Economic downturn increases urgency to invest in children [CA]

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EXCERPTS

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As they gear up to fight this recession, business and government leaders should reflect carefully on the messages in The Child Care Transition report just published by UNICEF.

The alarming news is that Canada ranks at the bottom of the 25 economically advanced countries assessed. No wonder 28 per cent of our children are not ready to learn by the age of six.

The good news is that the report should help break the policy impasse which has put our children at such a profound disadvantage. It also opens the door for immediate decisions to help families cope with the recession.

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The trend to out-of-home care "has enormous potential for good." But, the report warns, "poor-quality care has the potential for both immediate and long-term harm."

Canada's early childhood education certainly qualifies as unplanned and unmonitored. For the past 20 years, the federal and provincial governments (except Quebec) have been taking one step forward on child-care policy, and then two steps back. They have been blocked by cost, jurisdiction and how care should be delivered, but mostly they have been thwarted by conflicting values.

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Quebec is the exception. It has built a broad consensus on family policy, which includes an ambitious and popular childcare system with a strong education focus.

The UNICEF report should help the rest of Canada to break the logjam.

Penelope Leach, a distinguished British researcher, summarized the findings this way: "It is fairly clear from data from different parts of the world that the less time children spend in group care before three years, the better." But, she said, "Somewhere after two years, as the children begin to relate more to each other than to the adult, then high-quality, group-based care becomes an unequivocal benefit."

This suggests that Canada should concentrate its early childhood education investments in children over the age of two, and look to other policy instruments to help families care for the little ones.

For the youngest children, it is the federal government which has the right tools to support parents to stay at home with their kids. Parental leave should now be extended to 18 months from the current 12 months, and eventually to two years. Sixty-six per cent of mothers and 26 per cent of fathers take advantage of the leave now.

At the same time, the federal government should increase the benefits paid through the National Child Benefit, a refundable tax credit for families with children under the age of 18, with a goal to increase the maximum payment (targeted to the poorest families) to $5,000 per child per year. This will put more money in the hands of parents at a time when a lack of jobs will lead many women to withdraw from the labour force.

After the age of two, child care becomes an essential service, as Penelope Leach noted. The first step is for the provinces to extend the public education system to four- and five-year-olds. Quebec has already done this and Ontario has just decided to introduce full-day learning for four- and five-year-olds. The other provinces should follow their example. Expanding preschool education creates jobs and frees up childcare spaces for use by younger children.

Finally, the federal government should offer to create a pan-Canadian statistical system for monitoring progress in educating all children under the age of six. At the moment, we know alarmingly little about the quality, cost and availability of child care in Canada, and we do not know enough about how our children's cognitive and social skills are developing.

The UNICEF advice suggests an investment strategy to balance family and government responsibilities for young children. The recession simply increases the urgency to invest now, to do what is best for today's families and tomorrow's prosperity.

- Judith Maxwell is the former head of the Economic Council of Canada and the Canadian Policy Research Networks

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