

Affordable child care benefits us all [CA] ^[1]

An excerpt from "Child care and the future of Canada: Reflections of an Atkinson Fellow"

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EXCERPTS

Of all the factors that motivated Joseph Atkinson to imagine a better Canada, perhaps none was more central than the plight of children in his time, many of whom struggled under deprivation, disease and exploitative working conditions. In one poignant image from *Fighting Words*, a documentary about J. E. Atkinson, produced by the Atkinson Foundation, Toronto's harsh slums toil literally in the shadows of City Hall's power and imperviousness.

We have come a long way since those days, thanks to Atkinson and the many others who have since joined the spirit of his crusade for fundamental social reforms. Our cities, our country is a vastly different place today, anchored by our strong economic and social foundations.

Just recently, in fact, we came closer to achieving another milestone in Canada's history when our senior levels of government committed to kick-starting a much awaited pan-Canadian early learning and child care program.

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Like medicare, child care's benefits are both social and economic. They are not simply about our values of fairness and justice, they are also about the central role that a healthy, educated population plays in bolstering a competitive economy.

Like medicare, child care research clearly demonstrates the many quality advantages of investing public money in a not-for-profit approach. Wages and conditions are better, early childhood educators in not-for-profits stay longer and therefore provide better sustaining relationships with children, and public resources are reinvested in the well-being of children, not siphoned off for private benefit.

Like medicare, progress on child care is met with arguments about the need for "more choices." But it is an inescapable fact that in Canada today, regulated child care meets the needs of only one out of every six children under 12 years of age. In the case of child care, "choice" must mean that high quality early learning and care is advanced as an option of choice, not postponed or eliminated.

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To strengthen our common commitment to early learning and child care is to advance our individual and collective well-being and, in turn, the building of a better Canada. And in my view, to weaken or sabotage the development of an early childhood program will inhibit our national progress.

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How can we build a truly great nation unless everyone, regardless of income or region, has access to the same high quality health care? How can we build a great nation unless every family has access to high quality early learning and child care regardless of income or region? We can't.

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The Atkinson Foundation's work in this area is so critical. I am especially impressed by the innovative work of the Toronto First Duty pilot sites that put into practice that old saying that "anything that exists is possible."

Supported by a partnership between the Foundation, the City of Toronto and the Toronto District School Board, Toronto First Duty has set out to build the future of early childhood education. Five sites are operating today which provide services for families with young children that blend kindergarten, child care, and parenting supports into a single program linking practice and curriculum. This work is already playing a key role in guiding Toronto's early years aspirations under the province of Ontario's Best Start vision.

It is projects like this that will keep the flame alive for the pan-Canadian early childhood and education program that our communities right across this country have been waiting for.

How important is it that we do this? A recent Environics poll reinforced the fact that the Canadian public places a high value on child care programs and the importance of affordable child care to the fabric of society. The vast majority of Canadians understand that the lack of affordable child care poses a serious challenge for our nation. In fact, there is almost unanimous agreement from coast to coast on the need for our public institutions to play a significant and active role in supporting parents to meet their needs.

I firmly believe that the progress of our nation and respect for our legacy and values can be measured to a large extent by how we deal with the important issue of child care. It is time for us to take a page out of Joseph Atkinson's history, to dare to imagine a bolder future, and to apply our unrelenting determination to achieving a fairer tomorrow.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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