

Investing in child care now will pay off later [CA] ^[1]

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See text below.

EXCERPTS

Election campaigns tend to produce strategies that expire with the next election call; unfortunately, their consequences can endure a lifetime. Babies born during this campaign will be starting kindergarten when the next federal writs are dropped. If current trajectories hold, more than one-in-four will arrive at school with vulnerabilities setting them up for long-term challenges.

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The political parties agree families need some support raising their young children; at question is the form it takes. Should public money go directly to mom and dad or to child-care centres? We advise governments to do much more of both, and to start much sooner. Our work through the Council for Early Child Development, a cross-country network of academics, physicians, educators and community advocates, documents the consequences of delayed intervention.

Heavy public investment in health care and education are not yielding expected results. Projected childhood health trends will manifest in an epidemic of chronic disease in adulthood. International evaluations show that 30 to 40 per cent of our children reach adulthood without the reading and math skills they need in an information society. The problem is not the quality of our public systems. Clinics and schools are simply unable to fully compensate children for vulnerabilities embedded in early childhood.

Countries with better health and literacy outcomes than Canada have one thing in common: They all prioritize their youngest children. Canada does not. Of the 20 countries in a 2006 study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Canada ranked last in total spending on families with children, including tax measures, income transfers, paid parental leave and preschool and parenting programs. Canada devotes 45 per cent of its GDP per capita on those 65 and over but only 3.4 per cent on those under 5. By comparison, Sweden and Finland, both healthy market economies, spend about 20 per cent of their per capita GDP on the young while still supporting retirees.

A newly release report by the World Health Organization counsels governments that investing in early childhood is the most powerful tool available to support a competent and productive workforce, reduce the burden of chronic disease in adults and divert spending from the courts and prisons. It recommends a comprehensive package of family-friendly policies that offer an adequate income for all, allow parents to balance their home and work life and provide quality early childhood programs beginning in infancy and involving parents.

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Why should we care? When children fail to thrive, so do the societies they live in. Financial managers project that at current growth rates, spending on health care will consume an ever-increasing percentage of public spending. A declining birth rate means the workforce saddled with the bill will be smaller and, in a competitive world economy, will need to be highly skilled and productive. If we want a Canada able and willing to maintain social accountability for the old, we need to start showing more of it to the young.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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