

International family policy comparisons: Why Canada lags behind ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Canada lags behind most other industrial countries on many of the international family policy rankings, including public investments. In most provinces, this reflects the on-going fragmentation of both our systems for and our thinking about families with young children.

In her keynote address (which can be viewed [here](#) ^[3]) to the UBC's Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) Fall 2013 Research Exposition, Lynell Anderson, Senior Researcher for the Generation Squeeze campaign at HELP, and a Certified General Accountant, explored what we can learn from international policy comparisons (with a focus on OECD countries including Norway, France, the United Kingdom, the U.S. and Australia), and highlights policy changes required to help children and families thrive in Canada. Her research focuses on the financing of family policy in Canada, especially with respect to child care services.

Lynell points out that BC's recent decision to expand kindergarten was uncontroversial in terms of whether there would be free universal access, trained teachers, etc. But change the word 'school' to "child care" and a different set of values emerges, even though both are teacher-led programs in partnership with parents, but generally without parents participating directly in the program. In this discussion, Lynell compares Canada with 5 other developed countries, 2 Nordic (Finland & Norway) and 3 that are considered Canada's peer nations (Australia, USA and UK).

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Why the emphasis on child care?

She raises the point that a worry exists that if we increase the time spent in child care, we will reduce the time parents have to interact with their own children. Canada offers one-year parental leave for mothers, but no parental leave for fathers, except in Quebec. However, one has to meet employment duration criteria in order to qualify for leave, and payment is made at a portion of regular earnings so low that many cannot afford to utilize the full 50 weeks of parental leave. Only about two thirds of parents take up their entitlement of parental leave. This is significantly higher in Quebec, which offers more compensation and leave to fathers.

Where parental leave is better compensated, parents spend significantly more time caring for their own infants within a family setting. Countries that have strong child care systems also have generous family leave provision. Infants and toddlers in Nordic countries are much more likely to be cared for by parents and family members than are children in Canada. Countries that rank well on family policy provide more time and income for parental care early on.

In BC, 26% of children birth to 18 months, and 49% of children aged 18 months-3 years experience some form of child care in addition to parent care. Because there are very few regulated spaces for children in that age range, the majority of children are in unregulated childcare arrangements.

She states that, out-of-home experiences for young children have the potential to be very valuable if they are done well, but also have the potential to be a risk if they are not well done. Regulated childcare in Canada today receives insufficient funding and attention to ensure that it is consistently at the level of quality that will advance healthy development. Research also shows that quality in unregulated child care is generally lower than in regulated care.

Can we do better and build a quality, universal child care system? Lynell says the evidence is yes. First of all, there is a 30-year follow-up Norwegian study, confirmed by a Meta-analysis of 123 US studies (Barnett, 2013) that shows:

- Positive effects substantial over time
- Achievable at large scale (increased education/lower welfare access)
- Levels the playing field
- Less informal care (Norway)

The question she asks is: given that most children are experiencing out-of-family child care, when will we put policies and resources in place to reduce their exposure to risk and move Canada from the bottom of UNICEF Family Policy benchmarks? Her answer is that a level of public investment and planning that would expand parental leave with higher benefits paid to families and universal child care would eliminate child poverty in Canada.

Region: British Columbia ^[4]

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