

Tory child care plan not enough [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Conservatives claim their new child care policy provides choice for families searching for arrangements that will suit their individual needs.

In reality, the plan does nothing of the kind. How the Tories think offering \$1,200 a year per preschool child represents significant assistance is a mystery.

"You can spend that money the way you see fit," Stephen Harper explained this week as he unveiled the party's so-called Choice in Child Care Allowance.

It might buy winter clothes and boots for the kids but it certainly won't make an iota of difference to families hunting for quality day care or for those who'd prefer to have one parent stay at home.

Day-care fees cost hundreds of dollars a month. As the Liberals snidely pointed out, the Conservatives' proposal, at about \$100 a month, would cover about three days of day care.

This is the dilemma that bedevils the Tories. They want to stay true to their ideological roots by rejecting the Liberal's more expansive child care vision.

Giving money straight to families to spend as they wish is more equitable and will enable parents to stay home with children, they argue.

The difficulty is that returning to the halcyon days when mom stayed home, baked cookies and cared for the kids is prohibitively expensive. Who's going to pay for it? The state?

The Tories have traditionally stood for personal responsibility and a minimum of government intrusion into people's lives.

But a genuine push to help parents raise children at home would mean paying families thousands of dollars annually. How much would the state have to fork out to make it worthwhile for a parent (usually mom) to quit work? Perhaps \$15,000 or \$20,000?

Those who gripe about the cost of a national early learning and child care program haven't acknowledged that direct payouts to families - enough to make a significant difference - are even more expensive.

The reality is that 70% of mothers with young children are in the workforce and that means somebody has to look after the kids.

If the policy goal is to allow parents to spend more time with their kids, there are options we can pursue without bankrupting the country.

For instance, the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada (CCAAC) has called for enhanced maternity and paternity benefits that would cover self-employed parents and those who are studying or in training.

Adding more flexibility to the scheme would also help, says Association executive director Monica Lysack.

As for the child care debate, Lysack emphasizes that early learning and child care programs are not meant only for dual-income families.

Stay-at-home parents who have occasional or ongoing commitments caring for ill relatives or elderly parents would also appreciate accessible day care, she says.

The Liberals' regulated day-care plan, suddenly extended until 2015 this week (gee, is there an election on?), is on the right track.

We badly need a fix for what the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has described as "a patchwork of uneconomic, fragmented (child care) services."

- reprinted from the Edmonton Sun

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