

Opinion: Children's needs are universal and federal daycare plan can help meet them ^[1]

Needs of children are not determined by political geography, writes Verda Petry.

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EXCERPTS

A program for free and universal pre-school care and learning is absolutely the most important national initiative since Medicare. The oped entitled Federal Daycare Plan will not live up to hype (April 30) written by Janice MacKinnon and Jack Mintz is misguided. They say the program can't meet diverse needs of the Canadian workforce. Of course not. Childcare is not intended to serve the workforce and the economy; it is intended to serve children. The program is about giving them an opportunity to become all that they were meant to be as humans.

From article: "The success of the federal daycare initiative will depend significantly on how much flexibility the provinces have to design daycare programs that suit their unique needs." Needs of children are not determined by political geography. Needs of all children everywhere are: Encouragement, consistency, safety and security, trust, intellectual stimulation, healthy food, physical activity, playtime, rejuvenating sleep and love.

A child learns more in the first five years of life than it will ever learn again. Brain cells and neural pathways blossom from the moment the mother talks to the infant placed in her arms. Language is essential to brain development; we think with words. Most children begin to speak at about age two which is the age when publicly funded childcare should be available. Children who are shuffled among unpaid and untrained babysitters may not get the attention and age-appropriate stimulation they need. If homes are impoverished, over-crowded, violent or chaotic, the child's life is permanently affected. Instability and/or neglect in a child's early life has long-term consequences because anti-social behaviour is learned just as easily as constructive behaviour.

The authors say "It would have been simpler and more expedient for the federal government to directly fund daycare costs through grants or tax credits." No. Funding for K-12 education is not based on a means test, so why should we fund the years running up to kindergarten this way?

The needs of children are the same regardless of the wealth of the parents.

The writers quote the Quebec model. Why don't they quote European models? My husband emigrated from France to Canada in 1949 and they had free, publicly funded childcare and learning at that time. Here we are in Canada, 70 years later, without this public service. European models have trained and licensed childcare workers who understand the developmental needs of children, and schools are well-stocked with age-appropriate books, toys, pictures, games, music, etc. Children are fed nourishing food. Medical and dental care are provided as needed.

Healthy childcare and early learning have long-term economic benefits. It is estimated by the MIT Workplace Center that every dollar invested in quality early care and education saves taxpayers up to \$13 in future costs of antisocial activities such as gang activity, drug abuse, crime, incarceration, medical needs, unemployment and human misery. Early stimulation of children adds immensely to quality of life and the economic health of a society.

Verda Petry, a former chancellor of the University of Regina, holds bachelor and master's degrees in education with majors in math and psychology.

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