

Time to fix the childcare problem ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Let's talk some more about childcare, shall we?

I am the first to say that our little family is in a good situation over here. I had hoped to stay home with Small One after my maternity leave came to an end, but whether or not we could afford to be a single-income family was another story. And in many ways it's been hard. There is little, if any, savings to be had. I'm learning a bit more about homesteading; we grow much of our food, seasonally, and are learning how to stretch our dollar. And Little One - well, he makes our lives so much richer than my return to the workforce ever could.

But let's say we had wanted to put him in daycare - where would we even begin? How would we find a childcare space? Would it be in a regulated daycare, or an unregulated dayhome? My personal preference would have been to have a childcare worker come to our home, but paying out a full wage would have made that financially impossible. So even if we could find a place to put our little one, could we have afforded it?

In Canada there's approximately one million children under the age of five who have working parents, yet there are only 500,000 regulated child care spaces. Further, there are only enough regulated spaces for approximately 19 per cent of children aged 0-12. Where do the rest of the children go? I hear horror stories of endless waitlists, paying to secure a spot for childcare a year in advance, or having to turn down job opportunities because childcare cannot be secured. Or, my own personal nightmare: having one's child in an unregulated and insecure childcare situation with someone who has no childcare experience because it's an absolute last resort. As a former childcare provider, I have high standards. I want the very best for my child. I want someone who, if I cannot be with him, will love him, teach him, help him to grow, allow him freedom and space to be himself, be respectful of him and any differences he might have. I want someone who will support play-based learning, who will feed him healthy, whole foods. What I really want is another parent for him - another teacher, another educator, another friend. That is harder to come by than one would want to think.

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Stay home or return to work? What are the benefits?

I am thankful every day to be home with Little One. Had I managed to find someone to look after Small Person, perhaps we would have been further ahead financially, but we also would've had to sort out after-school care for our middle-child, who was to be eight years old when my maternity leave ended. And as someone who moved to Newfoundland without any family, I personally have no extended family here to draw on for childcare support, and all the members of my partner's family work. We would've been scrambling to find childcare, and I would have missed so many beautiful moments. Little One leaves me grateful every day for these moments with him, as he grabs my face in his hands to turn my head towards him so that he has my fullest attention. Or as he suddenly sings "Ellemmenohpee!!!" and "W - funny word!" Our days are rich in so many ways.

And realistically, how could we afford it? Would we be that much better off if we found full-time childcare for Small Person, and after-school care-or some serious playdate planning-for our middle child? It astounds me to no end that there are countries all over the world that fully recognize the value of childcare. Childcare is an investment in our society's future. It helps achieve gender equality in the workplace by enabling women to return to work sooner. Good quality childcare helps to teach our children at a younger age. It is an investment in our society to invest in child care programs. We have much to learn from other places, like Sweden, where all children are entitled to childcare. And cost is another factor. In Sweden, women do not pay more than 3 per cent of their wages toward childcare, with the cost of the parents' child care payments being capped. Compare this to St. John's, where on average 32 per cent of a woman's income goes toward childcare. And on a case-by-case basis, as we continue to consider the high costs of regulated childcare, we move onward to Québec.

Québec, where in both Québec City and Montreal, only 6 per cent of a woman's income goes toward regulated childcare. Six per cent, versus a whopping 35 per cent in St. John's.

Can I just move to Québec already then?

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Immediate returns, or a long-term plan for childcare?

Certainly childcare is a hot topic. It's raised in every federal budget. And here we are, in an election year again. So what does the government do? It allegedly tries to make child care more affordable for families by giving us income-splitting measures and an increased Universal Child Care Benefit. But as Kelly noted earlier, these tax breaks are doing nothing to increase child care spaces. And for someone like Hope, the financial benefit of these programs won't amount to much.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives breaks it all down for us:

- Only 49 per cent of Universal Child Care Benefit will go to families with children under the age of 13.
- The benefit of \$160 month will only amount to approximately 3 days of child care in Canada's major cities.
- The program will not create any child care spaces.

I admit, we have thought about income-splitting. When the federal government first promoted the plan, it sounded appealing. A bigger tax break if we split our income, transferring up to 50 per cent of one spouse's income to the lower-earning spouse. But then I started to read the fine print on the program. Eighty-nine per cent of families with children under 18 will not qualify for income-splitting, while only 3 per cent of families will receive the maximum benefit, up to \$2,000.

Two thousand dollars is a drop in the barrel for the estimated \$1,394 per month people in St. John's pay for infant childcare (childcare up to 2 years of age). It's pennies for someone like Kelly, who is paying \$110 per day for childcare, or upwards of \$24,000 a year. That's almost a full minimum wage salary.

Two thousands dollars - if you qualify. If you're a single-parent family, you won't qualify. If each parent is in the same income bracket, you won't qualify. Also consider that for the same cost of the Universal Child Care Benefit and the income-splitting program to be implemented this year, the federal government could also have created another 355,000 regulated child care spaces. Spaces for children. Available spaces for children. Yup.

Further, consider that Québec spends \$2 billion per year on its \$7.30 a day child care program. The federal government will be spending \$7 billion this year on the income-splitting program and increased Universal Child Care Benefit. That same \$7 billion could create a \$7 a day child care program for the rest of the country outside Québec. A program that would benefit families who have children who need childcare, families that can't afford childcare, and families that can't find child care spaces.

Being in a federal election year, child care is an issue that will find its way into the forefront of election campaigns. Already, the NDP are touting a highly-publicized child care plan to follow in the Québec model. The NDP propose a \$15 per day child care plan, with promises to increase regulated daycare spaces by 1,000,000 over the next decade. It all sounds great, but the details of how this will unfold are missing. Over the next year it should be interesting to hear more of the NDP's child care plan.

Similarly, the Liberals are beginning to delve into child care as well. So far, their main focus has been to criticize the income splitting measures implemented by the Conservatives. Their website states that "Liberals will work to ensure that all Canadians are able to access affordable, high-quality child care spaces in every region of this country". How that will happen is still unclear.

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The more I learn about our childcare situation in Canada, the more astounded I am. The more disbelief I have. The more I feel that our country, our government, our province, our people as a society do not have a respect for our children, for women (as parental leave is still primarily for women and there is still a significant wage gap). There is little respect for our society and for our future. An investment in childcare is an investment in our future. It puts more women back in the workforce (should they choose to return to the workforce), and provides our children with qualified early childhood educators who are teaching our children. But to mask government tax breaks as benefiting our children and benefitting families when families are still struggling to make ends meet does nothing for our society.

And as lucky as I consider myself, as grateful as I am to spend time with Small Person, we're in a hard spot many days. And if I were to go back to work - well, it wouldn't be easy, to say the least.

- reprinted from The Independent

Region: Newfoundland ^[2]

Tags: budget ^[3]

election ^[4]

public opinion ^[5]

funding ^[6]

mother's labour force participation ^[7]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/15/04/time-fix-childcare-problem> [2] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7851> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/budget> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/election> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/public-opinion> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [7]
<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8142>