

Five years on, children still wait for quality care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Mary Kim will celebrate her fifth birthday on Sunday at Chuck E. Cheese, her favourite restaurant.

But her mother, Sun Hee Paik, will think back to the frigid February morning in 2006 when Mary was born on the southbound platform of Toronto's Wellesley subway station.

"It was very scary," Paik says of the headline-grabbing event during the busy morning rush hour.

Coincidentally in Ottawa that day, many harried parents were grieving an untimely death.

In his first policy announcement as prime minister, Stephen Harper took an axe to Canada's year-old, \$5-billion national child-care plan -- a plan aimed at helping Mary and tens of thousands of young children attend affordable daycare while their mothers worked.

"It is a day that will live in infamy," says child-care expert Martha Friendly of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, which has been tracking Canada's lack of progress for decades.

On Thursday in the Commons, Harper's human resources minister, Diane Finley, rubbed salt in the wound when she said reviving the national child-care program would force parents "to have other people raise their children."

The remark, which drew outrage in Ottawa and across the country, has propelled the issue back onto the political agenda with the Liberals and NDP vowing to make child care an issue in the next federal election.

Without a national child-care plan, Canada seems doomed to remain a child-care laggard on the international stage.

A 2008 study by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) ranked Canada dead last with Ireland in early learning and child-care services among 25 developed countries.

Friendly's data shows fewer than 20 per cent of Canadian children under age 6 have access to government-regulated care. Meanwhile, more than 70 per cent of mothers of young children are in the paid labour force -- one of the highest workforce participation rates for mothers in the developed world.

This "child-care gap" shows how heavily families rely on informal child-care arrangements, she says.

Many of these arrangements include extended family members and trusted neighbours, and serve children and families well.

But numerous studies have shown that unregulated, home-based child-care businesses often fail to meet children's developmental needs. Sometimes the care can be harmful.

This fact was driven home last month when 14-month-old Duy-An Nguyen died in an unlicensed Mississauga home daycare. The woman who operated the business has been charged with second-degree murder.

Child-care advocates say the tragedy highlights the lack of real options for working families with young children. And they lay the blame squarely at Ottawa's feet.

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Few would seriously argue that finding a caregiver on the Internet or a grocery store bulletin board is an acceptable "choice" for parents who must work, especially if they are poor or newcomers to Canada, says Friendly.

According to Friendly's most recent survey of Canadian child care in 2008, there are just 867,000 government-regulated child-care spots, barely enough for one in five kids under age 13.

"Mothers' labour force participation is one of the most significant social shifts of the past four decades, but the child-care situation has not changed fundamentally since the 1980s," she says.

The city of Toronto oversees about 56,600 spaces in licensed centres and home daycares. But there are just 24,000 subsidies and more than 17,000 children are on the waiting list.

Even for families that can afford the \$10,000 to \$15,000 yearly cost of licensed care, the lack of spaces means parents have to put their names on daycare waiting lists before their children are born.

Building a system of high-quality early-childhood care and education creates jobs and allows parents to work and pay taxes, the UNICEF report said.

Canada's poor showing represents a lost opportunity for economic growth at a time of economic uncertainty, said the report by UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy.

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The Harper government makes no apologies for its child-care policies.

Ottawa is providing "choice in child care" by sending \$100 monthly cheques to parents for every child under age 6.

"Our Conservative government believes that it is up to Canadian parents... how they raise their own children, not the government," said Finley's spokesman Ryan Sparrow in an email to the Star.

Some 1.5 million families receive the Universal Child Care Benefit on behalf of about 2 million children, Sparrow said. About \$2.6 billion will be spent this year.

Ottawa also spends about \$760 million through the Child Care Expense Deduction, which offsets child-care expenses for parents.

In addition, Ottawa transfers \$1.2 billion annually to the provinces to spend on child care, Sparrow said. But it is up to provinces to determine how best to spend that money, he noted.

Under the previous Liberal government's five-year child-care plan, \$1 billion more would have been transferred to the provinces annually to build a system of high quality, affordable and accessible care. The chance to create almost 240,000 more government-funded spaces was lost when Harper derailed the plan, estimates the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada.

The \$12 billion Harper has spent sending child-care cheques to parents since 2006 could have provided high quality child care for another 500,000 children by now, advocates say.

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Neither the Liberals nor the NDP would scrap the \$100 cheques.

But both parties would return to building a national child-care system.

NDP child-care critic Olivia Chow says the cornerstone of her party's plan would be legislation to ensure federal money earmarked for child care goes toward high quality, affordable, accessible and non-profit care.

Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff says "a national system of early learning and child care for every child that needs it" is one of his top three or four priorities.

If elected, he would work with the provinces and child-care experts and move quickly to make up for lost time.

"Everywhere I go I see queues, people waiting; it's an urgent demand of Canadian families," he said in an interview. "It will be a commitment in the first Liberal budget."

Ignatieff would not indicate how much the Liberals would invest, but said it would be "substantial" and "fully costed" in the party's platform when an election is called.

Ignatieff's enthusiasm for child care is music to Leigh Petralito's ears.

"To keep a roof over your head in this city both parents need to work," says the York Catholic school teacher. "They need people and places they trust to look after the children."

The Richmond Hill mother has given birth to three children under the Harper regime, including Luca who was born the day the prime minister pulled the plug on the national plan.

Petralito's mother-in-law cared for Luca after her maternity leave. But when daughter Ella was born in June 2007, she knew two babies would be too much for a grandmother to manage.

Child care was out of the question because of the cost, she says. And few centres in Richmond Hill offered care for babies anyway.

The family's only real option was a nanny, a decision that became even more inevitable when baby Madeline was born in January last year, Petralito says.

Once families have more than one child, nannies are definitely less expensive, she says. But if there was a licensed child-care program close by that was affordable, that is what Petralito would prefer.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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