

\$10 per day daycare is absolutely doable—the pandemic proved it^[1]

Many provinces' emergency child care solutions during the pandemic are proof that a well-designed, national child care program can be flexible, responsive and meet the needs of modern working parents.

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Source: Today's Parent

Format: Article

Publication Date: 28 Apr 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online^[2]

EXCERPTS

When the federal government announced its blockbuster national child care investment in the budget last week, we were stoked. As child care advocates and parents ourselves, we have never seen such a huge amount of money devoted to making universal child care a reality: Up to \$30 billion over five years, with \$8.3 billion every year after that to maintain the ambitious system they pledge to build. The goal is to make sure parents across the country don't have to pay more than \$10 a day for child care. This will mean massive savings for families, who often pay over eight to 10 times that much now. It is a huge cause for celebration.

But of course, as has happened each time a federal government has tried to move forward on universal child care, critics pushed back. Alberta Premier Jason Kenney, for example, derided the federal plan as “cookie-cutter, nine-to-five, urban, government and union-run institutional daycare.” In the past, this kind of pearl-clutching has stymied progress on child care. But this time, the naysayers are at a disadvantage.

The pandemic has pulled back the curtain on the value and necessity of high quality, affordable child care. Women dropped out of the workforce en masse last spring, leading to a near 30 year low in their labour force participation. With every stay-at-home order that has triggered virtual learning, parents are in the thick of the impossible task of working and parenting at once—that is, if they have the privilege of working from home.

Many parents, ourselves included, now intimately know what it's like to try to work without child care, and it isn't pretty. But it's also hard for parents to envision universal child care because it's never been given a chance. The Liberals were on the cusp of making it a reality in 2006 when it was cancelled by incoming federal Conservatives who thought tax credits were a better solution. Conservatives claim tax credits offer more “choice” for parents. But a credit at tax time doesn't help parents throughout the year as their child care bills roll in. It also doesn't help parents in child care deserts, such as rural communities, where families have no choice but to scramble for any care they can get.

But the past year showed that affordable, publicly funded, flexible child care can work. When schools and child care centres first closed last March, many provincial governments recognized the need for emergency child care, and in Ontario, emergency child care was fully publicly funded and free for families. These programs responded to the unique needs of families of essential front line workers, like healthcare workers, postal workers and grocery workers. In just a few weeks from the start of the pandemic, we saw programs running 24-hour emergency care. By April of last year, several provinces had centralized services to help support families in locating the care they needed, and tweaked their programs to meet the changing needs of families in their communities. They even did a better job of reaching families that were previously underserved. Some emergency child care was in extended hours centres, but regulated home child care was also used, especially to meet the needs of shift workers. Part-time care was available to families that needed it, too. Yes, it was targeted and temporary, but emergency child care showed that motivated governments working together can make a real difference for families.

The federal government's child care plan is a game changer. The money on the table would more than double the child care budgets of most provinces. This won't only make existing child care programs more affordable—it will also raise the wages of child care workers, in turn making programs more stable and higher quality. It can also create new child care solutions for those who have been ill-served in our current child care market, such as shift workers, rural families or freelancers who need part-time or occasional care. Right now, these types of flexible programs exist, but they are few and far between. In Ottawa, A Children's Place operates 24-hours a day, 7 days a week at two locations. In Regina, Stepping Stones Child Care Cooperative offers care 7 days a week from 5:30 a.m. to midnight. These types of programs are a lifeline for shift workers and single parents. More flexible, responsive services like these are exactly what becomes possible when we build and grow a system. A publicly funded child care system will mean that an individual child care provider won't have to wrestle with whether they can break even if they open in a small, rural community, or if they'll still make ends meet if they fill a space part-time rather than full-time, or if they can afford to hire extra staff to open extended hours.

Emergency child care in 2020 showed that motivated governments can move quickly. It took a pandemic to prove it, but it turns out that political will can make affordable, quality child care a reality. Now imagine what could happen if our provincial and federal governments worked together to make child care options a permanent priority.

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