \$525 per child under five, or less than half the average fees for one month of care in Ontario. It's no surprise only 60 per cent of child care centres are reported to have reopened since March closures.

Most families, including mine, are on the hook for fees when their kids are excluded from care or centres close. Fees have increased to reflect the costs of new COVID-19 operating regulations and recover losses from five months of closure.

I speak as one of the lucky families. Last month alone, runny-nose absences cost us more than \$1,000 in fees for days not attended and seven days of lost productivity for this mother. Fortunately my employer's flexibility meant that my lost productivity did not result in lost wages. We can afford the ongoing fees, conscious that our beloved child care centre would not survive without consistent income.

Most families aren't so lucky. No child care means no ability to work, which eventually means no job. Or, paying fees when kids are excluded from care and one parent – most often mom – can't work is unaffordable, and we're back to "no care, no job." It's an impossible situation, compounded by anxiety over whether a child care spot will be there for you when you need it again. Even more worrying for those with subsidized spots. While families "made it work" for the first six months of the pandemic, many are at their breaking point.

Governments need to step up to keep child care available and support working parents. Providers need ongoing funding to meet increased COVID-19 operating costs and cover losses without increasing fees. During this exceptional time, families should only pay for care used, with the public purse picking up the tab when children are excluded from care. Lower- and middle-income families need financial support, such as a targeted boost to child benefits, that recognizes the current context requires flexible child care and unpaid time off work. Protected, unpaid short-term leave for emergency care needs to be extended beyond 10 days a year, recognizing toddlers are naturally snotty and employers can be too.

Yes, long-term solutions to increase access to affordable, quality child care are very much needed. But if we fail to address immediate needs and build a bridge to that better place, we risk leaving women and their children behind.

My girls ended up having a great day at day care. I took advantage of an uninterrupted day of work, something few mothers are able to take for granted these days.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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