

A call to action on child care ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

When it comes to public policy issues, Canada can be a very insular place. Defining ourselves to a large extent as "non-American North Americans," we have an inherent propensity to ignore the rest of the world.

That is why the kind of peer reviews carried out by the 30-nation Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development are so important. They give us a view of ourselves through a broader and more European-oriented prism - as they did yesterday in a report comparing Canada's child care system with those in 19 other countries.

In a scathing indictment of Canada's underfunded, fragmented system, the OECD says that, with the exception of Quebec, child care in Canada is focused largely on providing babysitting services to working parents to the exclusion of early childhood education.

The report points to major investments in preschoolers in other countries in response to growing evidence showing "the investment pays off handsomely in terms of better health for children, readiness for school, stronger education results and additional income for families."

In Canada, by contrast, OECD investigators for the most part found shabby, poorly lit day-care centres filled with plastic toys of doubtful educational value, where children were made to sit quietly by under-trained, poorly paid workers whose turnover rate is extremely high.

The report also suggests the quality of child care is a tangible measure of how much a country cares about its children. On that score, Canada falls short where 60 per cent of young children in the United Kingdom are in regulated care, and 78 per cent in Denmark, Canada has regulated day-care spaces for only 20 per cent of children under 6 whose parents both work. And of those limited spaces, a full 40 per cent are in Quebec.

Prime Minister Paul Martin deserves credit for his response to Canada's shameful record with his promise to invest an extra \$5 billion in child care and early child development over the next five years. But much more is needed if Canada is to catch up with progressive European nations.

In order to do better, Ottawa and the provinces must improve and expand our child care system. It also must ease the burden from parents who, except for Quebecers, are paying just under 50 per cent of current child-care costs, compared with roughly 25 per cent across Europe. The OECD suggests Ottawa and the provinces pick up 40 per cent of the cost, leaving parents to pay the remaining 20 per cent.

Ken Dryden, the federal Minister for Social Development, will discuss the OECD report next week with his provincial counterparts when they meet in Ottawa. He says the next federal budget, expected in February, may give provinces more money for child care, but with strings attached.

Clearly, the current \$1 billion a year cannot meet all the demands. But to be fair, Martin never said that it could. All he promised was to put the foundations in place for a truly national system of early learning and child care, based on quality, universality, accessibility and development.

That kind of foundation will be important, but only if a strong and lasting program is ultimately built on groundwork Martin has now laid out.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/04/10/call-action-child-care> [2] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/international-organizations>