

A new normal for child care in Canada: Accessible, affordable, universal^[1]

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EXCERPT

The Old Normal

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, not only was it difficult for parents to find child care spaces, but it was also expected that they pay exorbitant amounts of money for care that varied in quality across providers in Canada. This lack of access meant that a proportion of parents could not afford to find child care for their children. This exclusionary nature of child care in Canada has made it very difficult for low-income families to afford quality child care.

There have been calls for universal child care in Canada since the 1970's, initially through the trailblazing Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada. The report recommended that the federal government adopt a national child care program, in which it would cost-share building and running child care centers with provinces and territories. It called for the federal government to pay half of the operating costs, and 70 per cent of capital costs for the first seven years. Unfortunately, at the time, it was perceived to be too unsustainable to function effectively.

There have been several attempts at bringing national child care to life over the last fifty years, but with no success.

The Pandemic Impact

When the pandemic hit, child care was made available free of charge for essential workers and was funded and coordinated by the provincial governments. A lifeline during a time of crisis and uncertainty, it brought great relief to frontline workers who were scrambling to find safe and appropriate care for their children. As the economy recovers from the heavy impact of the pandemic, we have learned just how essential this service is.

A recent study examining the Labour Force Survey data showed gender employment gaps among parents of young children widening between February and May of last year. It is crucial to note that these gaps grew more for parents with lower levels of education.

In Ontario, the provincial government recently released proposed regulatory amendments, which would see increased flexibility for child care providers in terms of group sizes and qualifications of care providers. However, these changes appear likely to weaken the current child care system by reducing quality.

A New Normal for Child Care

Supporting all Canadian families in a post-COVID society demands a new normal – a national child care plan, covered, coordinated, and with standards, from the federal government. It should ensure that all children have barrier-free access to care, regardless of their family income and work schedules. It should also have consistent licensing standards for child care centers and provide access to well-paid early childhood educators (ECEs) to guarantee high-quality care.

Although the province has primary responsibility in this area, and Quebec has already established its own system (discussed below), a national system would still be preferred for several reasons. The federal government has an important role to play in economic development, closing wage gaps, and poverty reduction, which we can expect national child care would benefit. The cost of child care may be a burden to inter-provincial mobility as low-income families find it difficult to move from a province with reasonable child care to another. Finally, there is an opportunity for progressive federal governments to introduce national funding and standards to bring this important area of social need closer to, or above the standards set by the strongest province.

What It Would Mean

To conceptualize the significance of this undertaking, we need to examine what a universal child care program can do to ensure health equity for Canadian families. Affordable child care has been identified as a critical step for parents, specifically mothers, to access higher educational and employment opportunities. Reducing child care costs will disproportionately benefit families in greater need.

Regarding quality, child care centres should be run with ECEs who are well supported. The early childhood educator workforce is predominantly female and racialized. These workers are qualified to provide excellent care but are often subject to poor working conditions and are paid lower wages.

For these reasons, a national child care program can be a strategy to reducing income disparities for both families and ECEs. Access to a livable income, through means of further educational and employment opportunities, has direct impacts on health. Evidence shows income being correlated with health outcomes, with lower income being associated with asthma, poor oral health and malnutrition for children, and cardiovascular disease, diabetes and lower mortality rates for adults. With COVID-19 exacerbating deep income poverty in some communities, this new approach is needed now more than ever.

These secondary impacts of affordable child care, notwithstanding the direct benefits on the cognitive and social development of our youngest citizens, are too important to ignore in the rebuilding of society post-COVID.

In fact, economist James Heckman argues that society benefits greatest through investments in early childhood. The Heckman Equation explains how investing in childhood development and supports for parents can result in greater economic productivity and reduced health care and social spending. This is seen through outcomes such as increased high school graduation rates, as well as reduced crime and chronic disease rates. The equation specifically indicates that these benefits outweigh those stemming from social support investments for adults, due to the importance of early childhood years in developing the cognitive, emotional social skills that influence success later in life.

The Head Start program in the United States is one example of an initiative that has invested in the early years of children from lower-income families. It was created to promote school readiness for children, from birth to five years of age, by supporting their learning, nutrition, and family well-being. Aligning with Heckman's Equation, research on the program's impact over the last 50 years demonstrates its positive impact on participant educational attainment and behavioural outcomes, including problem solving and self-esteem. A universal child care program focused on enhancing children's early learning and home environments can have similar impacts on Canadian families.

How We Get There

There are several proposed strategies on how to afford and reach a universal child care model for Canada. Some have proposed capping the fees parents pay, with the government subsidizing costs so that these centres can stay afloat.

In Quebec's widely renowned model, parents pay \$8.35 a day for child care in a model which costs the government about \$2.9 billion. In addition to the stark increase in women's labour participation, the government was able to recover the costs of the program through means of increases in personal income taxes and social insurance contributions, as well as through decreases in child benefits distributed due to higher maternal labour income. However, there have been criticisms surrounding inconsistencies in the quality of care provided across public and private child care centres. Despite private centres receiving government funding, there has been limited oversight on their learning standards.

In 2018, Ontario had a proposed model for free child care for children between two and a half years and kindergarten. Coming from recommendations made by Ontario's Gender Wage Gap Steering Committee's final report, the program aimed to increase operating funding across the system to increase access to licensed care, support fee reductions, and reduce fee-subsidy waitlists. The plan also included wage increases for staff working in the early childhood learning and child care sector, with compensation aligning with early childhood educators working in full-day kindergarten. In addition to these changes there was to be \$30 million allocated towards extended child care hours to support parents facing precarious work situations, and those in shift work. Due to funding cuts by the provincial government in 2019, the plan was scrapped before it could come into fruition.

The federal government should take the strengths and weaknesses of provincial efforts into consideration when creating a national strategy. It should also ensure federal, provincial, and municipal spending, adequate to fund the system. Currently, the international benchmark for spending on early learning and child care is one per cent of GDP, and countries such as Sweden and Iceland spend 1.6-1.8 per cent of their GDP on affordable early learning and child care. Canada spends just 0.5 per cent and is falling behind in supporting the cognitive and social development of our children.

The recent Fall Economic Statement from the federal government has indicated that the government intends to build a national child care system over the next few years. This decision seeks to increase labour participation, specifically for women who have been hardest hit by economic downturn of the pandemic, contributing to a rise in the GDP. While this is great news, it is important to ensure that this system is created with equitable access in mind.

The rebuilding of the child care sector should center around those most impacted by COVID-19, including precarious workers, newcomers, and Black, Indigenous and racialized populations. Pre-COVID-19 statistics show that childhood poverty is most prevalent across these groups, and that these groups are also more likely to live in child care deserts.

This prioritization and investment will keep child care from being treated as a commodity and transform it into the necessary public service that all children should have equal access to in a post-COVID society.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: national child care ^[4]

access ^[5]

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