

Children need a place to grow [CA-ON]^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

There is a three-letter code that parents across Ontario would love to jettison when Ernie Eves takes over as premier this week.

A.B.C. usually uttered in a tone of despair means anything but child care.

For seven years, it has been the hallmark of social policy under the provincial Conservatives. They commissioned studies on children's early years, offered prenatal counselling, set up parenting centres, launched a healthy babies program and improved services for youngsters with a variety of disorders. The one thing they did not do adamantly would not do was invest in child care.

The Tories advised parents to leave their children with relatives or find babysitters. They suggested that couples rearrange their work schedules, sacrifice one income or make arrangements with a stay-at-home neighbour. With all of these alternatives, there was no need for more institutionalized child care.

This assumption flew in the face of reality, especially in large urban centres, where many parents didn't know their neighbours and had no relatives nearby. They couldn't raise a family on one income. And they didn't have the flexibility to set their own working hours.

In Toronto, more than 17,000 children are now on the waiting list for subsidized child care. Most will never get a spot.

Eves at least acknowledges that there is a problem. He has not made specific policy commitments, but he has promised to find ways to help working parents.

This spring's provincial budget will be the acid test. But Eves needn't wait until then to signal a change in direction. He could start right away, without spending a nickel.

First, he could announce that Queen's Park is prepared to work with Ottawa on its national children's agenda.

The federal government transfers \$4.5 billion a year to the provinces under an early childhood development deal signed 19 months ago. One of the stated goals of the program is to bolster child care.

But Ontario has insisted on setting its own rules. Last year, it scattered its \$114 million federal allotment across 25 different initiatives, ranging from services for autistic children to addiction treatment programs for pregnant women. Worthy as these measures were, they did nothing to alleviate the desperate shortage of child care in the province.

This coming year, Ontario will receive \$154 million from the fund. Eves could win a lot of good will by pledging that a significant share of the federal money will be used to support child care.

A second step that would cost nothing, but send an important message, would be to hand the new education minister responsibility for early learning.

As long as preschool programs are under the umbrella of the social services department, they will be treated as a form of welfare or family assistance. By shifting them into the education ministry, Eves could indicate that he considers the first five years in a child's life crucial. At the same time, he could transform child care from glorified babysitting to the first tier of the school system.

Typically, the three most senior cabinet portfolios at Queen's Park are finance, health and education. The mere act of putting early childhood development in the education portfolio would upgrade its status.

A third gesture of good faith would be to put to rest rumours that the government intends to slash support for child care by \$200 million.

Late last year, a report drawn up by officials at the social services department was leaked to the press. It outlined ways to reduce spending on regulated child care from \$470 million a year to \$270 million a year.

Social Services Minister John Baird dismissed the document as a preliminary draft that was never seriously considered. But he pointedly refused to rule out cutbacks in child care in the next provincial budget.

Eves could end months of worried speculation by stating explicitly that child-care spending which he chopped by 15 per cent when he was finance minister is now secure.

None of these moves would be easy. There are still many provincial Tories who believe that a woman's place is in the home, whether her family can live on one income or not. There are MPPs from small-town and rural constituencies who see no need for child care where they live. There are fiscal conservatives who regard child care as a luxury that Ontario can't afford. And there is great pressure to find savings in

order to balance the budget and deliver the tax cuts that Eves has promised.

But other provinces, with fewer economic advantages than Ontario, are investing in child care. Medical researchers have proven that a child's personality and life skills are largely determined before he or she starts kindergarten. And employers are beginning to see child care as one of the keys to a committed, highly motivated workforce.

The A.B.C. approach might work for a province that can afford to waste talent and project a backward-looking image.

Surely that is not the Ontario that Eves aspires to lead.

reprinted from the Toronto Star.

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