

# Universal childcare is an economic issue<sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** Ottawa Community News

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 24 Apr 2014

## EXCERPTS:

When I first became a mother, I wasn't sure universally subsidized childcare was the best thing for families or for tax payers. At the time, I felt I was young enough to take a break from my career, and I valued the care that only I could provide to my children. I didn't want a surrogate. I wanted to be supermom, in the sense that I would be the one to manage the nurture, feeding and education of my young babes.

Three children in and almost a decade later, I've changed my mind. Completely.

I've been managing a home business and working out various part-time childcare arrangements for so many years that I realize the inconsistency of it all has left us all quite stressed out. Perhaps more significantly, the lack of affordable childcare has severely limited my career options.

We've crunched the numbers upside down and sideways on a regular basis, and every time we realize that paying for care for three children - even when it was just two - plus the cost of me going into a public forum to work (transit, clothing, work luncheons, etc.), would leave me with very little take home pay. In the cost-benefit analysis - me returning to work or continuing to run my home business part-time so I could still be the point person at home - the latter has always won. If I had the option of affordable childcare, I'd be back into the public sphere in a flash. As it stands, I don't have a real choice.

I've concluded that Canada needs a national system of affordable, quality childcare.

This is not purely a gendered argument. There is much research out there to suggest that affordable childcare for families can offer a major economic benefit, and not just for parents with young children.

Companies invest a lot in young men and women, to train them and help them build their careers. When the babies arrive, these men and women are often forced to make a choice between family and their careers. The result is that many - mostly women - are fleeing the workforce in droves at key points in their career trajectories.

It's no secret that the population is aging and that the baby boomers are retiring en masse. We need all working-age people to stay in the workforce, to continue to build our economy and pay taxes to support social programs and infrastructure programs. The only way to ensure this happens is to give men and women real choices. The only way to do that is to create a national system of high quality and affordable childcare.

GOOD MODELS Canada has a number of models to emulate. The most obviously cited example is Quebec's seven-dollar-per-day system. Critics have touted it as expensive and lacking oversight in terms of quality. The latter point is mostly true. Two years ago, an American journalist wrote about the superior preschools in France, which have a standardized quality of teaching staff, food and education. In some of the Nordic countries, there are examples of standardized pay schedules, where all parents receive government subsidies, but on a sliding scale according to household income. Unfortunately, affordable childcare is a topic that comes and goes in popularity. It's a great thing to promise in an election, but when the number crunching begins, most leaders turn their backs on it. People using the system advocate for better quality and affordability, but quickly abandon the cause once their own children are school-aged.

Part of the problem is that affordable childcare is always presented as an issue for the people that will actually use the system. There's little emphasis on the benefits of a universal childcare system to people of all ages. Affordable and universally accessible childcare is, frankly, a silver bullet if we want to maintain and build a workforce of competent men and women to drive the economy.

As we look forward to Canada 20 years from now, we shouldn't be asking how we can afford to implement a national childcare strategy, but how we can't.

-reprinted from Ottawa Community News

**Region:** Ontario<sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** public opinion<sup>[3]</sup>

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