

The case for affordable child care ^[1]

For decades, we've known that universal child care would advance the nation. What's taking Canada so long?

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EXCERPTS

Jenny Daggitt is a cardiac surgical ICU nurse, and her husband, Patrick, is a computer programmer. In 2017, when Jenny was three months pregnant, she put herself on thirty-three wait-lists of every and any type of child care, from community daycare programs to unlicensed outfits run out of people's houses, within a thirty-minute walk from her home in East Vancouver. By the time her maternity leave ended, a year and a half later, she had heard of an opening at only one of the operations, but deemed it sketchy. Hiring a nanny, which, in Vancouver, could cost more than \$30,000 per year, was unaffordable. So Patrick took paternity leave and Jenny picked up overtime to make up for the lost income. Eventually, they figured out a way for Patrick to work part-time and for Jenny to work twelve-hour night shifts and weekends so they could pay their bills and care for their daughter and not completely stall Patrick's career.

"I sleep when she's napping and go to work as soon as he gets home," Jenny explains. It's not just that the Daggitts can't afford to live off one income so the other parent can stay home with the baby. "We have two people working and we can't afford the what-ifs that come up," she says, breaking down their budget. Even if they had been offered a spot somewhere that felt safe, the fees would have been exorbitant. "It's crazy that it costs more to put your kid through daycare than it costs to put them through university," she says. With the median cost of infant daycare at \$1,400 a month in Vancouver, the annual cost of child care for a one-year-old can be nearly 2.5 times that of undergraduate tuition.

The Daggitts are more than an anecdote: they are emblematic. Most families with kids are working longer hours for less pay than they did a generation ago, reports the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Add the dismal availability of licensed child care spots and soaring daycare costs that run bills of \$10,000 to \$20,000 a year across the country, and it's no wonder that Canadian families feel disillusioned. A 2019 Statistics Canada survey found that one in four parents changed their work schedule, worked fewer hours, or postponed returning to work after parental leave because of difficulties finding child care. For one in ten parents, the cost of child care precluded their use of it.

This is a big problem and one that the pandemic, with its unerring ability to pull at the most threadbare of society's seams, has further exposed. Before the pandemic, there were approximately 2.4 million children under the age of five in Canada, and there were licensed child care spots for only a quarter of them. Now, three out of ten child care providers aren't even sure they'll reopen after many were forced to close and lay off workers during lockdown. Experts conclude that our patchwork of child care options is failing to deliver the quality early childhood education that's shown to benefit young minds.

Canada now faces an urgent cost of inaction. The pandemic has exacted a steep toll, on women and single mothers most. Over March and April, 1.5 million women in Canada lost their jobs. The number of mothers who worked less than half their usual hours due to personal circumstances, such as caring for children or reducing shifts, has increased by 70 percent since the pandemic, according to Statistics Canada. And, for those who weathered the juggling act, the strain was considerable. One-third of Canadian women reported that they had considered leaving their job to focus on responsibilities at home.

"Child care really is a bridge, for so many, to jobs and being able to participate in the paid labour force," says Morna Ballantyne, executive director of Child Care Now, a national child care advocacy organization. "There's huge pressure on the government to fix this bridge that particularly mothers depend on to get back into the labour force." Sure enough, six months after Sophie Grégoire Trudeau went into self-isolation with COVID-19 last March, leaving her husband to juggle their children and his job as prime minister, Justin Trudeau addressed the nation and promised to provide access to high-quality child care for all: "By creating a Canada-wide early learning and child care system, we will ensure that kids have access to care and that no parent, especially no mother, has to put their career on hold. This pandemic has reminded us all that building strong social supports is essential to growing the economy." Silver bullets are rare in social policy, but in child care, one does exist: set up high-quality, universal child care, advocates say, and it will benefit children, families, and the country's economy. It's not the cure that's the mystery here but what took the good doctor so long to prescribe it.

In 1970, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women proposed a national child care program, stating that "the care of children is a responsibility to be shared by the mother, the father and society. Unless this shared responsibility is acknowledged and assumed, women cannot be accorded true equality." Half a century later, Canada has yet to acknowledge that shared responsibility, and its women have yet

to be accorded true equality, earning an average of 87 cents to every dollar earned by men despite achieving higher levels of education. The majority of the gender wage gap appears following the birth of a woman's first child.

When Canadian child care advocates talk about universal child care, they're not talking about free babysitting; they're talking early childhood education blended with child care that is available to all, affordable (but not necessarily free), and noncompulsory. Governments would have a key role in planning, policy, and funding, but the care itself would be delivered by both public and nonprofit providers across various locations and hours. Early learning and child care fall under provincial jurisdiction, but like Medicare, they require federal leadership to be pushed over the line.

Instead, Canada has long relegated child care, defined as the care of a child by someone other than a parent or guardian, to the free market. "When you have an essential and important public service, like early childhood education and care, handed over to the market to deliver, you end up with market failure," says Ballantyne. Unaffordable and inaccessible child care leaves families to rope in relatives, hire nannies, share nannies with other families to split the expense, or turn to in-home daycares, some of which are unlicensed. "You just know the desperation and anxiety in [parents'] voices as they're looking for spaces, and so it does come down to any port in the storm," says Don Giesbrecht, CEO of the Canadian Child Care Federation. It's not like children are thriving under the status quo. More than one in four Canadian kids enter school without all the skills—assessed under the categories of physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge—to equip them for success.

"If what you want to do is to build a strong economy, you cannot afford not to have a strong child care program."

