

Why our economic future depends on a national child-care program ^[1]

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Source: Canadian Family

Format: Article

Publication Date: 10 Apr 2012

AVAILABILITY

Full article ^[2]

EXCERPTS

With a lack of spaces, inconsistent quality control and a reduction of subsidies, Canada's child-care system is severely under-developed. This puts the economic future of our country in jeopardy and leaves our kids severely disadvantaged.

After decades of coasting on its good-guy social-policy reputation, Canada risks being left behind by other countries that are actively investing in early learning and child care and enjoying the benefits of such an investment.

Those countries have discovered the economic powerhouse that is child care. Invest \$1 million in child care and you'll create four times as many jobs as you would if you were to invest that same amount of money in the construction sector. And you'll start reaping the dividends right away. That's just a hint at the investment opportunities Canada is missing out on now that it has decided to stake out its turf on the international stage as the child-care bad boy.

It appears we're getting good at being bad. The most recent United Nations (UN) report card on child care—The Child Care Transition, issued in 2008—ranked us last (tied with Ireland) out of 24 economically advanced countries in the area of early childhood education and care.

If you're wondering how we came to receive this rather embarrassing report card in the first place, it's because Canada chose to ratify the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child back in 1989, thereby holding itself accountable before the international community for its progress in "setting standards in health care; education; and legal, civil, and social services." Under the terms of this legally binding document, governments commit themselves to "protecting and ensuring children's rights" and to acting in "the best interests of the child." These obligations are spelled out over a series of 54 parts, called articles. Because Canada is a wealthy, developed country, we are expected to be tackling high-level goals, such as improvements in the area of social policy. Unfortunately, our performance on the child-care report card screams to the world that we're not there yet.

Article 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states, in part, that Canada is responsible for taking "all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible" and that Canada "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."

This isn't the only document that is—or should be—tweaking the Harper government's conscience with regard to child care. The UN Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) requires Canada to ensure access to affordable child care on the basis of human rights.

If Canada does move forward with a major investment in child care, it's the federal government that stands to reap the greatest dividends: "More than 90 percent of the cost of hiring child-care workers returns to governments as increased revenue, and the federal government gains the most," noted Ann Decter, director of advocacy and public policy for YWCA Canada, in *Educated, Employed and Equal: The Economic Prosperity Case for National Child Care*, released last March.

Since Canada signed that UN agreement back in 1989, a generation of Canadian kids has grown up without a universal child-care program—and a generation of Canadian parents has had to make do with whatever child care they could find. For 80 percent of us, that has meant unlicensed child care. All this time we could have had a universal child-care system that not only paid for itself but that also created spinoff jobs in our communities. We had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

The Waiting Game

Of course, most of us don't think about Canada's obligations to the UN when we encounter child-care snafus. We're too busy panicking about the child-care-related train wrecks that are piling up in our own lives all too quickly—and trying to work child-care miracles on our own.

But it's time to stop wishing for miracles and to start talking about real-world solutions.

"The crisis will continue until we make child care an essential service," says Kerry McCuaig, Atkinson Policy Fellow, Early Childhood Policy

at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto.

While child care is technically a provincial or territorial responsibility, the federal government needs to provide the necessary funding and direction to prevent Canada from being stuck with a hodgepodge of child-care systems that vary in standards depending on where you live. That hasn't happened yet because "tactics designed to make you feel guilty that you had children or that you have to go to work have been very effective at silencing the child-care discussion in this country," says McCuaig.

"We need to be more open about the degree to which the stress and strain has been suffered privately," says University of Manitoba sociology professor Dr. Susan Prentice, referring to the myriad ways in which child-care issues contribute to the work-family juggle. We also need to steer clear of the blame game—the tendency to blame ourselves for not being able to find the perfect child-care solution in an imperfect child-care world. "These problems are systemic problems. And you don't solve systemic problems with private solutions."

That certainly doesn't stop us from trying, however. After all, what choice do we have?

A Painful Search

Starting a child-care search means doing battle with the application process and trying to make sense of the waiting lists—public enemy number one of the child-care-seeking parent.

