

Look in the mirror: Just substitute "Canadian" for "American child care hell"^[1]

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Author: Martha Friendly^[2]

An article in the April 29th issue of The New Republic has generated considerable interest in US child care as its content and perspective have been picked up^[3] and extended in social media, other magazines, US TV, radio and daily newspapers and even in offshore news media. *The hell of American daycare: the barely regulated, unsafe business of looking after our children*^[4] describes a case of a fire in a family child care home caring for seven very young children. The case - prominent in the media for some time involved an untrained 23 year old caregiver/owner who had left the kids alone to go shop at Target, a practice that - testimony at the trial asserted - was not new. An oil-filled pot left cooking on the stove caught fire and four children died. Eventually the caregiver who - it became clear - had a criminal record - was sentenced to 80 years in prison.

The article indicts the United States for - essentially - child neglect. The author writes that "despite the fact that work and family life has changed profoundly in recent decades, we lack anything resembling an actual child care system. Excellent day cares are available, of course, if you have the money to pay for them and the luck to secure a spot. But the overall quality is wildly uneven and barely monitored, and at the lower end, it's Dickensian".

Jonathan Cohn, the author, reports research that "deemed the majority of operations to be "fair" or "poor" and notes that while "day care is a bruising financial burden for many families", "only minimal assistance is available to offset these expenses. And so many parents put their kids in whatever they can find and whatever they can afford, hoping it will be good enough". The article chronicles how President Richard Nixon's presidential veto of a national child care program back in 1970 had ended movement towards a child care system in the US.

Does this all sound familiar? To me, it's like looking at a mirror image of our own child care situation. Reading Cohn's story, I found myself substituting "Canadian" for "American", and expect that others with an interest in early childhood education and child care, young children and social policy in Canada will be doing the same.

The article illustrates the absence of a child care system, which for parents translates to mean that there are few (or no) options, and that securing good child care is, in large part, a matter of luck. Cohn's interview with one of the dead toddlers' mothers, a single mother trying to keep a job to earn a living for herself and her child - and maybe even advance to a better job - says it all about what the lack of child care options to help her and other parents mean. This is not different than what we hear in Canada - the stories parents tell^[5] about the lack of choices^[6] available in Canada reflect our equally dismal situation.

The story of "Jackie's Daycare" - the child care home in which the tragedy occurred - with its lack of public oversight and unsafe, insalubrious conditions (the home child care in this case was "registered", with virtually no requirements and monitored not at all, or minimally, at best) reflect the kinds of perilous conditions in some unregulated (sometimes illegal) child care revealed in a CBC Marketplace story^[7] only last month. And while Canada has not experienced a child care tragedy on the scale of this one in some time, just in the last two weeks, two child death cases in unregulated child care in Mississauga, ON^[8] and Port Coquitlam, BC^[9] have come back to the criminal courts, though they have received much less media interest in Canada than the "Jackie's Daycare" case did in the US.

There is also a telling parallel (though different methodology) between the US National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) study that found that most of the child care it studied was "fair" or "poor" and the sole national Canadian study of quality, You Bet I Care!^[10] (now almost 15 years old) that reported that of the centres it studied, "the majority provided care that was of minimal to mediocre quality".

Demand for child care has grown as the labour force participation rate of mothers with young children has continued to rise in both countries (though more steeply and to a higher rate in Canada) while today the child development value of high quality early childhood education and care is well recognized by experts and the general public in both countries.

And ironically, the rejection of a national child care program by the highest government official in the US and in Canada - President Richard Nixon in 1971 ^[11] and Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2006 ^[12] - is unique to the two countries. In 1971, as a very recent immigrant to Canada fresh from working on the American Head Start program, I had been following the successful progress of national legislation to begin building the first US national child care program through both houses of Congress. I was stunned when Nixon exercised the rarely-used presidential veto to override Congressional assent (his veto message spoke of the threat of "Sovietizing" the American family and his opposition to coming down on the "side of communal approaches to child rearing against the family-centered approach") - just as I was stunned 35 years later when Stephen Harper unilaterally abrogated the hard-won federal-provincial bilateral agreements that were to set the stage for building Canada's first national child care program.

Following the end of Canada's first effort at a national child care program, in 2008, Canada was ranked lower than the United States (which was among the lower ranking countries studied) in a 25-country UNICEF study ^[13] of early childhood education and child care access and quality benchmarks.

This year, in his federal budget proposal, Barack Obama included funds to the states ^[14] for preschool targeted to modest and low income families, as well as increased funds for Head Start - not quite the comprehensive national early childhood education and care program we envision here in Canada. Still - it's a far cry from the contempt for ECEC that Canadians with an interest in child care have been experiencing from the Conservative federal government since 2006 and the "we can't afford it" from tax-cutting and books-balancing provincial political parties and governments. Indeed, based on the UNICEF study, it seems that Canada spends even less money on ECEC than does the US.

So Canadians who still think that most young families need, and want, the kinds of options for decent quality affordable child care and early childhood education that families in other countries enjoy need to be thinking about their political choices and preparing to join with others in exercising them. Otherwise, our child care choices for the foreseeable future will remain limited to cross-border examination of our own unsatisfactory reflection in American mirrors.

Tags:

quality ^[15]

funding ^[16]

unregulated ^[17]

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