

Child care at the crossroads [CA] ^[1]

Issue of child care more than choosing between countrybuilding and choice

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EXCERPTS

In the current campaign, child care has emerged as one of the best candidates for debate about what kind of nation we want and offers different visions of how to get there. Do we want Stephen Harper's simple plan of "choice" for parents of young children via income supplements or do we want Paul Martin's "nation-building early learning" system via federal-provincial-territorial funding transfers for quality childcare spaces? Or do we want Jack Layton's Childcare Act to put teeth in public funding for quality spaces by ensuring that the system is not-for-profit?

For some of us child care isn't a new issue. I'm writing this in a university office at the Institute of Child Study where staff reached out to set research-based standards for the operation of day nurseries over 60 years ago, both in Ontario and in Great Britain, in order to allow women to work and to win the war. I regularly check for news on child care on the website from U of T's Childcare Resource and Research Unit (www.childcarecanada.org ^[2]), established more than two decades ago in an era of interest in women's work equality.

In 1887 Hester How, the first female school principal in Ontario, combined preschool child care with elementary schooling by allowing pupils to bring their preschool siblings to school to play at the back of the classroom. Before her innovation many pupils in the under-privileged school neighbourhood in Toronto were truants because they had to stay home to care for younger siblings while their mothers worked.

We no longer have a world war or major problems with elementary school truants, but employment issues are still a big part of the answer to why bother with improving child care and its availability. More than 70 per cent of women with children under six years of age are working outside the home. They need to work and are needed in the workforce and all indications are that this figure will continue to grow. At the same time the supply of quality care is insufficient. The concern with quality is a key because we want children to be happy, healthy and developing and learning in their preschool years. A substantial body of literature shows that good quality child care fosters good child outcomes. This is a key answer to why bother: Because quality child care supports child development, not just parents and employment. And better child development is a basis for social good, not just a concern for parents.

My personal interest in child care goes back 30- something years to the time when I was shopping for child care for my first-born. With graduate student parents and a father studying developmental psychology, you'd think that my son might have been ushered right into optimal arrangements that preserved attachment security between parent and child and provided stimulating interactions with peers and other caring adults. Not so easy. I remember checking out "family day care" arrangements that made the environments of Dickens novels seem preferable since the latter weren't organized around total TV. Eventually we found a regulated university centre that was the clear choice among bad alternatives, even though it wouldn't meet today's quality standards. My early experience as a parent, subsequently repeated in other communities with other children and different kinds of care arrangements, made me think that quality child care is scarce but important. My professional and research career studying early child development, parenting and early childhood programs and services has reinforced what I learned as a parent.

I applaud the Liberals and NDP for their plans for building a public system. I know the research shows that quality is a key to success and that quality is strongly related to regulated, non-profit delivery. At the same time, I appreciate the need for flexibility recognized by the Conservative doctrine of "choice" and the implied recognition for the value of work and parenting in the home. But choice isn't really choice if there's little or nothing to choose among.

I believe we need a system along the lines the Liberals and NDP are proposing but the campaigning hasn't given us a clear enough vision of why investing in early child development is a key to a civil and economically successful society. Research shows that quality child care and allied early childhood services have the preventive capacity to reduce some costly social problems, including later special education demands and even crime. Promoting early learning for later payoffs in a competitive workforce are no doubt on Martin's mind as well, but he's not talking big picture in the campaign. Neither is he providing much detail. For example, how will the investment in child care tie into the 2000 federal-provincial-territorial agreement on early childhood development through a variety of programs and services? How does it relate to the generous increase in parental leave?

Can we also talk about innovations? How about wrapping child care around kindergarten as a universal "platform" to build community and to support preschool children and their families in local schools? My colleagues and I have been evaluating exactly this kind of possibility in the Toronto First Duty early childhood demonstration project, a collaboration among the City of Toronto, the Atkinson Charitable Foundation and the Toronto District School Board (www.toronto.ca/firstduty/index.htm [3]).

It will be interesting to see what happens in the second half of the campaign. Will the media be preoccupied with scandal and security concerns or will there be discussion of how to build something new for Canada? Will shootings in the street blow away interest in investing in the world of young children and families? Might there be a distant connection? I hope we see more ideas and discussion on child care that get us beyond who wins the parent vote.

- reprinted from the U of T Bulletin

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