

# Editor's take: Child care a necessity <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

It was the spring of 1965, and my parents had just returned to the farm after spending their first four years of marriage on a grand adventure of sorts, living, working and studying in other parts of Canada.

First, they travelled to Newfoundland, where my father worked with 4-H Canada, organizing clubs in the new, larger, central communities being formed from outport amalgamation.

While there, my mother attended Memorial University in St. John's, acquiring enough credits to earn a teaching certificate.

After three years there, they travelled west, to Edmonton, where my father worked for the provincial Agriculture Department and my mother taught.

Arriving back at the farm, all that changed. First my older sister arrived in the summer of 1966. Mom still taught, with childcare from the grandmothers.

Then I came along, in the dead of winter in 1969. And finally my younger brother, in the summer of 1970.

And suddenly there she was, raising three children on a farm 11 miles from the nearest town, in rural Saskatchewan.

Suffice to say her teaching career, other than a few brief stints as a substitute, was over.

While she was never resentful towards her children for it, she and I have talked about this a few times over the years; I know she does wish she'd had different opportunities.

As she put it, when I talked to her to seek permission to tell her story, "Daycare and job sharing would have kept me in the workforce."

And while I'm eternally grateful to both my parents for the childhood they gave me and my siblings, I can't help but regret that my mother didn't have that opportunity.

I know the days, surrounded by the antics of three young children and scant adult company as my father worked on the farm, must have been long, monotonous and at times infuriating. Especially, I have long suspected, the hijinks of her middle child.

I have little doubt that she'd have enjoyed the mental and social stimulation of working outside the home, and I'm sure that in the early years of their farm life, the stable additional income would have provided a nice cushion.

And while there are more options available to parents today, this is still a serious barrier to farm families in Manitoba.

So much so that members of the Keystone Agricultural Producers put forward a motion at the organization's recent annual general meeting, asking it to lobby the province for more support and resources.

Predictably — and happily — the issue has broadened and become more than a women's issue. It's now families concerned about the care of their children and the equitable distribution of opportunity within those families.

But it's still a serious issue that needs to be addressed. If the sector wants to continue to make the great strides it's already made in gender equality, it needs to ensure that female farmers are seen — and treated — as 'real' farmers.

That means giving them the tools to continue to participate in the farm after the family has expanded to include children.

And for those parents who choose to work off the farm, it becomes even more important.

And in fact this isn't just a rural issue. Ask any family with young children in an urban centre like Winnipeg, Brandon, or Portage la Prairie, and they'll all tell you that childcare is one of their biggest concerns.

A 2016 survey of parents in the province, conducted by Probe Research for the Manitoba Child Care Association, found that there were 15,000 children on the province's waiting list for licensed childcare. More than a third of respondents said lack of childcare was 'very serious' and a further 46 per cent said it was 'somewhat serious.'

Totaled up, 83 per cent of Manitoba parents said the province's childcare situation was inadequate.

As is usually the case, the situation is worse on the farm, due to rural depopulation, the on-again-off-again nature of seasonal farm work, long distances to population centres and lack of staff to run daycare centres.

The families that reporter Geralyn Wichers spoke to noted they don't want to take their children out to what can be dangerous environments, which means if they're going to farm, they need access to childcare.

And while it might be traditional for kids to accompany parents to the field, it also might be time to revisit this practice, and have a good long think about whether this is the best for farm families.

After all, miners don't take their kids to the mine, and manufacturing workers don't take their children to the factory floor, and for good reason.

Work environments frequently have dangers in them, and there are few work environments more dangerous than a farm.

If Canada wants to encourage young people to make the choice to farm, it needs to give them winning conditions to do so.

One of the biggest pieces of that puzzle is better childcare.

**Region:** Manitoba <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** accessibility <sup>[4]</sup>

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