

Ensuring the best start in life: Targeting versus universality in early childhood development ^[1]

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Excerpts from the news release:

Author Gillian Doherty (University of Guelph) reviews thirteen initiatives designed to enhance the development of vulnerable children and prepare them for healthy and productive adulthood. Her analysis suggests Canada's targeted policies are not working as well as they should. Currently, sixty percent of the money invested in targeted programs is used for initiatives that have been shown to have a negligible impact on children's development. Furthermore, in most cases, due to lack of monitoring and evaluation it is not possible to determine the extent to which programs are reaching their intended clientele.

This is a major problem, as Canada is facing workforce shortages resulting from low birthrates and increasing numbers of baby boomers retiring. These demographics and the demands of the global economy for highly skilled and knowledgeable workers mean that Canada's future prosperity depends upon ensuring every child's optimal development to ensure the productivity of the smaller future workforce.

As the study points out, vulnerable children are found across all socio-economic groups, with the greatest number living in middle- and upper-middle income families. As a result programs that are restricted to the lowest-income group miss the majority of children experiencing difficulties. The author argues that improving early childhood development in Canada will require the creation of a non-targeted, cost/effective early childhood education system and:

- Accepting that vulnerability to poor developmental outcomes occurs across all income levels.

- Recognizing that there is no easily observable marker to identify all vulnerable children. Thus, early childhood education programs must be universally available to all families wishing to use them.

- Providing the level of government funding and other resources such as infrastructure for the strategy to be effective.

As to whether the country can afford such a system, Doherty argues that Canada needs to spend 1 percent of its GDP on early childhood education and care, that is about \$15 billion given current GDP. However she contends that "Universal early childhood education and care provides greater benefits to society than it costs in public expenditures. Canada can afford this expenditure; Canada cannot afford the inevitable negative consequences to its future prosperity of failing to implement a universal system."

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