

How to support working parents during a pandemic: Lessons from Quebec ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Affordable, quality child care has long been the holy grail of working parents, and the coronavirus crisis has made it even more scarce. Child care programs are suffering from months of lost tuition followed by the increased costs of running a day care during a global pandemic. Some struggle to reopen while others have closed for good. Families needing child care have fewer places to turn, as employers become increasingly less amused by toddlers making cameos during Zoom calls.

But at the large Canadian company where Leticia Desai manages a team of about 30 employees, things have felt pretty much back-to-normal for months. Desai credits this to Quebec's low-fee universal child care program, which costs parents less than \$9 a day, and which several observers of the system say emerged from the spring lockdowns relatively intact.

Like Desai, many of the employees she manages are moms to young children who felt stretched thin while working at home with kids underfoot. But as Quebec's child care centers began welcoming back families last summer, it was like a "weight had come off people's shoulders," Desai says. "Morale and mental health improved. ... There were more smiles," even though they were flashed across computer screens.

The resilience of nonprofit child care programs in Quebec relative to other parts of North America is one of simple economics: More like gyms or bars than public schools, most child care programs depend on paying customers to survive. Add to that the increased costs of operating with fewer children to allow for distancing, safety equipment and regular deep cleanings, and making ends meet becomes even more elusive.

When those customers don't appear — or when they're mandated to shelter at home — the business models collapse.

But many of Quebec's day cares are primarily funded with government subsidies, and throughout the shutdowns the government continued to pay its nonprofit centers to stay open for hospital staff and other essential workers. Programs were running to help nonessential workers, such as Desai and her co-workers, return to business months ago, fueling a growing consensus that subsidized child care programs are particularly well-suited for economic downturns.

"The Quebec piece of funding the service is really important," says Martha Friendly, executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit in Toronto. "I don't think you can run child care that can weather a crisis unless it's more of a publicly funded and managed system."

Pierre Fortin, an economist at the University of Quebec at Montreal, says it's possible that Quebec's child care program may ultimately help the province's economy rebound faster from this economic downturn that has hit women particularly hard. While it's too early to say for certain, Fortin says, there is evidence that in the months following the spring shutdown Quebec appeared to be recovering more quickly than the United States, although the percentage of the population that was employed decreased just as it did in the United States and in other parts of Canada.

Fortin says that "it is a reasonable assumption to make" that the province's universal child care program is contributing to that. Now, with Quebec in a second wave of shutdowns, having reliable child care in place may be even more important.

The Canadian government has taken note. In late September, in a speech laying out Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's key priorities for the government, an official announced intentions to create a national child care and early learning system as a way to help mothers return to work, adding that the government would "learn from the model that already exists in Quebec."

There is "broad consensus from all parts of society, including business and labour leaders, that the time is now" for such a system, the prepared speech said.

Advocates who have long rallied for such a system credit this moment in part to the economic crisis. They say this time has laid bare the shortcomings of private, market-driven child care, and spurred a national reckoning about the need to invest in early education as a public

good.

For months, Canadians have watched child care throughout the country “fall apart for the same reasons as in the U.S.: It’s not publicly funded,” Friendly says.

Many private child care centers in Canada and the United States have laid off staff, deferred rent and mortgage payment, and some have closed altogether. In Ontario, which has Canada’s largest labor market, only about 60 percent of the licensed child-care centers had found a way to reopen as of early September.

In California, nearly 1 in 4 licensed child-care providers had closed by July 31.

The consequences are devastating, with some parents cutting back work hours and leaving the labor force altogether, says Jennifer Reynolds, chief executive of Toronto Finance International. Meanwhile, parents who have lost jobs may be less likely to seek new work without child care.

Because mothers tend to shoulder the responsibility when child care falls through, this trend threatens to deepen gender inequalities at home and in the workforce that may take decades to undo, Reynolds says.

In the United States, women are leaving the workforce at nearly four times the rate of men, with more than 800,000 women 20 and older neither working nor looking for work between August and September, according to an analysis by the National Women’s Law Center. In Canada, the female labor participation rate plummeted to a level the country hasn’t seen since the 1980s.

When women can’t work, “you knock out a significant share of earning power,” which in turn lowers household spending as well as the GDP, explains Armine Yalnizayan, an economist and the Atkinson Fellow on the future of workers.

“This is not just about Mommies getting back to work,” Yalnizayan says. “This is about the whole economy. ... This is about macroeconomic failure of the highest order.”

Advocates are quick to say that Quebec’s program is not a cure-all, and that there are many parts they do not want replicated in a national system. Perhaps the biggest critique: Its quality is uneven and low-income families tend to wind up in the lower-quality programs.

Nor has Quebec’s nonprofit system emerged from the past few months unscathed. “We’re all expecting to be in a deficit in the next year because of the way we’re having to spend money on cleaning and supplies,” says Stella De Gaetano, director of Quebec’s nonprofit center Les Petites Cellules. “But we’re subsidized by the government, so I think we’re going to be okay.”

But there’s near-unanimous agreement that Quebec’s program has succeeded at helping women enter the workforce and stay there. In the two decades after the program’s launch, the labor force participation rate for women with young children increased by nearly 20 percent in Quebec, compared with just a 4 percent increase in neighboring Ontario, according to one analysis. Increased tax revenue generated by more women working means that the program pays for itself, bringing in enough in taxes to cover more than 100 percent of its costs.

While the Liberal government’s speech offered few details as to what a national child care system might look like, Canadian advocates say it represents a key shift toward viewing child care as a necessary social infrastructure. Advocates in the United States say they hope their government will follow suit. Rhian Evans Allvin, chief executive of the National Association for the Education of Young Children in Washington, D.C., says she has never seen so much government and business interest in child care as in the past six months. Child care has long “been a silent crisis” borne on the backs of women, Evans Allvin says. “It is no longer a silent crisis. Covid has ripped the band aid off.”

Kendra Hurley is an independent journalist specializing in public policy. Previously she reported on issues impacting low-income families at an applied policy institute at The New School.

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