

Mexican children ahead of Canadian, Mustard says [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Children in some poorer areas of Mexico are farther ahead in kindergarten than the average Canadian kid, says new research led by renowned expert Dr. Fraser Mustard.

Shocked? Mustard isn't. The government there has implemented a system of programs in the city of Monterrey, called CENDI, with supports for families from pregnancy through to preschool - similar to what he's been advocating for this country for years as research continues to show that early development is crucial to literacy, health and emotional well-being in adulthood, and how parents play a key role.

"You can't dump the whole responsibility (for child development) on families," says Mustard, world-renowned for his work on early childhood development.

"You have to build a system families can be a part of, not controlled by the government but where the government sets standards."

Mustard recently made recommendations to the South Australia government for improvements to early childhood development there.

Magdalena Janus, a McMaster professor who helped collect the data in Monterrey, was surprised at the difference between the Mexican and Canadian children.

"It's fair to say that these children are doing better than the average Canadian child," Janus said.

She stressed, however, that Canadian children aren't lagging behind; rather, the Mexican children are well ahead.

Since his 1999 report to the Ontario government on the importance of the years from birth to age 6, Mustard has stressed the need for home visits for new parents, alongside community "hubs" where they can access information on nutrition and health from professionals, take part in parenting programming, as well as programming for their children.

That way, they get the support they need to do a better job, and problems can be caught and treated early on.

Children's programming, which may include daycare for working parents, is also a part of such centres, ideally located in schools.

Such systems are necessary to improve the population, but it takes years before the payoff is visible, Mustard said.

"You don't get this overnight."

When asked how Mexican children from at-risk neighbourhoods could outperform Canadian children, Mustard said: "We don't have CENDI programs here, to be blunt."

The children were evaluated using the Early Development Instrument, created by Canadian researchers Dan Offord and Janus of McMaster University and now used internationally to measure children's development in five areas: physical well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language/cognitive development and communication skills.

Children are considered "vulnerable" when they score in the lowest 10th percentile on one measure:

Of those five areas, just 18.5 per cent of CENDI children scored low in one, compared to almost 26 per cent of children in the Canadian sample.

Among regular kindergarten students in Monterrey who'd had no exposure to CENDI, almost 34 per cent were below normal in one area.

Almost 4 per cent of the CENDI children had low scores in two areas; Canadian children, almost 13 per cent.

Mustard said the "harsh truth is that (school performance) is already set by the time you enter the school system.

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"There is a striking correlation between language and literacy and behaviour."

Low literacy in preschool boys has been linked to criminal behaviour in adulthood.

However, studies here and abroad have shown that poor results on the EDI can be improved within three years with quality parenting and childhood programming.

Janus, who holds the Ontario chair in early childhood development at McMaster, said the Mexican research involved 900 children ages 4 and 5 in poor neighbourhoods, and compared 2007 EDI scores from those who'd taken part in CENDI programs to those who hadn't.

The Canadian data was taken from EDI scores from an average sample of middle-class children from 2005-2007.

The Mexican and Canadian children measured the same on emotional maturity, and Mexican children were slightly lower on language and cognitive development, "but substantially better on the other three" measures.

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"In a way, I would put more emphasis on the fact that those children are doing exceptionally well."

Janus said the term "vulnerable" is essentially a warning sign.

"Basically, you are telling teachers and parents, telling this community that there are many children who have at least one area of development where they are not doing as well as they should at age 5," she said.

Mustard points to the early childhood system in Cuba, on which the Mexican program is modelled. Cuba is one of the few Latin American countries with high literacy, low infant and child mortality and high rates of elementary school completion.

Cuban programs are voluntary but used by virtually all families. Parents receive prenatal health and nutritional care from obstetricians, and take courses on how to stimulate their child's brain.

Once a baby is born, families receive home visits twice a week for two years from parenting educators, social workers, nurses or physicians. Programs are available in the community for young children. Everything is free of charge.

"It's a lot of good experiences in the first few years of life," said Alfredo Tinajero, who helped implement a similar program in his native Ecuador. He now lives in Toronto.

