

Preschool unavailable to many: report [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Canada lacks a system of well-designed, integrated and adequately funded early childhood education and care services to meet the needs of a majority of families and children, according to a report released Tuesday.

The report by the Toronto-based Childhood Resource and Research Unit said organized education and care services across the country are in short supply or, like public kindergarten, not sensitive to the labour-force needs of parents and are available for only a minority of pre-school-aged children.

The report also said regulated child-care services are often too costly for ordinary families or not of sufficient quality to be considered "developmental."

The research and education group found that labour-force participation by mothers continues to grow, with 77 per cent of women with children aged three to five now working.

At the same time, the number of spaces in regulated child care in 2008 could accommodate just 20.3 per cent of children up to five years old, an increase of one per cent from 2006.

During that period, for-profit child-care services saw sharp growth and accounted for 25 per cent of spaces last year, up from 21 per cent in 2006.

"Although participation in the paid labour force has become the norm for mothers of young children, and the evidence about the benefits of quality early childhood programs for young children has accumulated, the situation has failed to progress significantly," the research group said in the eighth of its twice-yearly reports..

It found growth in child-care spaces has slowed, with 29,791 being added in 2008, compared with 32,668 in 2005 and 50,831 in 2003.

Spending is also growing at a slower rate, with provincial and territorial child-care budgets increasing by just \$147.3 million between 2006 and 2008. That's a sharp drop from a few years earlier, when budgets rose by \$538.3 million from 2004 to 2006 and by \$512.1 million from 2002 to 2004.

The research group noted that a 2008 study by UNICEF - which measured the quality, access, financing and policy of early childhood education and care - ranked Canada at the bottom of 25 developed countries, tied with Ireland.

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