

We must insist on quality child care [CA] ^[1]

Author: Bennett, Carolyn

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EXCERPTS

In 1981, when my older son, Jack, was born, I'd been in practice as a family physician for four years. I'd delivered hundreds of babies, but as a mother, I was a total rookie.

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If there's one thing I'm thankful for (and there's certainly more than one) it's that I was surrounded by people and resources who could help with the monumental responsibility that is parenthood.

I was lucky and I knew it.

Many of my patients were very much alone as they tried to raise their children — parents far away, no partner, living on social assistance, hoping for a better future for their child, a better neighbourhood, a backyard instead of a balcony.

They thought about going back to school, about getting a job, but there were barriers, the biggest one being the lack of affordable quality child care.

Without exaggeration, in my 20 years as a doctor, not a week went by that I didn't hear the concerns of a mother or father expressing their anxiety about who was looking after their children, or their inability to find quality child care that they could afford.

This is why I firmly believe we must stand behind the Early Learning and Child Care agreements signed by the provinces and demand that the Conservative government stand by the agreements as well. Because it really does take a village to raise a child.

Critics of the former Liberal government's program have attempted to turn the debate into a question of whether parents or paid professionals are better at raising children, but this gross oversimplification of the issues misses the mark and ill-serves Canadians.

What they don't understand, or choose to ignore, is that all families — urban or rural, single or double income, one parent or two, day job or shift work — can benefit from the ready availability of a broad range of quality care and early learning services. Prenatal classes, parent-child drop-in centres, licensed child care, early learning activities, after-school programs.

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But you can't choose what doesn't exist, and too few of these services are available to meet the needs of those who want them. And when they are available, the cost is often prohibitive.

Stephen Harper is offering parents \$100 a month. But the cost of full-time child care can reach \$90 a day and a few more dollars in people's pockets does nothing to create new spaces. That isn't choice, it's only the illusion of choice.

Meanwhile, his move to cancel the agreements that the provinces negotiated in good faith and signed with the government of Canada is already taking choices away from Canadians.

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But there's a long-term social and economic cost as well.

We know that if we don't invest in our children, we pay dearly down the road in health-care costs, special education, corrections.

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I'm not alone. The majority of Canadians want this program.

All 10 provincial governments have made their choice, as demonstrated through the agreements they signed. And parents and advocacy groups have been clear.

In the January election, nearly 63 per cent of Canadians voted for a party that supports a national system of early learning and child care.

These parents know that such a program will give all of our kids the opportunity to thrive, while giving them as individuals the peace of mind they need to be full participants in the workforce, if they so choose.

Canadians have spoken. So just one question remains: Why won't Stephen Harper listen?

* Carolyn Bennett is MP for St. Paul's

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Region: [Canada](#) ^[2]

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[2] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864>

[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federalism>

[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-programs>