

# We're cheating our kids [CA] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

It had nothing to do with Fraser Mustard, though the Ontario government plastered his name all over the press release as if the renowned social scientist were a designer brand. There he was, invoked not once but four times, like a dose of credibility in an announcement of how Ontario plans to use a wad of federal cash earmarked for children. The trouble is, the plans all but ignore the recommendations of Dr. Mustard's celebrated report, The Early Years Study, which the province itself commissioned.

Ontario's announcement was a sober reminder that, for all the political rhetoric in Canada about an agenda for children, for all the millions of dollars invested in research and pilot projects probing the precious first few years of life, most children are standing on the same spot they were a decade ago, before the hand-wringing began. In an era when ordinary Canadians are conversant in neurological research about the hard-wiring of children's brains, Canada is still wrestling with the advent of the working mother.

For the past two decades, women with preschool-age children have flocked into the work force. It's a social change to rival the dawning of the Internet. Twenty-five years ago, the working mother was the exception; today, two of every three Canadian mothers with children under six hold down jobs.

But the spaces in licenced child-care centres are nowhere close to matching the need. With room enough in regulated child care and nursery schools for about 13 per cent of Canadian preschoolers, many parents are placing their children for most of their waking hours in unlicenced and often illegal care that -- top-notch though some grandmothers and nannies may be -- follows no standards around cleanliness and discipline, never mind curriculum for tilling fertile minds.

This, at a time when "the early years" are on the lips of every politician. This, two years after Dr. Mustard and his colleague, former New Brunswick lieutenant-governor Margaret McCain, released their report calling for early child development and parenting centres for all.

In Ontario, provincial funding for child care has actually dropped and a growing shortage of spaces has left some parents placing their names on waiting lists before their babies are even born. Except for Quebec, where the province has started funding \$5-a-day child-care costs for everyone, the story across Canada is the same.

Just last year, a massive study of the country's child-care system financed by Human Resources Development Canada found that even most regulated centres, teetering on the brink of financial ruin with woefully underpaid staff, fall short of providing the calibre of care that research tells us we need. Across Canada, child-care workers collect an average wage equal to paycheques of parking-lot attendants -- sending the inescapable message that the country cherishes its cars as dearly as its children.

So when last September Ottawa announced it was handing the provinces \$2.2-billion over the next five years for children's services, it seemed Canada was finally falling in line with most of the world's other rich nations and pouring money into the early years.

The deal with the provinces was called the Early Childhood Development Initiative, and it was the long-awaited finale to the children's agenda, a vague, warm-sounding concept that was repeated in successive federal budgets and throne speeches without even the bureaucrats in Ottawa understanding what it meant.

By its rules, the provinces could spend the money as they saw fit under four broad categories linked to children: pre- and post-natal care; parenting; early childhood development and care, and community supports.

Now the press releases are spitting out of the fax machines with provinces announcing their plans for their lumps of federal cash. And after all the fuss, only a handful of provinces are investing the money into anything remotely connected to early childhood education and care.

Across the country, the federal money is being scattered among so many disparate, if worthy, causes that it will ultimately make little difference.

Saskatchewan will pour its \$10-million share into preventing the fetal alcohol syndrome rife in remote native reserves. In Alberta, millions of dollars will be invested to battle the sweep of children into prostitution. Who could argue against children being spared the scourge of brain damage in the womb or pimps?

But perhaps the question should be, why are provinces being forced to choose between pressing issues like children with FAS and fostering a system of early childhood education for all children? After all, this year Quebec will spend three-quarters the money on its generous policies for child care, parental leave, and family allowances that Ottawa has pledged for the entire country over five years.

Even more to the point, why is Canada continuing to lavish untold millions of dollars measuring children's readiness to learn in kindergarten and testing the academic proficiency of eight-year-olds if policy makers ignore the findings?

Just last week, a federally funded study of kindergarten pupils in the North end of Toronto released results showing that nearly a third of the children scored poorly in at least two of the five categories that measure learning readiness. So what is Ontario, the province where these children live, prepared to do about it?

Of the province's \$114-million share of the federal money, not a penny will go to child care, junior kindergarten, nursery school, or parenting centres -- the infrastructure already in place for exciting the minds and senses of children in the first few years of their lives.

Instead, \$15.4-million will be stashed in a jar called the Early Years Challenge Fund that can be tapped for preschool programs so long as a corporate sponsor willing to provide matching funds is found -- and only if the money is not to be used for child-care spaces or workers' wages. Other bits and pieces will go to righteous causes, such as prenatal HIV testing, breast-feeding education, nurse practitioners in remote rural areas, pamphlets and posters urging pregnant women to consume folic acid.

But more than a quarter of it will fund Early Years Centres -- information kiosks where "parents can go to find the answers to questions they have about their child" that are flimsy knock-offs of the early child development and parenting centres pushed by Dr. Mustard to provide the nuts-and-bolts child-care and parent drop-ins that modern families actually need.

Were he dead, Fraser Mustard would be turning in his grave. But alive and garrulous as ever, he remains diplomatic. "One of the difficult issues for governments," he says, "is coping with the key recommendation in the Early Years report, that early child development and parenting centres have to include non-parental care. That's another term for daycare, and the government is stumbling on that."

-Reprinted from The Globe and Mail

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