

# Child care's rough ride <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

Child care in Ontario has been having a rough ride for some years. Most recently, the current election call illustrates the precariousness of child care in the absence of a federal role and without solid, well-developed provincial policy. In Ontario and Canada-wide, the state of child care is dismal in just about every way - spaces unavailable, quality uneven, wildly varied but mostly unaffordable parent fees, low staff wages, weak regulation. Full-day kindergarten-now in seven provinces-follows schedules that leave child care needs unmet while children younger than five (or four in Ontario) are left out. Integration of kindergarten and child care is at best superficial-not the "strong and equal partnership" we'd hoped for. Suitable inclusive options for children with disabilities are scarce. Many (or most) families rely on unregulated arrangements with no public oversight while quality in regulated child care is often not high enough to be called "developmental".

It goes without saying (again) that Canada has no national child care policy. However, provincial /territorial policy frameworks aren't sufficiently developed either. While some longer-term provincial plans have been developed in the absence of federal resources, compared with families' needs and international benchmarks, these are much too limited. As the Ontario situation shows, the absence of the "glue" of federal policy and financing-coupled with piecemeal provincial policy-leaves child care exceedingly vulnerable to political shifts.

Even before child care's rough ride began in the mid-1990s, hoped-for transformation had failed to materialize under an Ontario NDP government. The 1995-2002 Harris years were lost years, in which child care was plagued by substantial funding cuts, from which it never really recovered. Funding increased again after the slash-and-burn Conservatives were defeated provincially but Stephen Harper's cancellation of the federal Liberals' national child care program in 2006 was another massive setback. In Ontario, expansion plans were cut to one-quarter, while other provinces' plans were curtailed too.

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