

Dear CEOs: Why are kitchens prioritized over child care at your offices?^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Dear CEOs of Canada's largest companies, I know you're busy so I'll be brief. Why is child care not available at your company?

If I had to guess, it's because child care is considered independent from corporate responsibility. Perhaps children are viewed as a personal circumstance, not applicable to all employees, even a hindrance to your company's mission. Okay, not all chief executives and senior leaders hold this perspective, but the lack of employer-driven child care suggests some of you do.

Truth be told, I've never worked for corporate Canada. My career stems from public institutions, tech start-ups and my small business (currently ordered closed in Toronto). I opened a co-working space with child care because I'm a parent who wanted a thriving career. I hated the FOMO (fear of missing out) from the 4:30 p.m. daycare pickup shuffle. It's frustrating to be home because of preschool closings or snow days while my colleagues scoop an interesting project in my absence.

While I may not know corporate Canada well, I know office space. Don't tell me the office is dead. For all the glamour of work-from-home, a hybrid model is where we'll land when the pandemic ends. Parents and single apartment dwellers can't wait to go back.

When you return to the office, what amenities do you expect for a functioning work force? I suspect you never debate the breakroom, where employees can store their lunches in the common fridge and get a coffee. More importantly, it is a place to exhale.

Collective COVID-19 trauma taught managers that to do the work well, we need to enable the work. Some employees may choose to eat at their desks, but the kitchen is available and great companies encourage rest. This isn't a matter of scale. There is a spectrum of lunchrooms from the car dealership's microwave and a Keurig to a Google-esque in-house chef.

Kitchens are accepted in every workplace but child care is not. Do you really need more evidence for its importance than months of virtual schooling and lockdowns? What will it take?

Is it regulation? Surely you employ someone who navigates regulatory requirements. If you're unsure about where to start with building safe and quality child care, an in-house early childhood education adviser would be an excellent \$70,000 annual position for a new grad ECE destined to few other career paths but minimum-wage split-shifts (morning and afternoon care but not midday).

Is it space? In your "build back better" meetings, are the real estate teams weighing the office's purpose alongside resistant commuters, company morale and career progression? I bet you have rooms to spare.

Is it someone else's job? The federal government says it is working on a national child care system, and if it works, you might bypass the very real cost. Yet you accepted the price of dental, optical and pharmaceutical benefits. You've – at minimum – acquiesced to your role in filling the gaps in our public health care system. Why exclude child care, a service so expensive it becomes financially advantageous for women and non-binary people to quit their jobs and take years worth of company knowledge, skills and ingenuity home with them? A preventable loss.

At risk of drying out this kitchen versus child care metaphor, here is one more false barrier: Canadian labour laws have no legal requirement for employers to offer lunchrooms. Breaks are mandated. The facilities are not. Municipal zoning regulations will have guidelines that are someone's job to follow. Parental leave is protected, but workplace child care is not. That doesn't mean ignoring child care's inherent value.

Employer-driven child care will serve some quick wins. It's one path for marginalized workers to rise without onerous accelerators that often exclude participation from parents, especially racialized parents, who are too busy trying to keep it all together. It's also a competitive advantage. Only eight of the 20 "Top Canadian Family-Friendly Employers" for 2021 offer on-site care, and three are universities. Bell Media, CMHC and Desjardins Group are among a very small list of top corporations that offer on-site care. A unique recruitment badge.

While universal child care is a pillar of the Liberal government, sweeping national reform will take a while and not address every family's

needs. A multipronged solution that invites employer participation without reliance on the individual (through personal tax breaks and child care benefits) is an excellent addition to the mix. If you're still worried about cost, use your lobbying power to push for grants or corporate tax incentives for on-site care.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the past year's repeated school and daycare closings have sidelined women from the work force like no other recession has before. The power to determine whether many of them can return is in your hands.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: social policies and programs ^[4]

female labour force participation ^[5]

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