

Right in principle, right in practice: Implementation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child in Canada ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

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Excerpts from the report:

Children's right to early childhood care and development

The importance of early childhood for the health and full development of children is widely recognized. Its importance for the economy and social stability of Canada is also recognized in research studies. Putting what we know into practice, however, has been slow.

This section focuses on the benefits of a children-first, rights-based approach to helping resolve what has become an acrimonious, polarized, and unproductive debate about early childhood care and learning in Canada. It also addresses the need for equitable treatment in early childhood. Many other factors involved in early childhood are addressed elsewhere in this report.

This report draws on existing analytical reports from various sources. It identifies common themes and priorities, and it proposes recommendations to move past the policy stalemate.

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The policy environment for early child care, learning and development

The primary role of parents and family in child development, especially in the early stages, is recognized in the Convention. The contribution of parents and the various costs associated with child-rearing are not sufficiently recognized in debates about policy priorities and distribution of public resources in Canada. This is true both in the design of general child benefit and transfer policies and in the more specific design of early child care and development policies. Public policy can play a more significant and effective role in supporting families. To be effective, it needs to be based on accumulated evidence about optimal child development for individual children and for society as a whole. As articulated in article 18 (2), "States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities, and services for the care of children."

Policy decisions related to early childhood in Canada are not always evidence-based. They often reflect polarized, ideological debates about the role of women and of government in society. Resistance to public support for out-of-home child care persists, in part because early child development and care are dichotomized. Out-of-home child care is perceived as substitute supervision while parents are at work - a service that should be privately arranged by families who choose it - rather than as support for all children and families to achieve optimal child development and learning as a public good. The debate polarizes 'stay at home' working parents and other working parents whose children are in formal child care centers. It also ignores the fact that there is a variety of circumstances in-between, including regulated informal care, and part-time access to child development programs for 'stay at home' parents with young children.

One result of this custodial approach to out-of-home child care is the fact that there are only enough regulated child care spaces for 20% of young children, while 70% of mothers are in the paid labour force. Whatever the philosophy of parents or governments, the majority of Canada's children are in some form of out-of-home care, which raises major concerns about affordability, access, and quality.

At least three-quarters of Canadians support the establishment of a national child care program and consider the lack of affordable child care to be a serious problem. The public need for quality-assured child care and support for early childhood development is not satisfied by currently available options, which include kin and neighbour child care.

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Policy directions for early childhood development

- A Systematic Approach to Early Childhood Policy

The fact that Canada has no coherent national family or child policy, no cabinet-level position specifically focused on the coordination and impact of all policy decisions for children and families, and no national children's advocate, results in unresolved debates on strategic choices and the lack of effective coordination of policies that influence children and families.

Canada spends less on early childhood than other comparable countries, based on expenditure analysis by credible international bodies.⁵² This analysis is contested by the Canadian government, but no complete, transparent account has been provided to establish whether young children receive a reasonable share of public investment or not. A coherent strategy with reasonable, transparent budget allocations is needed.

- Quality Child Care, Learning and Development Options

There is significant discussion in Canada about issues of quality within the child care sector. There are no minimum national standards and there are significant differences between standards set by each province or territory. Individual incidents of negligence receive significant media attention and erode public confidence. But the much greater issue, which gets little media attention, is the lack of any quality assurance in the large, unregulated sector. The shortage of regulated spaces means that only 20% of parents can choose care that has some measure of quality control. The majority of parents seeking child care must choose from available options in the unregulated sector.

- Equitable Impact for All Children

On repeated occasions in recent years, the federal government has been asked to provide evidence showing that current policies meet the provisions in Canada's *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and in the Convention for equitable treatment of all children - ensuring that children living in low-income and single parent households are not disadvantaged by policy. Funding for early childhood care and learning through tax credits and transfers to provinces is one of the key areas of concern.

- Adequate Investment and International Comparison

Data published by the government and analyzed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) suggests Canada spends less on early childhood in general than do other comparable countries. This has also been documented in an international report by UNICEF. The average investment in early childhood among industrialized countries is 2.3% of GDP, while Canada spends just over 1%. Within the relatively low level of early childhood investment generally, the largest relative gap with other countries is in expenditure on early childhood care and development. Most industrialized countries spend an average of 0.7% of GDP on this component, while Canada spends 0.25% of GDP, far short of the international benchmark of 1% of GDP. Federal transfers for this purpose in 2007-2008 were reduced by 37% from 2006, and by 61% from the previous government's commitment for 2009.

Region: Canada ^[5]

Tags: children's rights ^[6]

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