

Keep your eye on family issues [CA] ^[1]

Politicians oversimplify child care research for their own ends

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EXCERPTS

Much debate has erupted in this election over how best to support the health and well-being of Canadian families and how they care for their children.

The bad news is that in the process, the politicians have pitted the legitimate interests of some families against the equally legitimate interests of others -- with the result that "family," the institution Canadians tell us is most important to them, winds up being tossed around in political games that have little to do with real families' day-to-day needs and hopes.

Families are, in all cases, primarily responsible for the care of their children whether or not others provide supplemental child care. The issue of a child-care program raises many questions: Who does it? What would a national system look like? If we need one, for whom do we build it, where, and at what cost?

Clearly, this is an issue of central importance. But the Vanier Institute of the Family has too often been quoted to assert that Canadians do not want to support a national system of early child care.

This conclusion cannot be supported by our survey.

Here's what we asked: "If you and your partner were/are employed outside the home and you had these choices for the care of your preschool children, which would be your top five choices?" The responses to this particular question told us, "... in an ideal world, the No. 1 choice is one's partner, followed by one's parent, then another relative. Rounding out the top five? Home-based child care followed by a child-care centre."

These responses aren't surprising, given that most Canadians' hopes and dreams for family life are fairly traditional. So when presented in one question with a "what would you choose -- all else being equal" proposition, it is no surprise that Canadians would opt for what appears most familiar to them.

It is important to point out that we did not ask Canadians what type of child care/family support would work best for them given their current reality. Canadians might prefer it if one earner in a family were paid enough to support a financially dependent spouse or that the aging of Canadian society did not compel those of so-called "working age" to help support the growing numbers of seniors. But most of us are also realists. Close to seven out of 10 (68 per cent) of Canadians are prepared to see their tax dollars help cover the costs of supplemental child care. One third of Canadians (those with and without dependent children) told us that child care for parents working outside the home is a "very high priority."

To genuinely advance the interests of Canada's families, everyone must understand both the hopes of families and their realities. It is especially incumbent on those seeking their electoral support to acknowledge both -- and the contradictions therein.

The answers to our survey questions taught us that the way Canadians actually experience decisions around raising their children is complex. Many working parents said they would like to stay at home to raise their young children if they could afford to; meanwhile, many stay-at-home mothers said they'd like a part-time job.

The Vanier survey did not focus on child-care issues. It did not present Canadians with a basket of "best" or "better" child-care options, nor did it ask respondents to choose from a broader set of family/work balance supports. Had these items been explored, we might have seen a very different "ideal" -- one that more closely reflects reality and finds its expression in the current tableau of work/family trade-offs: part-time work, shared parenting responsibilities and varied child-care arrangements.

However, our survey did ask enough questions to show that most Canadians have a far more sophisticated, realistic appreciation of families' needs than are reflected in the limited choices offered on the campaign trail.

Each of us has a vested interest in the well-being of Canada's children and the parents who provide for them. In the end, it is the responsibility of our governments to acknowledge our debt.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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