

The NDP child care plan gives parents hope, but the details are fuzzy ^[1]

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Excerpts:

The NDP is promising families a dream: Accessible child care that costs no more than \$15 a day. Unfortunately, along comes reality.

On the one hand, this is the commitment that child care advocates and parents have been demanding for years and the NDP deserves credit for bringing an important social policy back into national discourse with a concrete commitment. When it comes to child care, Canada performs shamefully compared to many European countries. Canadian families pay some of the highest daycare fees in the world - and they just keep rising. Short supply requires many families to use unlicensed care of questionable quality - if they can find a spot at all.

The NDP proposal is a game changer (similar to what the Liberals under Paul Martin attempted in 2005, before the newly elected Conservatives called a halt to the plan). After four years, Ottawa would spend \$1.9-billion a year and have created 370,000 new licensed spots. That annual amount will rise to \$5-billion over eight years, with the federal government kicking in 60 per cent of the cost for every new spot created, and the provinces covering the rest.

If only it were that easy. Even if Ottawa is willing to foot their share of the bill, they still have to negotiate complicated deals with the provinces - a big hurdle. And while the NDP commitment sounds like a lot of money, child care done properly is expensive. Sweden is the gold standard, and Canada would have to spend \$16-billion a year to match, adjusting for population, what the Swedish government spends on its program. That's not going to happen.

To spend our money wisely, we have to tackle some key questions:

1. What comes first: low fees or high quality spaces? Quebec learned this the hard way, expanding its \$5-dollar a day (now \$7) child care program so quickly that it had to make concessions on quality, including allowing more home-based and for-profit care into a publicly-funded system. Even Sweden, which took decades to get where it is now, had to start out by compromising on universality to focus on quality. A Canadian program would have to make similar concessions in the short-term, though the NDP plan to enshrine the program in legislation and its commitment to long-term funding will help get the balance right - eventually.
2. Where will those spaces go, and what families will get them? Building an efficient network of child care centres that covers a diverse group of families requires careful planning. Otherwise, the best centres tend to spring up in the best neighbourhoods, not the low-income ones where children get the most benefit from high quality care. That's where the role of cities - which aren't mentioned in the NDP backgrounder - is essential, to track demand, both now and down the road, and to locate centres where they are most needed.
3. Where will we find trained educators to staff all those new spaces? This is a daunting problem. Even now, Canada has a shortage of trained early childhood educators. Go figure: it's a tough job, and the pay is lousy. Child care workers - including those with a college degree - make about \$16.50 an hour, roughly the same as a data-entry clerk. According to a recent study, one quarter of full-time staff worked a second job to pay the bills. But you can't have a high quality system - that pays off in future economic and educational dividends - without well-trained caregivers.
4. How will we follow the money? The NDP plan includes setting "measurable benchmarks" with numbers reported to the public. That will require the country collecting data on wait times, fees and space, as well as quality standards. Since much of the current system is unregulated, Canada currently doesn't have good data in these areas.

The NDP plan is a good big picture start. They are selling child care the right way - as both an education system to help families, and an economic program to support employment, especially for mothers. The financial commitment is big, yes - but will certainly go further in reducing the child care burden than the current \$100 monthly cheques that families receive as the Universal Child Care Tax Benefit, which costs taxpayers \$2.5-billion a year.

There are reports the Conservatives plan to increase the child care benefit, and the NDP, incidentally, plan to keep it, to give "families more options not less," a party spokesperson explained this week. (This is politics, not good policy. Since the money barely covers two days of child care, let alone makes it remotely possible for a parent to quit their job and stay home, it's unclear what "options" the benefit is

actually creating.)

When it comes to child care, the NDPs have acknowledged that Ottawa will have to take input from the provinces to go forward - a difficult task, as the Liberals learned nine years ago. NDP leader Thomas Mulcair has been talking about a national child care plan for more than a year now, and, beyond the smart optics of making a commitment, it's not yet clear how the NDP would get it done in practice.

Right now, families can dream of \$15-a-day child care - especially since many are currently paying more than three times that amount. Just remember, it's still awfully fuzzy around the edges.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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