Some parents describe the process of applying for child care as completely arbitrary. Getting a space can be determined more by who you know, calling on the right day or wooing the child-care administrator with home-baked cookies than by objective criteria—or at least that's how it can feel.

And as if that weren't bad enough, some centres require that you pay a fee as part of the application process, something that can leave you feeling like you've just handed over a wad of cash to play a round of child-care roulette.

Of course, some parents don't even bother to go through the process of applying for licensed child care. They know they can't afford it. Or, if they do apply in the hope that they will become eligible for a subsidy around the same time that they become eligible for a space, they risk being forced to turn down the space, something that is only a little less painful than having to turn down a subsidy because no space exists. Depending on where you live, the two lists—space and subsidy—may operate independently of one another. Having your number come up on one is no guarantee that you'll have any luck on the other.

It's worth pointing out that child-care subsidies aren't the financial cure-alls that many people assume them to be. A subsidy may only contribute a few hundred dollars toward a space that costs \$1,500 month; paying their portion of the child-care bill may require parents to wipe out what little savings they have. And, of course, many families who would really benefit from receiving a child-care subsidy never receive those badly needed dollars, simply because there aren't enough dollars to go around. As of August 2011, there were more than 20,000 children in Toronto alone waiting for a child-care subsidy.

Dr. Lero would like to see something more substantial than good fortune looking out for the well-being of our children. "It shouldn't be a matter of luck to find good-quality care in the early years. It should be a matter of strong public policy."

A Wise Investment

So what's been holding Canada back from delivering on its outstanding promises on the child-care front? A lack of political will and two deep-rooted misconceptions about child care.

The first misconception is that child care should be a private rather than a public responsibility. Or, as some people like to put it rather bluntly, "You're the one who decided to have children. Why should I have to pay to take care of them?"

The reason child care should be treated as a social responsibility (in the same way we treat education and health care) is that society as a whole has a strong vested interest in ensuring that children have access to quality care. As The Child Care Transition report states so eloquently, "Poor-quality early childhood education and care is not a product that can be returned, repaired, exchanged, or refunded. It may take years for the lack of quality to show its effects; the cause may never become apparent; and the consequences are likely to fall not only on the child but on society as a whole." And, as University of Toronto economists Dr. Gordon Cleveland and Dr. Michael Krashinsky have noted, "because most parents can't afford to purchase child care of high enough quality to deliver all the benefits society would like children to receive, public funding allows for a system that provides higher quality and greater public benefit."

The second misconception is even more insidious: "Canada can't afford another big social program. The thing is, kids have been waiting their turn for a social program of their own. They've been waiting forever, in fact. And as for our generation of parents? As University of British Columbia family policy researcher Dr. Paul Kershaw (the "Generation Squeeze" guru) has demonstrated so pointedly, our generation of parents hasn't benefitted from the types of government policies that allowed our parents' generation to thrive: government policies that ensured that post-secondary education was affordable and that the job market offered family-sustaining, full-time jobs—the kinds of jobs that made it possible to support a family and buy a house on a single income.

Sometimes the people who like to tell us that we can't afford another social program are the very same people who are pressuring governments for more tax cuts. If that's the case, they're doing their best to turn this particular myth into a reality for future generations of parents and kids. "It all comes down to a choice—paying taxes," says Martha Friendly, executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit. "If you can convince people that it's in their best interest to cut taxes, you're never going to have social programs."

What gets lost in all the rhetoric is that investing in child care and early learning is a no-lose proposition—for families and communities now." (In other words, "sorry kids.")

The Time is now

What will it take to move the child-care agenda forward? The answer: parents becoming increasingly political.

“Parents need to let politicians know, ‘I’m voting child care this time,’” adds Sharon Gregson of the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C. “Child care needs to become the pivotal issue. If parents voted based on child-care needs, we would elect a government that would have to deliver.” So now that Canadian parents know that a universal national child-care program not only pays for itself but is actually a powerful economic stimulus and job creator, will we be content to settle for the same old, same old come election time? Or will we put the federal parties on notice that it’s time to deliver on Canada’s past-due child-care promises once and for all?

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