

Better daycare works for us all^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Not long ago, in her small corner of Facebook, new mother Jamie Slight got a local taste of a national debate, one that gets at the heart of how we think about kids and families.

In a discussion thread about day care policy, Slight said giving up a teaching job she loves is not an option, and more affordable, accessible daycare spaces are needed. A family member, a stay-at-home mom, gently took issue with that.

"She replied, 'But why should your choice be funded by the government and mine shouldn't?' " said Slight. "Which was a very fair point."

Slight mentioned this Facebook exchange during the casual, chit-chatty end of an interview last month, but it stayed with me, in part because it's become the undercurrent of a year-long series of stories on child-care Free Press Ottawa correspondent Mia Rabson and I have just begun.

It's a tension even the staunchest daycare advocates talk about with trepidation, but it underpins one of our most pressing policy problems. Whose job is it to take care of kids? Just parents? Or everyone's? Are kids a private responsibility, or a public one?

Policy-wise, we're in limbo on this question. Experts agree that innovative early-childhood education is the key to giving kids, especially poor ones, a huge head start. But such programs are rare, costly and mostly only available to parents who can pay for nursery school or Montessori-style child care. We're miles from a system that gives parents real choice. Instead, we've got a take-what-you-can-get patchwork that includes glorified babysitting, parent-run centres that operate close to the bone and a complicated bevy of tax credits and monthly cheques meant to give parents some autonomy. But how much real choice do parents have when expensive and scarce day care forces some women to give up careers they love, while other women who would rather stay home for a few years are forced by finances to work?

And, is any of that my problem?

"Why is day care for someone else's children my responsibility?" one reader wrote to Mia Rabson last weekend. "In the time I've been alive, I have watched a proud and independent nation descend into a 'welfare state' mentality that has us mired in debt, over-taxed and intruded upon by more government than is rational."

"Must ask a question no one seems to," a reader wrote me last month. "Why are these women having children when they know they are not in a financial position to stay home for four or five years to look after them? Daycare is a method of allowing someone else to raise your child (children) and the cost to taxpayers is extremely high."

That view is at odds with the most basic notion of women's equality. But feminism has never been a very effective argument for policy change, so let's try reality.

Women work. They've been working, in increasing numbers, for 50 years, contributing to the economy, to the tax base, to innovation and growth and to political and public life. The romantic notion of a Leave it to Beaver family no longer exists. Nearly two-thirds of families include a working woman, because women want and deserve a rewarding career and family finances demand two incomes.

It's tough enough to buy a starter bungalow in Westwood on two salaries, let alone one. And, if you're among the 15 per cent of families headed by a single mom, you have little choice but to work and find child care.

Nor does it make practical sense to ask would-be parents to save up before having children. No couple in the history of procreation has ever done that. It's not how life or love work, and if it suddenly was, Canada's birthrate would plummet.

Truly, it's been generations since we considered children only a parent's responsibility, not since before the first family allowance was created 70 years ago. Nor do we consider the care of the elderly only the private responsibility of family. Instead, government spends much more helping seniors than we do helping young children and parents.

As a taxpayer who will never use publicly funded daycare or the \$2.5-billion universal child-care benefit I help pay for, I still want as many

women in the workforce as I can get. I want their pension contributions, their income tax revenue, the benefit of the skills and education I've already invested in. I want the economic growth that comes from their labour. And, I want their children, especially vulnerable ones from poor or troubled families, to have the best early education possible, like the innovative early years program that has transformed Lord Selkirk Park.

I want the best head-start for toddlers so I'm not stuck paying for prison and welfare costs down the road and so, instead, those children keep my pension solvent. I also want parents -- not just Mom -- to have the ability to stay home for a few years, if that's what's best for the family.

So let's dispense with this notion that children are only the responsibility of parents, who ought to be left to navigate our messy, out-of-date child-care system on their own. Instead, let's build better policy around the idea that working parents and happy children benefit us all.

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