

# Debate: Canada needs a national child-care policy <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

As Canada gears up for a possible federal election, child care has roared back onto the public agenda. Tuning into the media on child care last week was a strangely déjà-vu experience. Is this 2011 or are we back in the run-up to the 2006 federal election? The public discourse on childcare has not changed in the past five years; but, regrettably, while this sterile and shopworn debate is playing out in the media and Parliament, another generation of families and children are the losers.

A recent National Post editorial weighed in on the subject, recycling familiar phrases: "institutionalized daycare," "pushing babies out of the nest," "farming children out to strangers at a tender age," and "forcing" parents to use "a massive coast-to-coast daycare program." In this day and age, these represent contrarian views that are out-of-touch with realities faced by families across Canada on a daily basis and inconsistent with the abundant research on children and families.

The idea of a national childcare program has been around since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women put it on the political agenda in 1970. Arguing that reliable child care is fundamental to women's equality in employment, the Commission recommended that "the federal government immediately take steps to enter into agreements with provinces leading to adoption of a national Daycare Act."

Most mothers now work outside the home - the first good reason Canada needs a national childcare program. Since the Royal Commission's report, mothers' labour-force participation has more than doubled. Young mothers work to contribute to family income, to keep their families out of poverty and to pursue careers - just like young fathers. As the Vanier Institute of the Family notes: "Most women and men expect to have jobs and careers. [Given] the high cost of living, most families require two earners to achieve an average standard of living."

Knowledge about young children acquired over the last two decades provides the second - at least as compelling - good reason Canada needs a national child-care program. We know that young children can - and do - thrive in enriching environments outside their homes, with other adults as well as their parents, and through interacting with other children, even at an early age.

In the last 20 years, extensive research has shown that good early childhood services play a valuable role in early childhood. It is exceedingly clear that quality matters. An expert American panel studying developmental science concluded: "The quality of child care children receive is linked to virtually every measure of development that has been studied."

Other things, such as families' resources or vulnerability also make a difference. So does the child's age - which is what motivates those who advocate for child care to support well-paid, year-long flexible parental leave as complementary to child care. Overall, the research solidly supports the benefits of high-quality early childhood education and child care for young children, whether mothers are sole-support, low- or middle-income, in the labour force or at-home, whether children are in early childhood programs for part or all of the day. New studies regularly appear that corroborate these ideas.

A third good reason why Canada should have a national child care program is that early childhood systems are shown to be good for society overall in several ways, including providing hefty economic stimulus benefits, as recent Canadian research shows. Inclusive early childhood programs can also offer "a welcome for every child" - newcomer, special needs, advantaged and disadvantaged - in the best Canadian tradition. And universal child care as one part of a strategy to fight poverty is a given.

What does "national child care" mean? Not a "massive coast-to-coast program" but provincially-designed early-childhood systems and locally-managed programs supported by an overarching national policy framework analogous to Medicare. Not "farming children out to strangers at a tender age" but strengthening and extending maternity, parental, and fathers' leave and ensuring more family time. Not "forced" attendance but offering families with diverse needs some good options amongst which to choose.

A national child-care program will have clear goals, objectives, targets and timetables - and ongoing evaluation - participation by three levels of government and the community, a well-planned approach and adequate public spending. However, without the financial and policy participation of the federal government - which represents all Canadians - early childhood education and care will continue to be inadequate, fragmented, inequitable, and erratic, even if some provinces are trying to modernize their programs.

Good child care so parents can work, study and participate in their communities while children thrive is in the best interests of all Canadians - as are public education, publicly-funded universities and publicly-funded health care. A thoughtful national child-care program can become a real social program like those at which Canada used to excel.

-reprinted from the National Post

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