"You start at an early age, which is crucial, and at the same time you have the health sector involved in such a way that they are involved in the development of children."

He said from age 3 to 5, Cuban children and their parents take part in anywhere from 160 to 320 sessions in the community.

"It's an incredible amount of early stimulation."

Cuba also targets women in their child-bearing years who might, down the road, have a high-risk pregnancy due to high blood pressure, and works to deal with those conditions.

Mustard is hoping to conduct research comparing students in Mexico, Cuba and Canada to look at their performance at the start of school and by grades 3 and 4.

In Ontario, the government has dozens of early years centres, which provide some programming for children and parents, and recently began funding parenting centres in schools around the province based on a model created by the Toronto public board.

Peel's public and Catholic schools have also used EDI scores to target needy communities with specific programming for kids and parents.

Mustard said the Liberals' plan to implement full-day kindergarten for 4- and 5-year-olds is a good start, but it should be sure to pay attention to the preschool years and provide supports for parents.

But the country still needs a national framework and the federal government needs to step up, he says.

"It's not yet fashionable enough here."

Parental leave should be 18 months, Mustard tells Aussies

New parents should be able to share an 18-month leave from work after their baby is born, says a just-released report by renowned early childhood expert Dr. Fraser Mustard.

The report, for the South Australia government where Mustard was appointed a thinker-in-residence, recommends 39 improvements and sweeping changes the state can make in early childhood development, which it has deemed a priority.

Those changes equally apply to Canada, where parental leave is currently one year, says Mustard, considered a world leader in the area.

Key among his proposals is that the South Australian government continue to create a network of early childhood development and parenting centres, linked to schools, to provide families from pregnancy onward with nutrition, health and parenting - including programs for parents to "learn parenting by doing" as well as programming for children, as well as provide child-care where needed.

Such centres would also "reduce isolation for parents and young children," the report says.

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Mustard is perhaps best known in Canada for the 1999 Early Years study he co-authored with Margaret Norrie McCain for the Ontario government, and last year's follow-up that detailed how Canada is last in spending among industrialized nations when it comes to early childhood development programs.

Those reports also urged a national framework for universal "hubs," with trained staff providing community-based help to parents, activities for children as well as access to health professionals.

Research shows that literacy, school performance and lifelong health and behaviour are largely determined by the brain development in the early years. Because parents are the main caregivers for children, Mustard says it's essential they have strong skills.

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He estimates the cost of behavioural and mental health problems to be more than \$30 billion a year in Ontario alone. The price tag of providing these hubs and extended maternity leave? About \$18 billion.

Among the highlights of his South Australian report:

Implement parental leave: The first six months of parental leave should be for the mother, the remaining 12 to be divided between parents as they see fit. Income support, provided by the government, should be at least 80 per cent of earnings. Currently, there are no statewide maternity leave provisions.

Assess young students: The government should assess all students in kindergarten given 25 per cent currently are already behind when they begin school; that assessment should be used to monitor communities on an ongoing basis to make sure programs address needs.

Track students: Children should be tracked by linking school and health records, as is done in Manitoba. There, researchers found a number of at-risk students were falling in between the cracks.

Better training: All post-secondary students in programs relating to children and families should take courses in developmental neurobiological science; existing staff will also need such training. Public servants, too, should also be informed of human development and how it affects lifelong health and behaviour.

Integrate government ministries with responsibility for any aspect of children's lives.

The goal should be to reduce by 50 per cent, the cost of mental health, addiction, crime and violence 20 years down the road.

Early reports out of South Australia indicate the government is willing to implement, in some way, 38 of Mustard's proposals, but has rejected extended parental leave.

"As a result of Dr. Mustard's influence...our state is even better positioned to provide the very best start for all South Australians," said Premier Mike Rann in his foreword to Mustard's paper.

"Ensuring that our children develop to reach their potential as health and competent members of...society is a priority."

Mustard said society needs to produce a competent population, and can't simply "dump" that on parents without providing support and help.

"Children don't choose their parents," he said. "Society does have a responsibility to help families."

Mustard estimates the cost to implement his recommendations in South Australia to be roughly \$800 million.

- reprinted from The Toronto Star

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