

Child-care systems across Canada are reaching a breaking point

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OPINION: Last month, a Toronto daycare pulled out of the \$10-a-day program, and the YMCA says more centres could follow. None of this should come as a surprise

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Simply put, child-care systems across Canada are reaching a breaking point. Instead of spending subsidy funds to independently audit child-care centres — as Ontario recently instructed city-run facilities to do over the next few months — governments and parents who stand to benefit from accessible care would do well to listen to what experts have been saying for some time. Without proactive policy that ensures adequately paid, stable workplaces for the people providing this care, even grand gestures such as a \$10-a-day program aren't going to do much for parents if daycares can't afford to participate.

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Until 1997, child care in Quebec was largely subsidized by a mix of tax credits available to parents and operational grants for which non-profit child-care providers could apply. When the province famously moved toward a directly funded model that year, the idea was to push for \$5-a-day care for every child four and under, within three years. In other words, cheaper child care and in less time than Canada's current plan.

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The Parti Québécois' original plan was to have non-profit, directly funded centres known as CPEs make up the bulk of the child-care system: CPEs feature higher employment qualifications and mandates that include making child care accessible to families otherwise less likely to receive it. When demand for CPE care far outstripped availability, the system couldn't hire and train ECEs fast enough (sound familiar?). A new government was voted in a few years later, caps on new builds for for-profit centres were lifted, and tax credits for families not using subsidized care increased significantly. While this improved access, it resulted in a high reliance on for-profit services that don't offer the same quality of care.

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He suggested prioritizing spaces for pre-school-aged children — where the staff ratios and existing spots are less likely to see acute shortages — and incentivizing people to take up child-care work via higher wages, apprenticeship programs, and other points of entry into the industry.

A recurring argument I see repeated on social media and in comment sections — places I need to learn to avoid — about child-care funding is the idea that one's ability to pay for child care shouldn't be a public concern. "Can't afford child care? Don't have kids!" seems to be the sentiment, which would be appropriate if we were talking about children as consumer products. The thing is, they're not: they're human beings, and anyone trying to convince you otherwise is trying either to sell you a \$1,200 luxury stroller or to shirk our communal responsibility for their well-being.

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