

Targeted child care misses the mark [CA-ON]^[1]

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EXCERPT

Intuitively, it makes sense that early learning programs should be targeted at low-income children. They face bigger hurdles than other youngsters. They're more likely to struggle at school. They have a higher risk of dropping out and perpetuating the poverty cycle.

Yet pediatricians, teachers and psychologists consistently advocate that all pre-schoolers be treated equally.

For the past 15 years, Canada's politicians have ignored the experts and gone with their guts.

The result is a patchwork of programs aimed at youngsters living in poor neighbourhoods, aboriginal communities and single-parent households.

It fails on two counts, says Gillian Doherty who has just completed a comprehensive review of Canada's children's policies. First, it isn't particularly cost-effective. Second, it excludes 70 per cent of youngsters with development problems.

"Targeting misses the mark most of the time," she says. "We're just not getting to the kids who need help."

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[Doherty] has just completed a study for the Institute for Research on Public Policy (www.irpp.org^[2]) that pulls together the lessons she has learned:

The first is that most developmentally delayed children come from middle-income and affluent families. The incidence may be higher among economically disadvantaged kids, but numerically, the vast majority of vulnerable children are neither poor nor distinguishable from their peers.

"Many people are unaware of this," Doherty says. "The problem is much bigger than people realize and it cuts across income groups."

The second is that programs designed to change the behaviour of low-income parents & to improve their child-rearing skills or get them into the workforce & have little impact on their offspring.

"These interventions may benefit parents," Doherty says, "but they generally have negligible effects on children's development."

The third is that vulnerable kids do best in structured, full-day programs. Less formal types of care reduce their odds of succeeding at school and becoming healthy, self-supporting adults.

"Poor quality child care is not simply a missed developmental opportunity, it is known to be detrimental to all children's development," Doherty says. "Canada cannot continue to treat this service as simply a safe place for children to stay while their parents work."

Her final overarching conclusion is that universal programs are a better investment of public funds than initiatives targeted at kids that "everybody knows will have difficulty."

This proposition is also the most controversial, Doherty admits. Taxpayers don't like being told that their preconceptions are wrong, especially when the status quo is cheaper than change.

"But Canada cannot afford the inevitable negative consequences to its prosperity of failing to implement a universal system," she says.

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By her estimate, it would cost about \$5.6 billion to put in place a high-quality, universal early childhood education system in Ontario (\$15 billion nationwide).

But within a generation, the payback & in reduced dropout rates, lower welfare expenditures, increased employment income and higher tax revenues & would outweigh the costs two to one, Doherty says.

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