

Making cents of child care [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

UVic law professor Rebecca Johnson has all the respect in the world for women who stay at home with their kids. It was her fantasy too, but the reality was too tough. "It's very lonely; it's very difficult," she says.

The nearly six-foot-tall academic acknowledges she's a privileged married mother who can afford high-quality daycare. But she says the workplace is getting too good a deal when it comes to society's collective responsibility for children. Despite all the talk about how kids are the future of the country, the onus for providing, paying and stressing out over quality child care is piled pretty much on parents, she says.

Reproduction, she argues, is every bit as crucial as production of goods and services to society. But the economy trumps social policy all the time.

It's an issue that has bothered Johnson since before she had kids of her own.

In 1993, she served as a law clerk for a Supreme Court justice in the controversial Elizabeth Symes case. Symes was a lawyer who fought and failed to have her child care expenses declared eligible as a business expense under Canadian tax law. The seven male justices said no. Two female justices, both widows with young children, said yes.

Johnson has devoted the past 10 years to writing about the case in *Taxing Choices: The Intersection of Class, Gender, Parenthood and the Law*. The book recently won a national award from the Canadian Humanities and Social Sciences as the best of its funded English-language books in the social sciences.

The title reflects the fact that no matter how a family chooses to care for its children, there are onerous consequences for their time, money, energy and stress levels that workplaces don't factor in.

She was supportive of Symes, but at the same time worried about potential class implications -- that a business expense deduction would be greater for high-income professional women.

Johnson wishes that society could figure out a way to validate and underwrite all kinds of child care choices, from at-home moms to public daycare instead of shoving parenthood into the realm of private choice.

She's thrilled with the care that her sons receive at the UVic child care centre, even though at times it has cost her and her husband up to \$14,000 a year.

She likes to say she grew up in a day care with too high a ratio of kids to caregivers. Her mother stayed home raising eight children.

While families today have fewer kids and mothers have more job opportunities, a frantic balancing act between work, family and finances has become the norm.

In her ideal world, people would be able to take their child to high-quality day care the same way they take them to school, just as matter of course, with no cheques mailed to anyone. She'll believe national day care when she sees it. But she defends it as good social and economic policy: "It has all the same money multiplier effects that the economists like to talk about. It means the purchase of goods, the purchases of services, it means taxes for the people who employed in the day-care centres.

"The care of children is valuable however it's done, whether through funded child care programs or in the home. But we need to take seriously a commitment to children that doesn't require mothers to be in the home on an unpaid basis."

A lot of people still think a parent in the home is the ideal, but she disagrees. "I had a mother full-time in the home but what does that mean? A large part of our time was spent in the backyard learning how to play with each other."

In her view, public child care is vastly underrated. "I am such a big supporter of it. They have structured activities, they learn how to play, they've planted a garden. They learn how to use words, respect body boundaries, attend to their environment at clean-up time."

Her friends wondered why she and her husband didn't hire a nanny to come to their home. It would have been cheaper and easier, but not as beneficial in her view.

"I actually think my children get a better benefit from being in child care with people trained in child psychology and child development and have all sorts of information about raising kids."

What does she think we all need to do when it comes to caring for kids? "What I think is required is more social talk about children and how we might redesign the workforce to make ensure that we take care of production and reproduction and take seriously our obligations toward children."

- reprinted from the Victoria Times Colonist

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