

British Columbians hold strong views on child care options ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

While many governments and political parties have talked about changing the way child care works in Canada, most of these promises end up as anachronistic paragraphs in forgotten platform documents.

Most of the assistance for families comes from handouts or tax breaks. At the federal level, the Conservative government has discussed increasing the monthly taxable Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB) payment from \$100 to \$160. In the latest provincial budget, the B.C. Liberal government introduced a monthly \$55 tax credit for families with young children.

When Insights West asked British Columbians about these two ideas, they were moderately optimistic, with 62 per cent saying the federal cheque would be "beneficial" and 50 per cent feeling the same way about the provincial credit. In stark contrast, the level of support for a child care proposal that costs parents \$10 a day and increases the number of available spaces reaches 82 per cent.

In lieu of a carefully developed plan to deliver child care to everyone who needs and wants it, politicians have resorted to throwing money - albeit in small quantities - at parents. If governments behaved the same way with other universal services, the public would notice quickly. It would be unfathomable to consistently offer residents a tax credit in the event of a twisted ankle, or with cash to pay for an MRI.

The research does not suggest that tax breaks and handouts are perceived negatively. After all, few people would say no to the little help that is available. Still, there is a large proportion of British Columbians (64 per cent) who see more benefit in funding services and allowing parents to have more opportunities to enrol their children in child care facilities. A significantly smaller group (22 per cent) prefers to provide cash for parents so they can make a decision on how to allocate funds for their children. Simply put, the current strategies - federal and provincial - to help those who need child care are rejected by a three-to-one margin.

Child care, however, has traditionally been regarded as a temporary burden. The lack of action from politicians has been disheartening, but voters later move on to other stages in their lives. It is also an issue where nostalgia clashes with the realities of bringing up a child at a time when two full-time working parents are the norm, especially in urban areas. Young parents have heard it all from members of older generations.

"If you don't spend as much as before, one parent can stay at home until the child can go to school." Two thirds of British Columbians (65 per cent) disagree with this notion.

"People should only have kids if they can afford it." This is not a reasonable point of view for 55 per cent of us.

"Just get the grandparents to help you take care of your kids." Almost half of us (48 per cent) disagree, but this includes a majority (53 per cent) of residents aged 55 and over. Our seniors are looking forward to retirement and relaxation, not to becoming de-facto child care providers on weekdays.

In my experience as a public opinion researcher, I have seldom seen four-in-five British Columbians agree on anything. A child care service that would emulate Quebec's successful experience is immensely popular in our province. It is also rooted on essential Canadian values: universality, safety and employment.

While it may be enticing to think that a further intervention from the government on child care should focus on the least fortunate residents, most British Columbians (66 per cent) believe that the \$10-a-day plan should be available for anyone who needs it.

Safety also boosts support for \$10-a-day, with three-in-four British Columbians (75 per cent) saying that a proper child care system would eliminate the need of parents to use unregulated facilities. This is a fundamental flaw of the existing funding schemes. Federal cheques or provincial tax credits may be utilized on a monthly basis to partially pay for access to an unlicensed facility, leaving desperate parents with little or no legal recourse if something goes wrong.

Finally, with 73 per cent of British Columbians expecting that more child care spaces would mean more revenue for the province, our economy would also be a clear winner. The statistics show that it took less than a decade for Quebec to see an improvement in the number of women working or looking for work after the new child care system was implemented in 1997. That is truly putting families first.

Region: British Columbia ^[2]

Tags: funding ^[3]

spaces ^[4]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/15/04/british-columbians-hold-strong-views-child-care-options> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7860> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/spaces> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-election>