

# Affordable day care can ease child poverty <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

When you make a promise to children, they expect you to keep it.

I hadn't been a mother for long, but the importance to a child of keeping a promise was a concept I'd already learned the hard way in 1989, when Parliament first made a commitment to eradicate child poverty in this country. I remember thinking even then that the pledge was either very brave or very foolish.

Fast-forward 14 years, and it appears the promise may have been a little of both. Today, more than one million Canadian children live below the poverty line. If there is positive news to be found, it's that the number of children living in poverty has dropped in each of the past five years. Still, a stunning one in six children in this country is poor. And despite the many myths about poverty, a significant number of those children have parents who work but whose income barely covers the basics.

That's why the suggestion that there will be more help in next month's federal budget to kick-start a national day-care plan, as well as more financial help for low-income families, is good news.

As the Star reported last week, sources in Ottawa indicate there may be not only additional funding for the National Child Benefit program, which provides monthly financial help to low-income families, but also funding to move along the federal-provincial talks aimed at establishing a joint system of day care.

Last year, I sat on a committee at my children's school that established in-house day care. At our first meeting, we sat around a table and traded war stories of how we had resolved our child-care issues. One of the things we agreed on was just how stressful it can be to ensure your children are well cared for when you go off to work. We laughed ruefully about the juggling act that occurs when a sitter cancels and grandparents have to be called in to pinch-hit, or a child comes down with the flu and you end up working from home.

It's noteworthy that everyone on the committee already had some sort of care in place. But then we all came from middle-class, two-income families in comfortable neighbourhoods.

The driving forces behind establishing child care in our school were convenience and economy rather than an urgent need to find affordable day care to be able to get a job and improve our children's quality of life.

It was an eye-opening experience, because when I looked around the table and realized how hard it was for the group of us, with all our advantages, to arrange child care, it made me wonder just how it must be for other families to work things out.

And while we moaned about the high cost of child care, we were all able somehow to pay it.

What came through loud and clear was that while child care could complicate our lives, we still had the luxury of choice. We all had cars to drive our children to relatives if necessary, the money to pay an emergency sitter if needed, the ability to work out all the contingencies.

Yet, as Laurel Rothman, national co-ordinator of Campaign 2000, a coalition monitoring the federal government's resolution to eliminate child poverty, points out, many families have no choice.

Some parents either cannot afford care, split shifts to share caring for the children, or opt for unregulated care. At the very least, that means a poor family's quality of life suffers even more. At worst, it means taking risks with a child's safety to put bread on the table.

Campaign 2000 also notes that, in Ontario alone, more than 16,000 children are waiting for child-care subsidies.

When I look back on the years since the pledge to eliminate child poverty was first made, my family has expanded, we've moved to a bigger

house, we've made arrangements to save for university, we've taken family vacations and we've been able to give our children lots of enrichment.

Some of that has come because I've been able to ensure my children are looked after so I can go to work. All families should have a shot at attaining the same sorts of goals. Affordable child care is one way to help break the back of poverty in this country.

And, as any child will tell you, a promise is a promise.

-Reprinted from the Toronto Star

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