

# Neglecting child care now will cost us in the long run [CA]<sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

There are two reasons why early childhood development should be a major issue in this election campaign.

One is that early childhood development greatly improves the life chances of our youngest people &em; their ability to lead rewarding and healthy lives as adults. We owe it to children to give them the best start in life. Enabling our youngest citizens to succeed as adults is the best anti-poverty initiative we could possibly imagine.

The other reason is our own self-interest as adults &em; if Canada is to prosper in the years ahead, it will need a high-quality, literate, innovative and adaptable adult population that can succeed in the intensely competitive global knowledge economy.

Early childhood development, with play-based learning in a secure and nurturing environment with well-trained staff, can provide this vital start in life, which is when the trajectories for lifetime learning, behaviour and physical and mental health are set.

Finland probably has the best early childhood development program in the world, and it may be no accident that its young people score highest in international tests on student achievement at age 15.

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But the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development has ranked Canada last among 20 countries in its commitment to early childhood development.

Canada had taken some initial steps with an agreement between the Paul Martin government and the provinces in 2005 for a five-year initiative guided by so-called QUAD principles &em; quality, universal inclusiveness, accessibility and developmental.

Social conservatives, who believe mothers should stay at home, disliked the initiative. So when Stephen Harper became Prime Minister in 2006, he killed the agreement and replaced it with a \$100-a-month taxable cheque to families for every child under the age of 6. In the past two years, this has cost \$3.7 billion but done little if anything to help children. Harper also promised to help the provinces build 250,000 child-care spaces but there's little evidence much has happened.

In this election, the Conservatives are sticking to this. Their website mostly attacks the Liberals and NDP.

The Liberals promise to embark on negotiations with the provinces for a new agreement but their platform foolishly pledges them to retain the costly and useless \$100 monthly cheque program introduced by Harper, despite its high cost.

The NDP also have no intention of rolling back Harper's giveaways. They promise funding for an initial 150,000 child-care spaces. But this is not the same as creating a universal system of early childhood development.

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Canada has a problem today. According to the OECD, some 42 per cent of Canadians 16 to 65 lack the levels of literacy and numeracy needed to cope with the demands of everyday life and work in a modern society. That is a shocking statistic for a country trying to compete in a knowledge-based economy. One reason for this result is that too many young people have been getting off to a poor start in life.

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The recent report of the World Health Organization on how to improve human health &em; Closing the Gap in a Generation &em; declared that "investments in early childhood development are one of the most powerful that countries can make &em; in terms of reducing the escalating chronic diseases burden in adults, reducing costs for judicial and prison systems and enabling more children to grow into healthy adults who can make a positive contribution to society, socially and economically."

...

If elections are about our future direction, surely the future learning, behaviour and health of our people should be at the top of the list, not lost in a fog of peripheral and often negative campaigning.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

**Region:** Canada <sup>[2]</sup>

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