

# Our future rides on this budget [CA] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

Odds are, if you have children, you've discovered one of Canada's darkest secrets: In one of the world's richest countries, it's almost impossible to find a regulated child-care space. This is unacceptable.

In the 21st century, the single most important investment we can make to improve the quality of life is to invest in people. With a federal budget due this week, the priorities of governments must reflect that reality.

Canada's Innovation Strategy acknowledges that one of our greatest assets is our human resources. The success of our current work force depends on well-educated, high-achieving people and the conditions that support their work. This means addressing both the higher education and family needs of employees.

The innovation agenda also takes into account the work force of the future: our children. Their development and learning starts early. As the influential Early Years Study by Fraser Mustard and Margaret McCain states, "It is clear that the early years from conception to age 6 have the most important influence of any time in the life cycle on brain development and subsequent learning, behaviour and health." Thus Canada's future success in generating economic growth, and sustaining a healthy population, depends on the quality of care and education our children receive early in life.

Some Western nations have long understood the importance of early learning and child care. Others, such as the United Kingdom, have realized their deficiencies and are correcting them. The Blair government recently promised a preschool space for every three- and four-year-old by October, 2004.

Even some U.S. states, including Georgia, Connecticut, New York, Michigan, California and Oklahoma, are establishing universal preschool programs for three- and four-year-olds. Among OECD countries, Canada is a laggard. In France, Belgium, Italy and Iceland, nearly all three-year-olds participate in preschool programs; in Germany, the Czech Republic and U.K., about 50 per cent participate. Only about 12 per cent of children in Canada have access to regulated child care.

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