

Parents, starting from zero, could use a public boost [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Globe and Mail's recent series, *Starting from Zero*, confirmed many home truths, but it also pulled together the research findings of Canada's top experts in child development. These experts teach us again that children need three conditions to thrive: adequate family income, good parenting, and supportive communities. As Canadian Policy Research Networks reported in its 1999 study, *The Best Policy Mix for Canada's Young Children*, each is necessary, but none is sufficient.

Income is important because poverty is the absence of many things, including health, time and relaxation. However, scientific data confirm that developmental difficulties are not confined to low-income families, lone-parent families, or any other category (because most Canadian children live in "middle" income families, most of those with developmental delays aren't poor).

The challenge for parents is how best to balance work and family life. Numerous studies of income patterns in Canada show that two earners are needed for families to keep their heads above water. Two-thirds of mothers with children under six are employed, as are three out of four women heading lone-parent families. Happily, there's little evidence that young children suffer when both parents (or the one with whom they live) are employed. Working parents need not fear they are depriving their children, or that they must cram precious quality time full of formal learning with flash cards. School readiness and later school success depend more on social and language skills than on knowing the alphabet.

And there are clear advantages, beyond income, to having parents who are happily employed. The science teaches that parenting is more effective when parents are emotionally healthy and part of a social network, whether of friendship, kinship - or work.

But parents of preschool children can only go to work with their minds at ease when they know that their children are lovingly cared for in developmentally appropriate environments. Pioneering work on "the early years" by the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research repeatedly makes the case that all children benefit from a stimulating, developmentally appropriate learning environment. Yet few parents are lucky enough to find such a space or to be able to afford its cost.

Canadian parents must fend for themselves far more than those in many countries. The Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development reports: "The trend . . . is toward full coverage of the 3- to 6-year-old age group, aiming to give all children at least two years of free publicly-funded provision before beginning compulsory schooling." Except for Quebec, Canada has resisted this trend. Even the United States spends 0.36 per cent of GDP on preschool education; Canada spends just 0.23 per cent.

Why don't we provide parents with sufficient community-anchored early-childhood-education centres with trained educators who know their children well? They can help parents sort through everything from commercials about educational toys to the normal level of aggression in a two-year-old boy. Why don't we relieve the tension between home and work by providing affordable access to the story times and sandbox play that any good child-care program provides? Why do we leave parents alone to worry about whether their child is developing normally? A system of affordable, accessible early-childhood education in Canada would provide such supports to all parents. Parents are working hard for all of our futures, and deserve no less.

- reprinted from The Globe and Mail

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