

# Baby 'gifts' left in limbo [CA-ON]<sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

About 260,000 baby literacy kits, produced by the Ontario government for distribution to every new mother over the next two years, have been languishing in a warehouse for months.

And about \$830,000 worth of canvas tote bags that were to accompany the kits have been destroyed under provincial orders.

The kits, valued at \$8 each, consist of a book by Governor-General-Award-winning children's author Barbara Reid; a children's music tape or CD; a video showing new parents how to nurture a love of reading in their children; a plastic passport to store childhood immunization cards and other important baby information; an Ontario Early Years Centres fridge magnet; and brochures about early childhood development.

When the kits were sent to child development experts for review last fall, they came with a specially designed canvas tote bag bearing the provincial Early Years logo. But the prototype bag, authorized under former social services minister John Baird, was subsequently dropped from the package by current Community, Family and Children's Minister Brenda Elliott.

A memo to the government from the Toronto advertising agency handling the kits, obtained by the Star, reveals that the fate of the bags - already ordered and pre-cut at a factory in China - was the subject of intense debate last winter.

"Please be advised that we are at the absolute latest point possible for a final decision as to whether or not you want to destroy the canvas bags," it says. The memo from Howard Thomas, president of Vickers and Benson Companies Inc., and dated Dec. 20, 2002, continues: "We have advised against this, as the potential for being seen as wasteful spending is high and the PR fallout could be costly." An earlier message from Vickers and Benson notes that the ministry paid \$831,970 for the bags and that as of last September, \$629,997 had been spent.

A spokesperson for the community, family and children's ministry confirmed the contract for the bags was cancelled.

"We decided the totes were not a high priority in an early years package ... and we stopped production of the bags before they were completed," Anne Machowski said yesterday. Financial information about the cancelled contract was not available yesterday, she added.

NDP MPP Shelley Martel said the bag mix-up is typical of the provincial Tory government's treatment of children and families.

"Here's another case of this government putting politics before kids," Martel (Nickel Belt) said yesterday.

"I think this has everything to do with election timing and putting together propaganda to try and profile this minister and her ministry and the government, pretending they're doing something for kids."

Martel noted that the money for the bags could have provided a year of treatment for 16 autistic children, or a year of licensed child care for 100 toddlers, or a year's operating grant for 25 family resource centres.

"But here you have a government literally throwing money away that could have been used to buy services for children and families," she said.

-Reprinted from The Toronto Star

**Region:** Ontario<sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** funding<sup>[3]</sup>

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