

# The evolution of Canada's child care debates <sup>[1]</sup>

Blog

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## AVAILABILITY

Full text <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

Canadians have long grappled with the meanings and purposes of child care.

As Canadians gather for ChildCare2020 -- the country's fourth national child care policy conference -- in Winnipeg on November 13, it's worthwhile to reflect on how child care debates have unfolded over the past several decades, and particularly how the three previous national conferences -- in 1971, 1982, and 2004 -- acted as important landmarks in the sometimes-rocky landscape of Canadian child care history.

As is the case this year in Winnipeg, all three of these conferences were convened because advocates sensed an opportunity to change the national conversation about child care. In each of the previous conferences, advocates, parents, educators, and others sought to set an agenda for better child care moving forward, but they also engaged in passionate debates about what "better" meant. Taking stock of those competing visions for child care reminds us how far the movement has come over the past 40 years.

When delegates gathered in Ottawa in June 1971 for the first Canadian Conference on Day Care, child care was a relatively new issue on the federal policy agenda. Canadians were still getting used to the idea that working motherhood was a "normal" phenomenon, and second-wave feminists had just begun their fight to have day care recognized as a necessary service to support women's equality in the workplace and in the home.

Just a year before the conference, for example, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women released its ground-breaking report calling for (among other things) the creation of a national day care program. Given the rapidly changing contexts of working motherhood in Canada, conference chair Anne Barstow explained there was a need for the child care community to articulate a "clear idea of the philosophy behind day care." The Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) brought together 350 people to do just that.

At the 1971 conference, feminists pushed delegates to adopt a stance in support of a "public...system of free universal day care" as a matter of women's rights. But in 1971 this was still considered a radical position, and such views consistently ran up against older, entrenched notions of day care as a last-resort welfare service, one that should be reserved only for "needy" mothers. Conference delegates all agreed that governments needed to do more to ensure that a wide range of day care services were available around the country. In the years to come, though, these tensions between universalist and targeted notions of day care would run throughout child care politics.

Although feminist-inspired advocates worked hard throughout the 1970s to set the agenda on child care, by the end of the decade governments of all levels had undertaken little more than piecemeal reforms. But the number of women in the labour force had increased by more than 65 percent, and 1979 data showed only 109,135 licensed child care spaces for the 1.5 million Canadian children who needed care.

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