

Daycare issue not a big priority for western Canadians; Support for grants, national program about the same [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Politicians were not only kissing babies during the recent federal election, they were pitching different ways to look after them. On the one hand, were the Liberals and the New Democrats arguing in favour of a national childcare program. On the other hand, were the Conservatives and their promise to give money directly to parents with children under 6 to use as they see fit.

These options were — and continue to be — presented as polar opposites. One might be tempted to draw the conclusion that the public also sees the issue in this way and that individuals who support more government funding for daycare do not support giving money to parents, and vice-versa. However, this would be incorrect.

The Canada West Foundation's Looking West 2006 Survey asked 4,000 western Canadians their opinions on a variety of issues, including two questions on childcare. The respondents were asked to rate the priority of "providing funding to parents with children under 6" and "developing a national daycare program." Respondents were asked to rate these options as a high priority, a medium priority, a low priority, or not a priority.

Some 34.3 per cent of western Canadians rate providing funding to parents with children under 6 as a high priority and 31.6 per cent rate developing a national daycare program as a high priority. Out of 17 issues included in the survey, providing funding to parents with children ranks 13th, and developing a national daycare program ranks 15th on the list of priorities.

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A number of interesting — and perhaps surprising — lessons can be drawn from these results.

First, a positive correlation exists between responses to these two childcare options. Simply put, individuals who rate funding for parents as a high priority are also likely to rate developing a national daycare program as a high priority, and individuals who rate funding for parents as a low priority are likely to rate developing a national daycare program as a low priority. Helping parents — be it directly or indirectly — is the issue that divides the public, rather than how it is done.

Second, while childcare funding may be at the top of the list for federal politicians, it does not rate nearly as high among the western Canadian public. The survey reveals that neither alternative is a top priority for western Canadians.

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A final lesson of the survey is that, while funding for parents with children under 6 has the edge over a national daycare program among western Canadians (as one might expect given Harper's strong western base), the gap between the two is less than three percentage points.

This is not to say that childcare is unimportant to western Canadians. On the contrary, when the "medium priority" category is added, both the national daycare system and funding for parents options are rated as either a high or medium priority by approximately two-thirds of western Canadians.

The point is that the diametrically opposed childcare approaches of the two major parties are more a matter of politics than something that is rooted in the hearts and minds of western Canadians. For a good number of people, federal involvement in childcare — whatever form it may take — is not as high of a priority as the recent election made it seem.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7858> [4]

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