

# Keep for-profit centres at bay [CA] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

There are more than 1 million preschoolers in Canada whose mothers work outside the home. Do we know what's happening to these kids while their mothers work? We should. What's happening to them will determine many things about what kind of society we'll be living in a decade or two from now, including things like our productivity level and our crime rate.

If ever there was an area that cried out for thoughtful social policy, this is it.

Fortunately, we don't need to be terribly creative or rigorous to figure it out. Childhood development has been exhaustively studied and the overwhelming consensus in the field is that children reap enormous intellectual, social, health and behavioural benefits from early childhood education programs.

European countries have shown how to put this knowledge into practice. The norm in Europe today is a national, publicly funded child care system. Quebec has a more modest, but very successful and popular version of these European programs.

In both Europe and Quebec, the educational value of the programs is considered so high that mothers who stay home usually send their children as well.

So it's disappointing that our two leading political parties have come up with such dismal proposals in this area.

The Conservatives are downright hostile to the notion of a national child care program. But recognizing its popularity in vote-rich urban Canada, they tried to defuse the issue last week by instead offering parents direct annual payments of \$1,200 per child.

This would simply perpetuate our existing inadequate child care system while giving parents only enough to cover about two months of care.

The Liberal plan is only marginally better, providing about \$1 billion each year over a 10-year period &mdash; not enough for a good, comprehensive program. It also offers no reliable funding for new buildings.

This is like trying to create a public school system from scratch, without providing money to build any actual schools. Why bother when there are so many unused basements?

Worse still, the Liberal plan fails to restrict the public money to non-profit care. This leaves the door enticingly open to corporate daycare chains, for which profits are the top priority.

Consider what happened in Australia. Since the 1990s, the Australian government has provided public funding for child care, without restricting it to non-profit care. Today, the private child care business in Australia is booming, fuelled by public money. After a merger last year, ABC Learning Centres Ltd. controls a sprawling empire of 900 centres across Australia, worth more than \$700 million.

The wide-open public funding envisioned for Canada in both the Conservative and Liberal plans has no doubt caught the attention of ABC and other corporate interests.

They have their eye on those 1 million Canadian pre-schoolers, even if we don't.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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