

Conservative care scheme is flawed [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

As a child care advocate, I can say that the Conservative child care plan is woefully inadequate and ideologically driven.

The Conservative plan is not policy at all; it is a tired idea that will not build a child care system or even do much to support families. Essentially the plan offers a \$1,200 a year income supplement, which in Waterloo Region might buy you two months of child care, or infant care for only one month. This is not a sound policy.

The Conservative plan is so far off what research is telling us, research that has been picked up and supported by economists. Child care and early learning are investments that provide significant financial returns to the community, significantly more than most social programs.

A similar plan was rolled out in the days of former Ontario premier Mike Harris. This plan did absolutely nothing to create quality spaces in the province, and so we have cause to question its validity in today's economy.

I will give the Tories credit for messaging and strategy. They are "guilting" parents into feeling that they can afford to stay home (this one is usually meant for the mothers), if only they will sacrifice some material goods. And their cash- up-front strategy blocks any broad societal view of children who need and deserve quality care. Ironically, the Conservative plan offers no accountability for taxpayer dollars. If such a plan were to be implemented, \$2.5 billion of public money would be spent without any guaranteed benefit for children. Now that would be a scandal.

Currently, there are only enough regulated child care spaces to serve 15 per cent of Canadian families with children under 12. The plan is silent on this matter.

And the Conservative child care allowance would not benefit working parents because it is taxable.

Essentially, this scheme offers a baby bonus. I have many friends who choose to stay home with their children and there is no doubt that a tax break should be on the table for these families. Even here, a system that allows for this "choice" should involve early learning and care options, such as preschool, for these parents as well. There are certain economic realities that need to be acknowledged: Working parents and their children need access to quality care spaces that are affordable and accessible. And parents who stay at home need to be valued by society by way of an income supplement, but let's be clear, it needs to be more than \$3 a day.

Governments need to establish policy and programs for a majority of citizens, not a minority. Like it or not, parents work because they want to, need to or simply have no choice. A recent poll suggested that stay-at-home parents would like to work part-time if they could afford quality early learning and care. This should be an option for children and for parents who have sacrificed careers to care for their children; it would certainly ease their re-entry to the workforce as children mature.

What is required is a community vision for child care. Pro-active policies that provide quality options for parents and, most importantly, children who need care should be a priority in a G8 country. The Best Start Initiative which aspires to offer community hubs that centre around child wellness is not far from this vision, although jumping through hoops to access funds is an emerging theme as are photo ops of politicians going down slides at day- care centres.

The Conservatives have stated that they will only honour the first year of the five-year federal-provincial child care agreements; any decision to cancel these agreements would leave parents and provinces in limbo.

Political parties have finally started to take notice that an early investment in quality child care spaces is good for the economy and social fabric of this country. All parties have now played their child care card.

Some voters will see the Conservatives' Child Care Allowance has nothing to do with children, and everything to do with lobbying for votes. Some voters will recognize that the Liberal plan is offering up the usual status quo.

One thing is clear though, the issue of child care and how the parties have chosen to deal with it clearly defines the political differences of the national parties.

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