

Early life's long reach forward: Can a parenting co-op in Cape Breton save the economy?^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

A report released in January by the Canadian Paediatrics Society (CPS) outlines a simple adjustment in family services that would lead to an economic revolution in Canada, and it's all about facilitating early childhood development.

The society's 2012 status report, *Are We Doing Enough*, showed that for every dollar spent in the early childhood years, the government could see \$4 to \$8 in return to society. It noted, in particular, the provincially funded early learning and childcare program in Quebec, which undoubtedly played a role in increasing the number of women in the workforce by four per cent, and in increasing the provincial GDP by \$5.2 billion.

But the report said that the federal government isn't doing enough to advance early learning and childcare programs across the country.

A group of young women in Inverness, an old coal-mining town in rural Nova Scotia, are not waiting around for the government to catch on. With the help of a municipal councillor, the women have decided to start the revolution in their town.

"There is a lack of honouring the role of the child and the woman in building a pluralistic, empathetic world," says Jim Mustard, a councillor for the County of Inverness. There is little in the way of public services aimed at enriching the lives of people ages zero to five, he notes, even though these are the people who determine the health and vibrancy of a community.

In an effort to support the county's population of young families, Mustard, along with seven mothers, formed the Inverness Early Years Co-op.

Inverness, population 2,000, is a little different from nearby villages in that it enjoys a critical amount of built infrastructure: a hospital, an arena, a school, a food bank and low-income housing. "Families don't need two cars to survive here," says Mustard. "It's a nest for people to land in and stay."

Still, to an outsider, a small town in an economically depressed region of Nova Scotia may not seem like the place such an initiative might flourish, but for Diana MacLellan, a 25-year-old single mother originally from Inverness, and a member of the co-op's board of directors, it makes perfect sense.

"I always had a baby on my hip," she says. "I have a large extended family: 22 aunts and uncles, 52 cousins. You know, someone to turn to, everyone to answer to." The supportive dynamic of a large, tight-knit family was common when she was growing up, but it has faded as families moved away from their rural roots in search of more economically viable livelihoods in urban centres and in oil-rich Alberta.

"We're trying to bring that [family support] back," she says.

The Inverness Early Years Co-op is not yet operational, but its board has been meeting since June 2010, and plans are underway to partner with the Inverness Cottage Workshop to build a space for the co-op's services. The centre will be 11,000 square feet, and "a model of energy efficiency," says Mustard, using local energy sources such as biomass pellets from naturally regenerating alders and solar power. The town of Inverness has already raised \$700,000—one-third of the building's cost—and hopes to raise another third from the province. The board hopes the co-op will be open in eight months.

"We're creating a platform to grow a community," says Mustard.

Like many other towns and villages in rural Nova Scotia, Inverness suffers from a constant cutback in support services for families, Mustard says. The obstetrics unit in the Inverness hospital was cut eight years ago. Now, women in Inverness have to drive two hours to the nearest obstetrics unit, in Antigonish, to give birth.

In addition to rural hospitals losing their services for young families, Nova Scotia has also closed dozens of rural schools over the past 15 years. Last year, the federal government further cut five Service Canada offices out of rural Cape Breton.

Because a child's health begins with the mother's, the Inverness Early Years Co-op is geared towards relieving the woman's financial stress by offering training for employment skills, while providing a place to share childcare. In-kind payments will be an option for low-income families.

"We want to have licensed childcare, an informal drop-in, with prenatal [services], breastfeeding, a playgroup, and a place for families to

convene with a specialist," says MacLellan. "The centre has to be accessible to absolutely everybody."

The gap in services for the early years of a person's life—from in utero to age five—is a national trend. Canada ranks last among 25 wealthy Western nations in its support for early childhood development policies, according to a 2011 report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and UNICEF. Canada also comes second-last among 34 OECD nations in spending on childcare and pre-primary education.

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Canada was on the road to becoming an international leader in early child development programs with a national childcare strategy, to which the federal government committed \$5 billion over five years in 2004. Agreements were signed between the federal and provincial and territorial governments, which would receive transfer payments for establishing early learning and childcare plans.

But when Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper came to power in 2006, that plan was scrapped.

The 2004 vision for a national framework on early years development was crucial if Canada wanted return on its investment in early child development, according to Dr. Danielle Grenier and Dr. Denis Leduc from the Canadian Paediatric Society in a 2008 article.

"The belief that such a system can create itself in the absence of national leadership is simply flawed," they write. "At best, Canada's early childhood education and care 'system' is a patchwork of policies and programs—creating geographical and income inequities."

Nova Scotia, says Mustard, falls behind other provinces in its commitment to strategize around the link between maternal health and childhood development—it puts the least resources, out of any province, into early child development. In fact, in spite of CPS's recommendations to invest in early years education, the province's Department of Education announced on February 3 its "Kids and Learning First" plan, which would invest \$6.7 million in initiatives such as a Discovering Opportunities for Grade 9, virtual courses and skilled trade courses geared to shipbuilding. But none of the funds will be dedicated to early development initiatives. The department did not respond to requests for an interview.

The Inverness initiative demonstrates an alternative angle on economics in the choice to form a co-op, distinct from a profit-driven enterprise.

"The co-op model is most responsive when trying to develop something as open as an early years centre," says Mustard. "The model makes sense."

"This is not about targeting families with problems," says Councillor Mustard, "but building a centre in the community to support all parents, where all issues are put in a holistic perspective."

Twenty-five-year-old single mother Diana MacLellan agrees with Mustard and believes the co-op model will work to improve her child's development and health.

"The community has to have ownership in the centre, and be able to make changes and decisions," says MacLellan.

With this co-op in place, MacLellan says women might be able to regain the community network that once existed in Inverness.

"If anything ever happened, I could walk into any house for help and support," she says. "It's about feeling safe."

-reprinted from the Dominion

Region: Nova Scotia ^[2]

Tags: economics ^[3]

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