

# Opinion: 'Monumental need' for child care in wake of pandemic <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

It was during the Second World War that the federal government provided funding to the provinces to establish Canada's first child-care program, to enable women to enter the workforce in support of the war effort. Women were needed to work in munitions factories and other parts of the supply chain — and women needed child care to be able to do it. So, the province of Ontario, together with the federal government, came up with the funding to make it happen.

Now here we are, hopefully nearing the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, after more than a year of restrictions, shuttered businesses and lost jobs — and there is once again a monumental need for child care. As economies reopen and people continue navigating work environments — whether that is the crucial role of dedicated front-line workers, the return to work or adjusting to work from home — access to high quality, licensed child care is essential to recovery.

Historically, provincial governments have taken the weight of the child-care crisis. Now, after what is recognized as an incredibly difficult and tumultuous year for Canadians en masse, we are witness to the success of continued efforts urging the federal government to help develop and fund a pan-Canadian solution. The question at hand is: what does Canada-wide child care look like, and how will it benefit children, parents and the economy equally?

Female employment has been hit disproportionately hard by the pandemic. A recent analysis by Scotiabank found that COVID-19 has strengthened the economic argument for widely available child care. Parents are struggling to maintain their connection to the workforce as they juggle child-rearing responsibilities with work demands. In September, 70 per cent of mothers reported working less than half of their normal hours relative to Sept. 2019. As the pandemic wears on, this risks exacerbating disparities in labour force participation between men and women that predate the pandemic. This proves the immediate demand for high-quality, licensed child care as we run the risk of a delayed or stunted return to economic growth without women's participation.

Fortunately, the centrepiece of the recent federal budget is a plan to spend up to \$30 billion over five years, to create a Canada-wide child-care system that will cost parents just \$10 a day, per child. Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland calls it "social infrastructure that will drive jobs and growth." When coupled with the significant and ongoing commitments of our provincial governments, the opportunity to build a responsive, accessible, affordable and high-quality system is finally within reach.

The YMCA is the largest not-for-profit child care provider in Canada. With more than 50 years of experience and over 300 licensed programs throughout the Greater Toronto Area, the YMCA offers high-quality programs for infants, toddlers, preschool and school-aged children. At our centres, highly-trained Registered Early Childhood Educators partner with parents to support each child's development and provide families with the security and comfort of knowing their child is in a safe and nurturing environment during formative years.

We know that high-quality child care improves outcomes for children. Investments in child care won't only improve economic outcomes for women and families today but also, for the next generation. A strong, high quality, affordable child-care system levels the playing field for all workers, especially for women and those at the low end of the socioeconomic scale. It is the fuel that can ensure the economy restarts firing on all cylinders.

The federal government's pledge to develop a pan-Canadian, affordable network of licensed child-care centres presents a watershed moment in the development of Canada's social infrastructure and, by extension, its full economic potential.

We now have the greatest opportunity since the Second World War to facilitate the return of women to the workforce, to ensure that the full economic recovery — and the "she-covey" on which it depends — takes place for the benefit of all Canadians and most of all for the children we will leave this country to.

*Medhat Mahdy is president and CEO of the YMCA of Greater Toronto.*

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

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

economic recovery <sup>[5]</sup>

universal child care system <sup>[6]</sup>

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