

# Child-care policy lures voters, ignores early education needs <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** McIlveen, Claire

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

The latest report by Canada's parliamentary budget officer, Jean-Denis Frechette, sounds a cautionary note about the Harper government's changes to supports for families.

The Conservatives' income splitting plan has been criticized for mainly helping higher-income families, so the government has announced increases to other benefits.

The report analyzes the impact of changes to the universal child care benefit (which is being expanded to families with children aged seven to 17) and of a higher limit on the child-care expense deduction.

Some 60 per cent of Canadian families with young children pay for child care.

The Harper government is boosting funds for families beginning in July - just in time for a fall election.

The report says the changes will, indeed, put more money into the hands of Canadian families.

But families with children under age 13 who pay for child care will receive a smaller slice of benefits compared to families who don't pay for child care or have older children. The latter will get 51 per cent of overall benefits.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has argued that child-care funds for children are best spent in the hands of parents. It's an argument that many intuitively agree with.

But just as society cannot build highways, administer justice or defend the country without public programs, we cannot as individuals give a helping hand to all of Canada's vulnerable children. We must pool resources to do that.

Child poverty has not been eradicated but wise use of public money since the 1950s on programs ranging from day care to health care to dental care has helped low-income and disadvantaged children enormously. Such programs would not exist without collecting resources to do the greatest good for those with the most urgent needs, including First Nations children and those with disabilities.

The Conservative plan will more than double child-care spending, from \$3.3 billion in 2013-14 to \$7.7 billion in 2015-16.

In the meantime, most of the provinces are too broke to offer families universal early childhood education, a proven way to help lift children out of poverty.

Given today's governmental fiscal restraints and unmet educational needs in the provinces, a last-minute change that distributes half of child-care funds to families who don't have child-care expenses seems to miss the mark.

We know universal early childhood education programs put youngsters at lower risk of incarceration or income assistance and on a path to better educations and jobs.

Across Canada, early learning could use some of the \$3.7 billion the Conservatives will be giving families for child care. There's nothing wrong with giving families a break, but, with funds scarce, a balanced approach that also assisted early learning would be good policy.

Nova Scotia has eight early learning centres and, if it had the money, would likely fund more.

Given that unmet need, this expenditure looks more like a spur-of-the moment pre-election financial carrot for voters than carefully thought-out social policy spending that will reap benefits for years to come.

**Region:** Nova Scotia <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** funding <sup>[4]</sup>

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/15/04/child-care-policy-lures-voters-ignores-early-education-needs> [2] <https://thechronicleherald.ca/editorials/1278436-editorial-child-care-policy-lures-voters-ignores-early-education-needs> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7853> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding>