

Canadian family policy stuck in the past, report says^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Family policy in Canada needs to grow up and recognize the need for child care, parental leave for fathers and tax measures that support low- and moderate-income parents, not just the wealthy, says a new report being released Tuesday.

"The work and family lives of Canadians have evolved over the past three decades. It is time our family policies grew up too," says the report by the left-leaning Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

The report includes the latest available data on the impact of the Harper government's fall economic statement, which introduced income-splitting and increases to the monthly child care benefit and child-care expense deduction.

On income splitting, the report shows that 48 per cent of families with children under age 18 will get nothing. Another 29 per cent will get less than \$1,000. The biggest benefits will go to families with annual incomes over \$233,000, who already have financial options to have one parent stay home with young children.

The Conservatives capped the benefit at \$2,000 to blunt criticism that most of the money was going high income earners, said economist David Macdonald, who co-authored the report with Kate McInturff, director of the research centre's Making Women Count project.

"But it doesn't help anybody else, like the single mother who has two kids, or low-income families that can't afford to have one parent at home," Macdonald said. "You still end up with a program that is dramatically unfair."

The complicated process of applying for the benefit, with up to 85 additional steps on tax forms, means even fewer families will profit from the move, he added.

The \$2 billion in annual revenue lost from income splitting would be much better spent building a national child care program, like Quebec's \$7-a-day model, which has encouraged more women to work, boosted fertility rates and pumped more tax dollars into provincial and federal coffers, the report notes.

Toronto parent of three Brooke Richardson, 30, says the proposed \$600 annual increase in child care benefits may put a few more dollars in her pocket, but it won't give her family any more choice.

"You can't have choice when you don't have options," she said.

The Ryerson PhD student and child care policy researcher has been waiting for subsidized child care for her 1-year-old son, Kai, since before he was born. She has also struggled to find affordable before- and after-school spots for daughters Holly, 5, and Ava 7.

The average annual cost of a licensed child care space for a toddler in Toronto is about \$15,000.

Richardson and her husband, Steve Lamb, figure their incomes are too low to benefit from income splitting.

"This is bad policy on steroids," she said.

Over the past 30 years, Ottawa has ignored the flood of mothers into the workforce, the rise of fathers who want to play a more active role in child-rearing, and a shifting job market that still perpetuates a wage gap between men and women, says the report.

"Families in Canada need government policies and programs that respond to the way that they live now," the report says.

In European countries that provide parental leaves exclusively for fathers along with high wage replacement, a majority of fathers take a leave, the authors note.

In this country, however, only Quebec offers parental leave specifically for fathers. As a result, 76 per cent of Quebec fathers take parental leave when their children are born, compared with just 26 per cent in the rest of Canada.

Region: Ontario^[3]

Tags: budget^[4]

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