

Child care report hailed ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

An international report that criticizes Canadian child care as more of a babysitting service than a place for learning is an important national wake-up call, child-development advocates say.

"This report will capture people's attention," said Margaret Norrie McCain, co-author of the Ontario government's 1999 "Early Years" report.

"It will certainly capture the attention of the corporate community," said McCain. When it's the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development talking about it, "then it gives weight to our message. I'm thrilled," she said.

The Paris-based OECD reviewed Canada's early-learning programs and found an uneven patchwork of services that are often of poor quality and inaccessible to people who need it the most.

Fixing that fragmented patchwork is going to require federal-provincial co-operation, said Martha Friendly of the University of Toronto's child-care resource and research unit.

"If there isn't a (jurisdictional) fight, it will probably mean the federal government didn't push for anything," said Friendly, one of three Canadians who wrote a background report for the OECD study.

McCain said the OECD report, released yesterday, should put political pressure on provincial and federal governments to replace the current fragmented and underfunded service with a truly national system of early learning for young children.

Social Development Minister Ken Dryden said meetings planned for next week with his provincial and territorial counterparts will be a key step in developing the shape of Canada's national system.

Neglecting child development is a pity because children are "very competent learners," said OECD project manager John Bennett.

"They can do a great deal and if they're given the right situation and the right support and the right professionals looking after them, children will learn to read and write quite quickly, they'll be curious about nature, about their environment, it means they can communicate well together," Bennett said.

The report notes that centres didn't always have the right materials for learning. "Plastic toys, tabletop games and worksheets are, in general, rather limited learning tools."

It also found outdoor play spaces seemed limited and inadequately designed to encourage development.

"Children need to move, to express themselves and to take part in an active, exploratory curriculum," the report says.

Dryden told reporters that Canada's system, details of which will be released in the next federal budget, has become a Canadian expectation much the way public education did 100 years ago and public health care did 40 years ago.

"What the OECD report said, and very clearly and effectively, is we've approached child care in the past as a service... Now what we need to do is move from that to something that is a system," Dryden said.

Canada lags far behind many countries when it comes to investment, particularly Sweden and Denmark, which spend five to seven times more on child care than Canada does, Bennett said.

The report found that child care in Canada is not easily accessible — accessibility is a quality the Liberals have promised for their national program. Less than 20 per cent of children aged 6 and under find a place in a regulated service, as opposed to 69 per cent in France, 78 per cent in Denmark and 60 per cent in the U.K., the report found.

With the exception of Quebec, whose \$7-a-day program is praised by the authors, Canadian parents pay on average just under 50 per cent of costs, compared to 15 per cent in Finland and 25 per cent across Europe.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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