

Pre-school crucial time [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

By the time children get to Grade 1, it may be too late to help those who have already fallen behind, says a new study by a renowned child development expert.

The latest research by Toronto-based Dr. Fraser Mustard and his Founders' Network compares children's readiness for kindergarten and standardized test results in Grades 3 and 6, and concludes that children who lag behind early on will generally remain so years later.

He says the study helps explain why overall results on standardized tests in reading, writing and math have stalled, despite millions poured into remedial programs. That investment should be made earlier, he argues, in programs aimed at early childhood development.

While socio-economic status appears to play some role in a child's readiness for school, many students from needy neighbourhoods do exceptionally well, while many from wealthy areas do very poorly.

Mustard argues that "it's more than just economics" — what really counts is quality parenting, good interaction and reading to children.

The study is the latest in a series that have concluded that investment in the early years pays off over time, not only in terms of a country's economic and intellectual prosperity, but also in terms of improved physical health and emotional well-being among its citizens.

Armed with the results of these studies, Mustard and volunteers interested in children's issues want to set up centres across the province that would help parents learn how and what to read to youngsters, and get advice on parenting. They would also provide organized activities and educational play for children, which parents can then use at home. Some could provide links to community agencies to help parents struggling with unemployment or immigration issues.

The group, called the Council on Early Childhood Development, is calling for participation from community groups, public health authorities, private companies, municipal governments and school boards. Mustard, who has long advocated a system of centres supported by government, communities and the private sector, also hopes federal and provincial governments will sign on.

"If society doesn't invest in early childhood development for families with young children, we risk damaging the next generation," Mustard said, estimating the start-up costs to be \$3.2 billion in Ontario.

Martha Friendly, of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit at the University of Toronto, said she understands why politicians and voters are preoccupied with what they see as more fundamental issues.

"We're talking about issues of whether people have electricity and are they going to die from tainted water and meat. Who would have ever thought the public education system would be in such decline?"

She said Canadians are conditioned to think of child care and early childhood education as a personal responsibility rather than a right of all children, as it is in many European countries, where it's expected children will go to school at 3 whether or not parents work outside the home.

David Dodge, governor of the Bank of Canada, earlier this year also agreed that investment in "human capital," especially in pre-school years, is essential.

And in a report last week, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development said "investment in early childhood education is of key importance to build a strong foundation for lifelong learning and to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities later in school."

During the election campaign, the Liberals promised a "Best Start Plan" making schools community hubs, with child-care and parenting programs.

- reprinted from Toronto Star

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