

Our kids, childcare, and Bob Dylan's Dream ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

I made a flying visit to Kingston a few days ago. It's where I grew up. My mom, now 90, still lives there. I had dinner with my Em. It was just shy of two weeks since we had dropped her off at Queen's to begin a life away from home. That was a day that carried me back 16 years to a time when it seemed every weekday morning - for the longest time - started with a pain in my heart and half-damp eyes as I left her at daycare, in someone else's care, and walked away to get to work.

Though I still, thankfully, have my Hannah and Rory at home, having a kid in university has shifted my place in the universe of parents and parenting. Babies and toddlers - and their moms and dads - now trigger reflections on times when our three were babies and toddlers ... times that somehow seem both recent and distant.

Many memories thankfully remain and, thankfully again, they are almost without exception happy ones. We were lucky to find and secure safe, healthy and loving childcare. A complex combination of neighbours, friends, daycares, and afterschool programs all played their part in setting the foundation for at least the possibility of the kids' health, happiness and success.

But I also remember clearly that there was no guarantee of that outcome ... that with all three of ours the questions of how, who, where and when we would find childcare consumed and worried us. And as I looked out Thursday afternoons this summer (at the farmers' market) over an East Lynn Park covered in blankets and strollers, it was clear that there are more parents doing a lot of unnecessary juggling ... and worrying. According to the National Post, East Danforth saw the under age 4 cohort grow by 49 per cent between 2008 and 2011. And it's clear the boom hasn't let up.

It's also clear that childcare is an issue in need of a sensible public policy response, now more than ever. It's not just about the boom. It's about recognizing the fact of - as a matter of need or desire - parental workforce participation. It's about the availability of affordable childcare as a response to social demand and not individual choice (that just happens to be made by the vast majority of parents). And it's really about the broader social context in which too many Canadians have to raise their kids.

According to the most recent UNICEF report, 14 per cent of Canada's kids are living below the poverty line. These numbers have remained largely unchanged in Canada over the last two decades - in spite of the promises of successive federal governments. It means that large numbers of Canadian kids are experiencing various forms of deprivation, most obviously food and housing insecurity.

That poverty flows, largely, from the kinds of jobs too many moms and dads are doing these days. Canada ranks 26th out of 28 countries on the OECD's index of employment protection. Canada ranks last amongst OECD nations in having the highest proportion of men identified as low-wage workers. Even in this riding, studies have shown, there is an extensive informal economy in which employees make less than a minimum wage that is already grossly insufficient.

And, of course - most obviously - we have no national childcare program that responds directly to the needs of so many kids. Our NDP caucus is responding to this. We have had, for a long time, a bill calling for a national affordable housing strategy. We have recently released a national food security strategy, "Farm to Fork." At our recent national caucus meeting in Edmonton, we announced our commitment to reinstate a federal minimum wage. And we announced our commitment to put in place a Quebec-style national childcare program. This is why we talk these days about not just wanting to make change but about being ready to make change.

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[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856>

[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/poverty>

[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/affordability>

[6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/accessibility>