

Opinion: Why universal child care is a better choice than subsidies^[1]

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EXCERPTS

This snap federal election is quickly shaping up to be a referendum on child care. And rightfully so. For far too long, Canadian families have been waiting for real action on the issue, and for the first time, early learning and child care is front and centre.

On the one hand, on offer from the federal Liberals and the New Democrats is a universal, \$10-a-day program with billions of dollars invested into the system. This plan would create new child-care spaces, train and support child-care workers, and make these services immediately available to parents at a low cost.

On the other hand, the federal Conservatives have promised a subsidy program meant to cut costs to parents — a tax credit that would cover up to 75 per cent of child-care fees to low-income families. The plan will not create new child-care spaces, but will rely on the market to do so, and instead of receiving immediate benefit, qualifying families will shoulder the full cost of child care until after they file their taxes.

Which plan is better? And how? And why have advocates and experts in early learning in child care been pushing a universal child-care system over subsidies?

It's true that the surface promise of "affordability" makes all commitments seem similar. And it's understandable that cash-strapped families battered by job loss or precarious employment during a recession would feel compelled by any plan that promises to greatly reduce these massive rent or mortgage-sized monthly payments.

But as always, the devil is in the details when it comes to the best deal for kids, parents and workers in the field. To be frank, the CPC subsidy proposal will not result in universal access to the kind of child-care system experts agree is necessary — one that is high-quality, accessible, and affordable.

Essentially, a subsidy program only attempts to address one of these dimensions: affordability. And that promise is a shaky one, at best. There are many families who would not benefit from offset taxes, such as working families that do not make enough income to access the full benefit of the program, never mind people who struggle with filing taxes in the first place, such as recent immigrants or housing-insecure people. Even if they do pass the income threshold for benefit, it requires upfront costs — an often unmanageable economic burden for many low- and middle-income families,

The CPC subsidy plan does not address accessibility whatsoever. Only one in seven children in Alberta has access to licensed child care — an issue that is especially rampant in rural or remote areas. Another, often overlooked, component of child-care accessibility is for children with complex needs, such as children with disabilities or infants. Child-care operators require investment and support to create these necessary spaces.

And then there's the issue of quality: quality of work life for workers and quality of care for kids. One of the most important indicators of child-care quality is the educational attainment and training of early childhood educators. A highly trained workforce needs a higher standard of work to justify the personal investment to obtain this education. The systematic devaluation of child-care workers (who are largely women) through low pay and high burnout rates mean that it's often not a viable career option, at least in the long term.

Put simply: the working conditions of early-childhood educators become the care conditions for the children in their charge. A direct-to-parent subsidy program does nothing to invest in this critical workforce.

If we as a society want to achieve the best in child care, then we need a universal, publicly funded and publicly delivered child-care system. And we need to move away from thinking of child care as a marketplace for profit to a public good for our society and future. This is why investment into a universal system of high quality, accessible and affordable child care is the way to go.

The renewed focus and energy for advocates and activists who have long touted the benefits of high-quality, accessible, and affordable child care is welcome and necessary. If we make the right choice on child care and early learning in this election, we can be on our way to

(finally!) creating the generational change for kids, women, families and workers that so many have been advocating for, for so long

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