

The child-care challenge: Parents deserve a real choice ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

Canada's Conservative government has happily handed out nearly \$12 billion in monthly cheques to parents with children under 6. Yet, five years after Prime Minister Stephen Harper replaced a promising national child-care program with these \$100 cheques, there is no evidence they have created real child-care options for families.

It may be called the universal child-care benefit but, once taxes are deducted, the cheques are barely enough to cover a babysitter for a night out. They don't give parents the "choice" to stay home with their children or to pay for quality child care while they work.

Indeed, Canada is so bad at providing child-care services that we tied for last in a United Nations study of 25 developed countries. The parents of 14-month old Duy-An Nguyen, who died in an unregulated home daycare in January, know well the lack of affordable safe care.

Harper has tried it his way. It doesn't work. Parents deserve better.

The problem with Harper's choice-for-parents regime is starkly laid out by the Star's Laurie Monsebraaten in the Child-Care Challenge series, which began on Saturday.

Leigh Petralito's first child, Luca, was born on the very day Harper killed Canada's national child-care plan. According to his government, child care is all about parental choice and parents "choose the option that best suits their family's needs." But how can Petralito choose what she wants -- affordable, regulated child care -- when there is none near her Richmond Hill home?

On Thursday, Human Resources Minister Diane Finley offered a full helping of Conservative disdain for reviving a national child-care plan, arguing that parents would be "forced to have other people raise their children." How absurd.

No one wants a one-size-fits-all model in which children are rounded up into daycares every morning. But the fact that not everyone wants or needs it is no reason to deny it to those who do. The 1950s are over. Stay-at-home moms are an increasing rarity. And, despite what Finley may think, mothers (or fathers) don't give up being parents by putting their kids in child care. It just means they're going to work --

something they have a right to do and our economy needs.

The Conservatives are right about one thing: choice in child care is important. But it must include affordable, regulated child care. For far too many parents, that will never be an option without a national plan.

Right now, there is no choice for those in neighbourhoods where spaces are so few and far between that parents put their names on waiting lists before their children are born. There is no choice for low-income families who could benefit the most from regulated child care and yet have no hope of affording it.

So what to do? A good start would be to find a better use for the \$100 cheques -- which cost taxpayers \$2.6 billion a year.

Quebec, which has the most developed child-care system in the country, spends an estimated \$5,000 for each regulated space. By that accounting, the \$2.6 billion could fund affordable child care for 520,000 children. What a help that would be to the some 1.3 million young children whose mothers are in the paid workforce.

Advocates and critics of regulated care will argue that a fully-funded program for every family who wants it will take much more than that. True. But, at a time of government deficits, when we can't do everything, Ottawa should at least make sure it is getting the best public value for the dollars it spends.

Canada is one of only a handful of developed nations without a national child-care plan. The coming federal election campaign is the time to debate how to fill that void.

Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff says his party would deliver "a national investment in learning" that starts with "early learning and child care for every child that needs it."

That is the policy that families and our economy need. But Ignatieff has provided no details about what he proposes. He should.

The NDP's child-care critic, Olivia Chow, has introduced a private member's bill that would commit federal funding to high quality, universally accessible and affordable child care.

Both would be big advances over what we have now. The problem, though, is that neither party sees Harper's \$100 cheques as the way to finance their child-care plans. If they are committed to continuing spending that money, they should be prepared to tell Canadians just where they will find the additional dollars to fund the national child-care program Canada needs.

The Conservatives have shown nothing but disdain for child care and the transformative effect it can have on families and our economy.

The opposition parties can at least see there is a better way. They must present it compellingly to Canadians.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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