

Get it right from the start [CA] ^[1]

Author: Polanyi, Michael

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EXCERPTS

For many of us, children are at the centre of our lives. Singing, dancing, playing and smiling, they encircle us and give us an opportunity to rediscover the simplicity of life and the joys of their attention.

Now that our children are back at school or daycare, we should not let our attention stray from their needs. For on February 11 and 12, federal and provincial ministers will make decisions that crucially affect their lives.

Early this year, federal and provincial governments will decide the form and content of the long-awaited national early learning and child care program — arguably the most important social program since medicare.

But much remains to be decided. Most importantly, will governments commit adequate funds over the long term to ensure the full development and sustainability of the program? And, will early learning and child care be a for-profit business or a not-for-profit public good?

The provincial governments, which will be responsible for developing and expanding these systems, will require the confidence that adequate federal resources to do this will be available over the long term, not just for five years.

In terms of delivery, the experience in our own country and others, as well as much research, is clear: not-for-profit delivery of daycare is crucial to creating high-quality, learning-based programs. Opening up a new system of publicly funded early learning to commercial operators would be a mistake, as is illustrated by the market-based experience of Australia, where one rapidly growing company now controls and profits from more than 20 per cent of the country's child care centres. The company, ABC Learning, is now in court facing charges for leaving a 14-month-old boy asleep on his cot while the centre was closed for the night. The care and education of small children — like the health care of all Canadians — should not be subordinated to the profit motive.

Some raise concern that a national program will constitute a bias against stay-at-home parents. However, child care programs focused on learning are needed by all families, whether or not parents are in the workforce, at least from the time the child is about 3 years old. This is already the norm in most European countries. Moreover, an accessible national child care program could be complemented by enhancing supports for stay-at-home parents, such as decently paid family leave and family resource programs, which can be well integrated with the early learning and child care system.

Some balk at the cost of a national early learning and child care program. But surely its benefits far outweigh its cost. The program will constitute the foundation for lifelong learning. It will support the 70 per cent of Canadian mothers of small children who are in the workforce, most of whom are now paying for child care out-of-pocket. And it will help provide a fair start in life for disadvantaged children. Canadian economists Gordon Cleveland and Michael Krashinsky calculate that every public dollar spent today on early learning and child care saves two dollars in future spending.

Let's begin Canada's national child care program by doing what is best for our children. The federal, provincial and territorial ministers can do this next month by agreeing to:

- make adequate financial commitments to ensure the sustainability of the program over the long term — \$1 billion next year, ramping up to \$5 billion in year five, and commitments to roll out funds over the next decade to put the full program in place.
- develop a strong policy framework to ensure that these public funds are used to fullest advantage with maximum accountability.
- ensure that the expansion of the early learning and child care system is through not-for-profit services.

A national early learning and child care program is only a first step to creating a society that values and supports all children. We also need to put an end to the poverty, hunger and inadequate housing faced by far too many children.

But getting child care right from the start is one crucial first step for all of Canada's children.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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