

Opinion: What if child care was a dads' issue, too? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

If you're an advocate for universal, affordable child care, do you sometimes feel like you're Sisyphus? Except that instead of fruitlessly pushing a boulder up a hill, you're pushing a chunky baby in a stroller, and never reaching the summit?

Check a) for yes and b) for hell yes.

This federal election has unexpectedly spun in many random directions, none of them good.

When we should be debating how to care for our children and deal with the horrors of climate change, we're instead talking about who threw rocks at the Prime Minister. It has literally descended into a schoolyard fight.

Yet the advocates for child care continue to push that chunky baby up the hill, bless them. I won't remind you that 15 years ago, as the goal of a comprehensive childcare plan drew tantalizingly close, Paul Martin's Liberals lost the election and the stroller went careening down the mountain like something out of a Sergei Eisenstein movie. The wheels fell off, and it's taken this long to put them back on.

So I was happy when a friend sent me an open letter addressed to candidates on the issue of child care. It was signed by many bright and powerful women. It begins: "We are moms. We are working moms. We are retired moms. We are moms-to-be.

We are moms who work at home and moms who work from home. We are moms who want to go to work. We are also moms who are out of work."

Wow, I thought. Good for these women, taking on an extra burden of advocacy when they're probably stretched thinner than wallpaper. If emotional labour had a market value, they'd all be billionaires. But then I noticed something missing. Perhaps you did too?

That's right, it's the dads.

Where is the corresponding letter from concerned fathers, lamenting the lack of affordable, accessible child care in this country?

Where is the letter that begins, "We are dads. We are dads who sometimes can't find the exact right shade of purple marker to draw a unicorn, but we try. We are dads who think popcorn is a fine main course for dinner, and we are throwing our support behind a national system of affordable and accessible day care, because we know it will be good for our wives and our sisters and our friends and our kids. We know it will be good for the future of the country. And you know what?

It'll be good for dads too."

That's a letter I'd sign, even if I had to fake a dad signature (would Bobby Pin be too obvious?). For too long, child care has been framed as a women's issue, not just in Canada but in many parts of the world. Women are assumed to be the primary stakeholders, because they do much of the work of child care, for economic reasons (being paid less than men) and for cultural ones (because care work, largely thankless and unpaid, is considered female). If you look at the advocates for better child care, the economists and researchers and columnists, they're usually - though not exclusively - women.

But what if we dared to flip that script, as the management consultants like to say. What if we considered that good child care is not just a mom's issue, not just a parents' issue, but an issue that affects all of us in the long run?

A good, well-run, easily accessible and affordable child-care network would not only allow women with children to participate fully in the labour force - although that alone should be enough to guarantee its support.

(Twelve times as many mothers as fathers left the work force during the pandemic, according to an RBC study.) It also makes economic sense. Britain's IPPR think tank found that every woman who returned to work put \$35,000 in government tax revenue coffers over four years. A report from Deloitte earlier this year found similarly robust rewards: "The return to government from investing in early learning and childcare is greater than the cost of investment, meaning that funding of early learning makes sense even when governments are running large deficits in the wake of the pandemic."

Quite apart from the economic argument, there is the long-term health benefit to children, particularly from marginalized backgrounds, of stable and affordable care. There is the benefit to early childhood educators, who would be hired and paid a decent wage under the

expansion plans offered by the Liberals and NDP. Finally, there is the incalculable benefit of new capacity, so that parents do not have to buy wigs because they've torn all their hair out looking for a place for their kids. And that's a lot of parents: According to Statistics Canada, some 40 per cent of parents reported difficulty finding child care in 2020.

The NDP and Liberals want to build capacity and ensure affordability. The Conservatives' plan of a refundable tax credit for child care does nothing to ensure that there will be enough places to send those kids. It does nothing to guarantee that women whose lives have been thrown into disarray during the pandemic will be able to get back to work.

But, once again, this is not - or at least it shouldn't be - a women's issue. Women have already shouldered far too much of the burden in this pandemic. It's time for everybody else to step up and make dinner, supervise the homework, pick up a dirty sock or two, and cast a vote for the future. Because nobody wants to keep pushing that baby up the hill.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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