

The cost of raising kids? Let's be honest, it's not cheap^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

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"We're supposed to be able to raise our kids on \$4,000 a year," I said to my husband, after reading a controversial new report from the Fraser Institute on the cost of raising children in Canada.

"We spent \$4,000 on them last week," he said.

The report, by Nipissing University economist Christopher Sarlo, argues that, contrary to the \$10,000-a-year figure cited by most experts for raising children in this country, it can be done for a paltry \$3,000-\$4,500. (The U.S. Department of Agriculture has just released its report on raising children in America, which pegs the yearly figure at \$13,400 to the age of 18. Oh, and that doesn't include higher education.)

If you're spending too much, Prof. Sarlo writes, you're doing it wrong: "a great many parents find ways to reduce that amount by using savings strategies when shopping, home production of some goods, and by expecting children, when they are old enough, to work part-time for pay to offset some of their expenses." I shouldn't even be writing this column, when there are pickles I could be making to see us through the winter. However, I do like the idea of training my 12-year-old as chimney sweep.

The main gripe that most observers have with the Fraser report is that it does not include the cost of child care, which is ludicrous in a country where, according to Statistics Canada, 73 per cent of women with children under the age of 16 are in the work force.

But that's hardly surprising. The Fraser Institute, and the Conservative government, have no interest in making child care a priority, or ensuring that women (and men) can both work and be parents and not end up ripping their hair out by the roots. The national childcare policy, once a political dream within our grasp, is now deadlier than a raccoon in the middle of the Trans-Canada Highway. Instead, it's been replaced by a federal child-tax credit and, even more ominously, rumours of income-splitting, which seems just another way to encourage the little lady to stay at home.

Toronto screenwriter Trevor Finn wrote a hugely popular [article in the Globe](#) ^[3] earlier this month titled, "We earn more than \$100,000 a year. Why can't we afford day care?" He and his wife, saddled with a child-care bill of \$1,600 a month, were putting off having a second child. He asked, "Why aren't the provincial or federal governments helping to lighten the load for our young families?"

These aren't just academic questions. The fertility rate in Canada and in other Western countries is dropping, which will be troublesome as the population ages and the percentage of taxpayers shrinks. I recently wrote a story about the increasing number of young people who are choosing not to have children, and many of those I spoke to said they were afraid of being broke if they had kids. They weren't being selfish, merely rational: They wanted to work and find purpose in the world, and they didn't see a future where they could do that and afford children at the same time.

I talked to a woman named Laura Scott, who counsels young couples when they're trying to decide whether to have kids. Her clients' main concern was that they wouldn't be able to provide the way they were provided for. "Children have moved from an economic asset to a cherished luxury," she said. "The model for raising children is so different from our parents' expectation."

Those young people are savvy. They know that having kids is neither cheap nor easy (though it can be a huge amount of fun.) They also know the past ain't coming back, and all the wishful thinking in the world won't change that.

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