

Tory daycare offer tempting but ...[CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Conservative Leader Stephen Harper wants to give me \$1,200 a year, times two, to help us pay for Will's and Nat's daycare. A cold, hard, cash payment if the Conservatives form the next government.

The Liberals promise to invest heavily in national early-learning programs to the tune of \$11 billion - a project that'll take 10 years to implement. It's doubtful my 2- and 4-year-olds will reap the benefits of this.

The New Democrats also promise to open more daycare spots nationwide, if they win the election.

Where does a voting, thirty-something working mother of two toddlers who does laundry in the middle of the night, turn?

Ask anyone with a child about the issues that matter most to them concerning this vote and they'll bring up the costs of raising that child and of trying to find care in a centre or home they are comfortable with. And they'll also be sure to tell you about long wait lists in many non-profit, licensed daycare centres. One of the first things newly pregnant women in Toronto do is call around and place their unborn child on daycare waiting lists.

You've got to hand it to the Conservatives, appealing to the pocketbooks of the struggling middle class, saddled with taxes and daycare expenses that usually exceed a monthly mortgage payment. Throw in the promised GST reduction and it's really a brilliant strategy, especially since the money would be given out to every family with a child under 6 — regardless whether the child stays home or is in some form of daycare or nursery. If one were thinking solely about themselves, about saving money, and not investing in programs that could help build the nation, one would be sorely tempted.

I must be honest. If I was to receive a \$1,200-a-year payment for each of my children under the age of 6, I don't think I'd be pious or organized enough to save it and spend it on child care. No, I wouldn't spend it on beer. Knowing me, I'd probably spend the money on footwear or more trips to the mall. You can never own enough shoes.

But shoe issues aside, you either believe in national funded daycare programs or you don't. This is one of those times to take a stand. Seems to me the child-care issue in this election is about the greater good, not about your pocketbook.

How many families do you know who would prefer to have their children in licensed, non-profit daycare centres — where surprise inspections are carried out by government workers and things such as playgrounds and indoor facilities have to be up to provincial code — but are unable to do so because there just aren't any spots available? Not to mention the cost. If you don't qualify for a subsidy, fees can exceed \$40 a day - for each child.

Money aside, countless studies tell us early learning is so beneficial for little people. Socializing, circle-time, learning colours, shapes and numbers taught by early childhood educators (ECEs or people who actually go to school to learn how to deal with the behavioural issues of 2- and 3-year-olds) are valuable first lessons. Yes, these things are taught at home, but most families I know gladly take all the help they can get.

Left up to me, I'd bolster those public centres and pay the staff more. Sad fact is, most of those ECEs, classroom assistants and those running home-based daycare programs - primarily women - aren't financially compensated for the extraordinary work they do. For all the hugs, wiping runny noses and helping families raise a child, many in non-profit centres are paid salaries so low they wouldn't be able to afford to send their own children to the centres where they work.

Imagine a country that has an affordable daycare spot for every family who wants it. Where learning begins early for all and nutritious meals are served.

The Liberals are running with the promise of putting an additional \$6 billion into their early learning and child-care plans creating more licensed spots, making it an \$11 billion commitment that they say will see the program through to 2015.

The New Democrats say they'd do a number of things to help families out, including introducing a Child Care Act that makes sure federal funding for child care is for licensed, non-profit care. Eventually, they say they'd provide 200,000 spaces with an additional 25,000 new

spaces in each of the next three years.

The Tories say their strategy would cost about \$10.9 billion and that they are giving parents financial freedom to choose the type of care they want. They'd also start a \$250 million annual fund for tax credits to businesses and community groups to build daycare facilities.

Plus Harper has promised to dismantle, after one year, the work toward a national daycare plan the current federal government has started and signed with the provinces.

I know what kind of Canada I want to live in.

Do you?

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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