

3 years after Canada's landmark investment in child care, 3 priorities all levels of government should heed ^[1]

Author: Dhuey, E.

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Excerpts

Three years ago, the federal government announced the multi-billion-dollar Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care plan, with its cornerstone focus on reducing child-care costs to an average of \$10 per day for all Canadians by 2025. Each province and territory signed an agreement pertaining to federal funds for quality, accessible and affordable care systems.

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Funding and how it's allocated

Three years after the launch of the federal early learning and child-care plan, things do not appear to be going as planned. It has been widely reported that space targets across the country will not be met by 2026.

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Prime Minister Justin Trudeau recently pledged additional funding via grants and loans to public and not-for-profit child-care providers prior to the release of the 2024 federal budget. But the issue is not only funding, but how it's allocated.

Québec: Important lessons

After Québec's universal child care program rolled out, a focus on low fees and a push to rapidly increase spaces resulted in a tiered system. This has meant parents choose between higher-quality, not-for-profit centres with long waiting lists — or more accessible but lower-quality for-profit providers. Such for-profit providers emerged in 2003 to meet space demands, following an initial for-profit moratorium.

Additionally, in Québec, lower-income families face significant challenges in accessing care. Children from low-income families are under-represented in high-quality centres.

While Québec's program helped increase women's participation in the workforce, its overall effects on children and their families has been quite mixed, with some studies finding negative effects on both.

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What to prioritize

Federal and provincial governments must work together and prioritize the following areas:

1. Quality assurance: In child care, quality matters, and it matters a lot. Creating a system that ensures high-quality care without draining excessive resources is of the highest importance. Fortunately, positive examples exist worldwide.

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2. Not-for-profit centres with well-paid staff: Building on the importance of quality, not-for-profit providers are key. Research shows for-profit child care centers tend to offer lower-quality services and are more likely to close.

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3. Priority to low-income families: The federal early learning and child-care program has hugely increased demand for care. However, when services are limited, vulnerable families experience access challenges. Without careful policies, lower-income families may be squeezed out of the market, exacerbating pre-existing inequities.

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4. Better child care for all: As all levels of government continue the important work of reforming and expanding child care in Canada, and

face significant time pressures to do so, quality must remain the cornerstone of such a strategy, with particular attention given to low-income families.

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