

# Stand on guard for child care [CA] <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** Globe and Mail

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 4 Feb 2005

## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

On Feb. 11, Social Development Minister Ken Dryden is set to meet his provincial/territorial counterparts in Vancouver to sign an agreement for a new national child care program that, as the Minister has boldly noted, could be as significant to nation-building as medicare and public education.

A Canada-wide system of early learning and child care holds many promises. Done well, it will provide multiple dividends; addressing child poverty, school performance and work-force productivity. Done poorly, it will waste scarce public funds by merely expanding the frail service-patchwork that now fails children. Moreover, an ineffective national child care program will dilute the shared values that define us as Canadians.

Fortunately, we do not need to learn by trial and error. What it takes to produce good child care is well documented by research. Other Western countries have decades of practice, and their lessons have been compiled and published by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

We come to early learning and child care from distinct starting points, studying it as a vehicle to promote healthy child-development, economic growth and healthy populations. Despite our different perspectives, we concur on the elements of good child care policy.

To this end, we offer the federal/provincial/territorial ministers our best advice: This is about more than money. The additional \$5-billion over five years promised by Prime Minister Paul Martin last spring for child care is insufficient to meet the needs of every preschooler in Canada. How it is spent, however, will determine the look of the new national program to come. The OECD recommends a "paradigm-shift" from child care services that are reliant on exorbitant parent fees and targeted subsidies, to public funding. The ministers should agree to an action plan outlining how the conversion from a user-pay child care system to a public service will take place.

Organization of this system is important. Early learning and child care promotes the healthy development of young children, at the same time as it supports effective parenting and allows parents to work, study, care for other family members and participate in their community.

No existing program addresses all these roles. Kindergarten, nursery and preschools are there to educate children. Resource centres support parenting, and child care is for working parents. A single service with multiple functions is more cost-effective and better able to respond to the changing needs of families. Any agreement should encourage provinces to rationalize their early-years services to provide a stable platform for expansion.

An effective program must support the educators. Dedicated people who view the work as a viable career are indispensable. They need to begin their careers appropriately trained and continue on because they are adequately compensated and supported to do their job well. Without addressing work-force issues, child care centres can be built, but there will be no one to work in them. Government child care offices must exchange their subsidy-doling functions for providing the supports any system requires to operate effectively.

Auspice matters. We have nothing against profit-making, except when it comes to profiting off publicly subsidized children's services. Child care, like schools, libraries or hospitals is a community-based service, not a commodity. Whether a centre opens or closes, where it's located, and who it serves are not merely business decisions. They require democratic input. While child care centres should be businesslike in their efficiencies; the sole business of these organizations should be fixated on the well-being of children.

We recognize that many families now rely on commercial operators for their children's care. Therefore, the ministers should agree to grandfather those now operating, but restrict expansion dollars to public and non-profit child care providers.

Our last word is for Minister Dryden and the federal government: Don't be afraid to lead. The point of a national program is to provide all children, no matter where they reside, with access to quality child care their parents can afford. The federal government has the right framework for a national policy, one that offers quality, accessibility, affordability and developmental programs. These elements, along with strong accountability measures, should be non-negotiable.

We appreciate that Ottawa wants to emerge from its meeting next week with everyone on side. But 13 signatures don't make a national

program if cross-Canada quality and accountability assurances are abandoned. The temptation of "let's make a deal" for its own sake must be supplanted by a commitment to making a good deal for the sake of our children, and in service of a stronger and healthier Canada.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

**Tags:** health <sup>[2]</sup>

child development <sup>[3]</sup>

funding <sup>[4]</sup>

federalism <sup>[5]</sup>

privatization <sup>[6]</sup>

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