

Finally, everyone agrees that Canada needs better child care. But what should it look like? ^[1]

Author: Scoffield, Heather

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EXCERPTS

Parents of young children and all their sympathizers — take heart. Child care is having a moment.

The idea of a dramatic increase in government funding for child care is suddenly not the political hot potato it once was. And that's an excellent development for kids, their parents and the economy, now and in the future – if we can pull it off and put it to good use.

The Liberals have made no secret that a national child-care plan is a top priority for their April 19 budget.

The NDP is ramping up its advocacy for accessible, high-quality daycare.

And the Conservatives, in their list of budget demands sent to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau this week, want to see measures to increase female participation in the workplace. That's child care by another name.

The pandemic broadcast what many working parents have known for a long time: yes, it's possible to hold down a job and take care of a family at the same time, as long as nothing goes wrong in those delicate arrangements families stitch together hectically to take care of the kids. But the moment something goes wrong, the house of cards comes tumbling down.

COVID-19 knocked down so many houses of cards that the workforce has suffered permanent damage. Kids are behind in school, some women have disengaged from the labour force altogether, and analysts fear for the long-term earning potential of those children and their mothers.

The good news is, there is an unshakable consensus that investing in child care is the solution. It would be politically unacceptable to ignore that child care's moment has arrived – especially since provincial governments and businesses are overwhelmingly onside, too.

The tricky part comes in the delivery – not just questions about the amount of money that needs to be spent, but how it should be spent.

Traditionally, the NDP has pushed for the creation of government daycare spaces, and Conservatives have argued for cheques straight into the hands of parents, while the Liberals have done a mix of both.

In a new discussion paper, analysts at Deloitte LLP make a strong economic case for the creation of spaces – and not just any old spaces. High-quality spaces under the guidance of early childhood educators will pay dividends, the paper argues, not just for families juggling responsibilities but also for the workforce of the future.

High-quality child care gives children an early, productive start on their educations and a more certain path to prosperous careers down the road, the paper shows. That's especially important right now because the pandemic has been so hard on young people.

It's an equalizer because it makes top-notch spaces available for children of lower-income families, the Deloitte paper says. And because the pandemic has penalized low-income families repeatedly through unemployment, or dangerous jobs, or hitting them with the virus, inequality is on the rise.

It increases the labour force participation of women by giving mothers more certain options to go to work, the Deloitte paper shows. And since the pandemic has punted so many mothers to the sidelines of the workforce to take care of kids who are in and out of school and daycare, that's a big bonus.

It would also create jobs and opportunities as the economy starts to recover, Deloitte argues. Since 96 per cent of early childhood educators are women, that bodes well for workforce participation too.

It calls for an \$8 billion investment in high-quality child care as a key to economic recovery, bringing Canada up to the standards in other developed countries, and adding between 89,000 and 281,000 women to the labour force.

There's little doubt the federal budget will make a similar case, arguing that money spent strategically on child care will eventually pay for itself through a better educated, larger and more productive workforce.

But when it comes to economic recovery, time is of the essence. Many daycares have shut down temporarily or permanently under COVID-19 restrictions, and educators have left the workforce and moved on.

Tax incentives or fee limits to help families pay the child-care bills are a moot point if there aren't enough spaces to go around. And if part of the goal in making child care central to the federal recovery strategy is to deal with the fallout of the pandemic and get the economy rolling again, waiting years for federal and provincial governments to iron out funding arrangements is not ideal.

The federal government has already given the provinces \$625 million for a "safe restart" of child-care operations, and another \$400 million to retain and recruit more early childhood educators.

Kate Bezanson of Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont., argues Ottawa could go further in the near term to bring back more child-care workers who are out of a job right now, and make sure that shuttered daycares are able to reopen.

Giving families a cheque or a tax rebate would only help families if they could find spots for their kids, she says, and also acts as an incentive to go for the cheapest care available.

There's not as much political consensus around this point as there is around the general concept of federal funding for quality child care, she concedes.

But there is one key thing that every single political party, business leader and childhood educator will agree is a prerequisite to any of this, she says: herd immunity needs to come first.

"Go get vaccinated."

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: national child care ^[4]

female labour force participation ^[5]

economic recovery ^[6]

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