

Child care, family benefits should not divide us [CA]^[1]

A Woman's View

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EXCERPTS

I start my first column with an issue that is among the longest standing and the most current of issues of concern to women: child care. Women are finally not the only ones talking about it. It's even an election issue. Better options may be offered to parents as a result of it becoming a political issue. But politics and media seem to require conflict. And so, there seems to be an attempt to create divisions where there aren't any.

Some are talking as if there were two fixed groups, stay-at-home and working-parent families. The reality is different. A stay-at-home mother today may be working for pay, outside or inside the home, next month. Stay-at-home parents may need child care on a part-time basis when they are sick, have other responsibilities or want to have their child benefit from the stimulation of child care programs. That is how most women we deal with see it, not in the us versus them view being projected.

Another false division being created is that child care is either care given by a stay-at-home parent or a day care centre, sometimes called "institutionalized" care to better demonize it. The reality is different. Child care includes supports to stay-at-home and to working parents, such as play groups, toy lending banks, drop in child care services, training on nutrition, literacy, etc, it includes home-based services and rural and seasonal child care services and it includes day care centres.

The Conservative and Liberal promises on child care are two solutions to two different problems. Both are attempts to answer real needs and one does not replace the other.

Giving a cheque to all parents does nothing to improve child care options or quality, but it is a gesture towards recognizing the value of parenting and the cost and sacrifices of raising children. Families are undervalued in our society. There are more reasons to not have children than otherwise. The amount promised by the Conservatives, \$1,200 per year per child, may not make a large difference, but such a benefit is a welcome recognition of families.

But these types of proposals do not address the issue of the quality of available child care. Even if the \$1,200 actually were to be spent on child care services - which is unlikely where child care can't be found - it would not improve child care services. It is not for lack of clientele that child care services in New Brunswick have trouble making ends meet - some have waiting lists and are still in danger of closing. It is because parent fees alone cannot pay the cost of quality child care.

If the proposed benefit of \$1,200 per child was meant to increase the number of children being cared for by their parent, then investing in the maternity and parental benefit program might be a better option. If there is a time when all parents want to be at home, it is in the first year after a baby's arrival. Yet some parents can't benefit from the maternity or parental leaves because they don't qualify or they can't live on the amount the Employment Insurance program pays parents.

On the other hand, the Liberal proposal to improve child care services in licensed homes and centres, is about fixing a problem being felt by children, families and employers. Right now, most children in New Brunswick receive some kind of non-parental care, and most of it unlicensed and un-inspected, since over three-quarters of mothers with young children are doing paid work and there are licensed spaces for about 11 per cent of children aged under 12. This state of affairs should concern us, if we truly believe that children are important and that the first six years of life are crucial to their educational, career and social success.

A Strategic Counsel poll last week found that 50 per cent of Canadian women prefer the Liberal plan, and 43 per cent the Harper plan. That is quite different from Canadian men: 40 per cent of men prefer the Liberal plan and 52 per cent the Harper idea. But what if the question that was asked was not which of these two options do you prefer, but instead, what supports do you need to raise a family?

Quality child care services and family benefits would have both been mentioned. But also improved maternity and parental benefits, and access for stay-at-home caregivers to retraining programs and disability, pension and retirement benefits. They would have mentioned the need for all caregiving to be recognized, including care of other family members, by both stay-at-home and wage-earning individuals. Some respondents might even have noted that the spousal tax credit should be a refundable credit paid to the stay-at-home spouse, in order to truly recognize the value of unpaid work.

Families don't need to be divided. They need more attention paid to them so that more of them will be able to ask themselves "Do we want a child?" instead of "Can we afford a child?"

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