The case against for-profit 'big box' child care [1]

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EXCERPTS

In an increasingly market-driven Canada, it should not be surprising that profit-making services are still part of the child-care landscape. However, the last decades' rise of "big-box" child care in Canada has been greeted with alarm by advocates for whom this is incompatible with the equitable, inclusive, high quality early childhood system they have long sought.

The impending hostile takeover of two Toronto non-profit centres by Kids & Company illustrates why the old slogan "kids are not for profit" still makes perfect sense. Kids & Company, a well-financed Canada-wide child-care corporation whose 60-plus centres cater to elites is perhaps the quintessential big-box child-care operation. This takeover should send a signal that the future role of profit-making child care must be addressed as a high-level provincial and national policy issue.

Child care ownership has long been a hotly contested issue in Canada, shaping debates as early as the 1970s. About 25 years ago, with commercial development booming in the old City of Toronto, city planners negotiated with developers for the creation and 25 years rent-free support of several centres in new office towers. In exchange, developers received substantial benefit from the long-term revenues from greater permitted density - gaining a public asset. Guidelines drafted by a city/community committee stipulated that the negotiated centres had to be non-profit.

Why non-profit? Even 25 years ago, research showed for-profit child care more likely to be poorer quality than non-profit. There was also local experience: in the 1970s, Alabama-based Kinder-Care had mounted a major lobby campaign aimed at reducing Ontario's staff-child ratios and the 1980s saw a bitter five-month strike over abysmally low wages at Ontario's Mini-Skool chain. Further, there was a conviction that parents should have a say about their child care rather than allowing it to be directed by a head office or shareholder group. And there was the idea that child care should strengthen social inclusion and community solidarity, not divide children and families into groups like "the subsidized poor" and "the pay-your-own-way" affluent elite.

One thing hasn't changed in 25 years: still no national child care program and only enough regulated child care for 22.5 per cent of 0 to 5 year olds (20.8 per cent in Ontario). The provinces haven't filled the gap; none has a fully-developed, planned system that has created child care for all. Families instead continue to rely on market-model child care that includes a significant for-profit sector. This despite the strong evidence that these demonstrably fail to deliver the high quality, affordable child care that today's families desperately want and need.

What's changed in 25 years? Canada has higher rates of working mothers and of child poverty. Income and generational inequality are growing. The importance of child care is now well accepted internationally and considered a human right for both women and children. Evidence about the importance of quality in child care is now strongly compelling. Child care's social and economic value is well documented while strong evidence shows the developmental benefits of high quality (but not poor quality) child care for all children.

There is also much more research. Today numerous studies examine quality in for-profit and non-profit child care, demonstrating lower quality - often significantly lower - in for-profits no matter how it's measured. Ownership is shown to play a significant role in determining quality through its impact on wages, working conditions, ECE training, staff turnover, morale and staff/child ratios.

As well, some analyses show that - rather than basing service delivery on families' needs - profit-seeking often determines location of child care centres and whether they choose to serve low income and special needs children. Australian and UK documentation also shows that rapid corporate child-care expansion can come to monopolize child-care provision, leading to ever-higher fees and poor service provision for families.

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