

# Birth of a notion: How to make life better for our kids [CA-ON]<sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Mother is delighted, father is thrilled. Baby's almost here, with a highly anticipated due date of Wednesday, Oct. 10.

An Ontario election-day baby.

We're talking about a universal baby, so circumstances vary from family to family. Perhaps mother is anxious and father absent, or both parents already are struggling to raise kids on two incomes that don't stretch far enough.

In this election campaign, the Star asked child-care advocates, academics, parents, students, a mother-to-be, and, yes, politicians and campaign strategists how to make life better for such a child born in our province.

From their responses and our research, we offer a starter prescription for problems that continue to embarrass Ontarians, beginning with the one in six children who live in poverty here and the poor scores for Ontario in child-care spending compared to Quebec, Manitoba, Alberta or the Yukon.

We took an unabashedly blue-sky approach, imagining a government in which all decisions were weighed against their impact on children.

Although there is applause for many things the Liberal government of Premier Dalton McGuinty has done since 2003 & and plaudits for policies of the Progressive Conservatives, the New Democratic Party and the Greens & the consensus is nobody has focused on that simple idea.

"If you go back to the middle of the 1990s, there has been a whole lot done in relation to children in Canada," says Gordon Cleveland, a University of Toronto management professor and early childhood education expert, ticking off a series of initiatives. "But nobody has said, 'Here's the entire package.'"

Cleveland points to the "ready, aye, ready" responses of Canadian governments (both at Queen's Park and on Parliament Hill) in the 1990s when the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development targeted deficits as a huge problem and "everybody went to the barricades."

Contrast that, he argues, with the sluggish reaction to two OECD reports since 2000 that show Canada is lagging in terms of money spent on child-care development. One report in 2006 put Canada in 14th place behind Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, France and even the United States in public spending on children to the age of 6.

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Certainly, families are struggling. That hit home last week with the latest report by Statistics Canada proving the rich are indeed getting richer while wages in the rest of society stagnate. The 22-year survey shows that wages of, say, \$25,000 or \$40,000 were virtually unchanged between 1982 and 2004 (adjusted for inflation), while the income of the top one percentile soared 80 per cent.

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A logical starting point for blue-sky thinking, according to our experts, lies with improving conditions for the family as a whole, be they in housing, health or income. The McGuinty government, for example, brought in legislation to increase the minimum wage to \$10.25 an hour by 2010, a move NDP Leader Howard Hampton would fully implement immediately and P.C. Leader John Tory would study further.

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For the most part, child advocates see public education as the basis of better health (including stopping the rise in child obesity) and the ultimate means to address critical issues of poverty, the environment and the means to have a decent standard of living.

So do prospective parents. Jennifer Brooks, 29, and an early childhood educator who actually could be having an election-day baby & her first & says her priority is more funding for education.

"So much has been taken out of it in the past few years in terms of resources and the way teachers are treated," says Brooks, who will vote

NDP.

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While there is controversy over parental leave and other issues, the single biggest wish appears to be for publicly funded child care for parents who need it. Perhaps it could be along the lines of Quebec, a province that provides child care at a cost of \$7 a day to parents and \$1.4 billion annually to the province.

Child care in Ontario varies wildly, with the largest portion provided by the private sector.

A Star investigation recently documented serious problems in that sector, including children being struck, forcibly confined, fed allergy-inducing food or left alone in public spaces.

"If they chose to do it, they could do," says Martha Friendly, executive director of the independent Childcare Resource and Research Unit, referring to comprehensive child care. "Why is it that other countries can do those things and we don't seem able to? It's such a puzzle to me."

Child care has not been a hot-button election issue.

The Liberals point to the creation of 22,000 new spaces since 2003, and say their proposed full-day kindergarten program (9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.) will free up another 40,000 spaces at a cost of \$300 million.

The NDP supports not-for-profit public daycare, as well as full-day kindergarten beginning at age 4.

However, the Hampton plan calls for 40,000 new spaces at a cost of \$800 million.

Tory espouses giving parents choice and has said the issue of early child care and education requires further study.

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Child-care advocates believe all-day kindergarten is a step in the right direction, but they want more for our baby.

Friendly advises "seamless" all-day care in a school setting, perhaps beginning for children as young as 3. Children would have the option of coming to school earlier than 9 a.m. and staying later than 3:30, under the supervision of childhood education experts.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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

Ontario <sup>[3]</sup>

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