Historically, Canada's strategy has been to give some families vouchers, cash, or tax deductions to offset their child care costs, a reward that can be meted out over an election cycle rather than the dedicated investment required to roll out a national plan. We've come close. In 2004, Paul Martin's Liberal government committed \$1 billion per year to establishing a national child care program. Ken Dryden, then minister of social development, set up agreements with every province. But the headway Martin made evaporated in 2006, when his government lost power and Stephen Harper eliminated the agreements as one of his Conservative government's first acts of power.

Instead, Harper's Universal Child Care Benefit sent monthly \$100 cheques to parents of children under six years old in order to provide "choice in child care." Critics have pointed out that this approach simply props up a flawed system: the number of licensed child care spaces has not risen significantly since the Harper years, and costs have continued to soar under this paradigm. In 2019, the Daggitt family received monthly \$227 Canada Child Benefit cheques from Trudeau's Liberal government, about enough to pay a nanny in Vancouver for a mere fourteen hours of work or to barely dent the \$1,400 per month daycare costs, assuming they could secure a spot. "So I can afford slightly nicer diapers," Patrick jokes. "It's not enough to hire any type of care or make the existing options affordable." We invest readily in the education of our young, from kindergarten through to high school graduation and even university. But, for some reason, the most promising and vulnerable of our citizens, those under the age of five, are treated like consumer decisions their parents made instead of like citizens in their own right.

For half a century, numerous government reports and panels have concluded the same thing: invest in a national, universal child care program and you advance the nation. "In the time between then and now, I'd say the most significant thing is that other countries have really developed their programs and we haven't," says Martha Friendly, executive director of Toronto's Childcare Resource and Research Unit. "We're a serious outlier." Sweden, Denmark, and Slovenia have all invested in universal child care. In its report card on early learning and care, the United Nations Children's Fund found that Canada met only one out of ten benchmarks that ensure children get a good start in life, landing it in last place (with Ireland) out of twenty-five wealthy countries.

According to a growing body of academic research and economic studies, investing in early learning and care programs grows your economy, decreases the gender pay gap, helps single parents return to work and get off social assistance, and lifts families out of poverty. As an investment, universal child care has higher rates of return than dollars invested in primary, secondary, or post-secondary education. Some research suggests children who have access to early learning programs go on to be more educated, hold better jobs, earn more, and have better health. Incredibly, the initiative can also pay for itself.

In Quebec, the only province or territory with a universal child care program, which it launched in 1997, the increase in GDP from more mothers working—together with concomitant increases in tax revenues, reductions in social assistance recipients, and lower child benefits—has meant that government expenditures on child care haven't cost taxpayers a single dollar. For every dollar invested in a national child care program, there is an estimated \$6 return—more for children from low income families. Quebec's program is the envy of many parents around the country because of its affordability: a sliding scale of about \$8.05 to \$21.95 per day, based on family income. The initiative emerged from a push to support women returning to work after maternity leave, and arguably, it has been a success in that regard: the province enjoys a higher female labour-force participation rate than Ontario does. But the Centres de la petite enfance, child care facilities that offer sought-after, high-quality care, do not have nearly enough space to meet Quebec's demand, so admission is lottery based. For those left out, the province subsidizes private daycares and in-home daycares. This has garnered criticism in Quebec, and it can serve well as a cautionary tale. Quality is paramount, otherwise governments can wind up subsidizing child care that gets parents back to work but fails to maximize the potential of its wards.

Early in the pandemic, policy makers and governments quickly realized that to have essential workers working, their children needed looking after. Grandparents, long valued as a crutch for Canadian families on this front, were no longer a safe option given their higher risks from COVID-19. Canadian families had been limping along with tenuous child care arrangements already; the pandemic laid those

arrangements to waste. “All of the problems with the child care sector—the problems of access, the problems of affordability, the problems of reliability, the problems of child care not being there when people need it—those of course predate the pandemic,” says Ballantyne. “But what the pandemic did was make all those problems so visible to so many more people.”

In this context, the Trudeau government naming a Canada-wide early learning and child care system as part of four foundations of its approach to the pandemic seemed inevitable. Advocates await the creation of the promised federal child care secretariat, who will lay the groundwork for a national system. Politically, the parties are divided. NDP leader Jagmeet Singh says the federal government needs to invest \$10 billion over the next four years for universal child care, while Conservative leader Erin O’Toole has promised to boost child care benefits to families instead.

As for the Daggitts, Jenny is currently nearing the end of her second maternity leave and gearing up to return to night shifts so she can watch their now two kids during the day while Patrick works nine to five. I, too, like countless other parents, often find myself juggling. Which is how I ended up in the surreal situation of discussing Canada’s child care crisis with Paul Martin one morning, before the pandemic, when, lacking child care myself, I plopped my daughter in front of the TV to buy the time I needed. I was eager to discover what had made him the prime minister who came closest to achieving what others—Pierre Trudeau, Brian Mulroney, Jean Chrétien—had talked about but never delivered. “I think that this idea of saying . . . that a government can’t afford it is just absolute nonsense,” Martin told me. “The fact is, if what you want to do is to build a strong economy, you cannot afford not to have a strong child care and early learning program. . . . And I’ll take on any right-wing economist in the world on this issue as to whether or not this is money that is well spent. The fact is, it has one of the highest returns on investment of any government program.” As I listened to Martin expound on the value of nurturing young minds by providing them with the best education possible through early learning and child care, I looked over to see my then three-year-old daughter practically licking the TV screen in rapture. “Do I believe that this is a moral issue? Unequivocally,” Martin continued. “There can be no excuse for not giving our children every opportunity that is possible.”

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