

Dust-up over daycare ^[1]

Editorial

Author: National Post

Source: National Post

Format: Article

Publication Date: 5 Feb 2011

EXCERPTS

As election fever mounts, an issue affecting millions of Canadian families is back on the radar: child care. This week, the Liberal party promised to revive its plan for national state-funded daycare. The Conservatives, meanwhile, support cash transfers to parents that give them choice in child care. In the words of Federal Human Resources Minister Diane Finley: "It's the Liberals who wanted to ensure that parents are forced to have other people raise their children. [The Conservatives] do not believe in that."

These remarks elicited an opposition tantrum. "[The Minister] insulted all teachers, all early childhood educators, child-care workers, organizers of parents' resource centres and even babysitters. She is trying to inflict guilt on all working parents -- a truly shameful, divisive behaviour," said NDP MP Olivia Chow. Liberal MP Bob Rae chimed in: "For decades we've realized that women are working, men are working and the second thing we've realized is that there's a great benefit to children from working and playing with others and learning with others. The notion somehow that child care is some form of alien abduction is just completely preposterous."

Is daycare really as good as home care, especially for very young children? That depends who you ask. Daycare workers, early childhood educators and their unions will say yes. They claim children benefit from "socialization" with their peers and "early learning" at the hands of specialists. Economists will argue that a mother's income raises a family's standard of living, which will ultimately benefit the children (and a nation's GDP), in some cases by lifting the family above the poverty line.

Crack open any child-care text, however, and it becomes questionable how much value children get out of being farmed out to strangers at a tender age. When they are younger than one year old, infants form strong bonds with their caregivers; in a daycare situation, employees come and go, meaning a lot of stressful transitions for a child. At 18 months, most children still "parallel play"; that is to say, they don't play with other kids, just beside them. And since most children can't even speak well until closer to the two-year mark, it's not like they will be having meaningful conversations in the sandbox until well past their second birthday.

A survey of 450 infant mental health workers in 56 countries, members of the World Association for Infant Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines, rated child-care arrangements for children under the age of three-and-a-half. Ninety-five percent of respondents affirmed that the preferred form of care until the age of one year was by the child's mother, 85% advocated maternal care until a child turned 18 months and 55% until the child was 30 months old. Only in the case of children older than three did a clear majority -- 62% -- consider daycare better than home care.

And what do parents want? In a study conducted in 2010, the Vanier Institute for the Family found that 90% of parents in two-parent families surveyed thought the best thing for their kids is for one parent to stay home. Institutional daycare ranked 5th in terms of preferred child care options, behind a parent, a grandparent, another relative or a home daycare.

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Instead of finding ways to push more babies out of the nest, politicians should look at ways to support all parents' choices -- which, as the Conservatives recognize, clearly include staying home. Ms. Finley's remarks may ruffle some politically correct feathers, but her party is on the right track.

- reprinted from the National Post

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