

# The miracle of the vacancies and the spaces<sup>[1]</sup>

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How about that? With an exposé by one right-wing think-tank and two comment pieces in a right-wing newspaper about the exposé by the right-wing think-tank, child care space shortages as a problem for parents have been made to disappear! Parents must be rejoicing!

Had we pesky "daycare proponents" only known-rather than harping on the problems of space shortages, high fees, inequity and uneven quality-we might have instead sat at the feet of the miracle workers who managed this, applied their magic and space shortages could have been vanquished just like that! Poof! Gone!

Joking aside, it's hard to know whether to respond seriously to such an argument and-if the answer is yes-then how?

The report relies largely on semantic and numerical gymnastics, sets up straw men, then knocks them down ("centre waiting lists are not a good measure of demand") and suggests intentional obfuscation on the part of Toronto Children's Services ("vacancies in daycare are a well-guarded secret"). It also barely touches on how key child care elements fit in-part-day nursery schools often used by parents not in the labour force, regulated home child care and parental leave. It doesn't discuss how key affordability is to how parents access spaces. And when it makes the accusation that "preferential funding granted to centre-based daycare [which] discriminates against parents using other forms of ELCC, and makes parental care the most expensive option" it leaves out the massive federal spending on the Universal Child Care Benefit.

There are factual errors such as conflating "institutional" centre-based daycare with all non-parental care more generally, misunderstanding how parents access services (can a parent in Scarborough use child care in Etobicoke?) and confusing Toronto's subsidy wait list with space waiting lists. And if Ontario had "opted to compensate centres for lost revenue created by the full-day kindergarten program", it would have been good news to everyone but wasn't so.

Some of the content is silly or simply untrue, for example, that "the daycare lobby would have us believe that all parents - and especially all low income single mothers - want and need nothing more than a space in a daycare centre for their child". And while no one credible would suggest that the labour force participation rate of mothers is a one-for-one representation of the demand for centre-based child care, even these authors would surely have to admit that increased labour force participation of mothers of young children is one of the key, legitimate drivers of both the need and the demand for good child care.

It's hard to know what all this is getting at. There should be more fee subsidies? Funding should be reorganized? There should be better data? Parents don't want regulated (or any?) child care anyway? Regulation doesn't make any difference? All mothers of young children should leave the workforce?

The Marriage and Family Canada (IMFC) Institute, the report's publisher, was established in 2006 by Focus on the Family Canada (a Christian evangelical right-wing registered charity) as its Ottawa-based research arm. Over the years, IMFC writings have denounced "institutional" child care (which it considers to be harmful to children and undermining of families) and full-day kindergarten.

The group has staked out the Harper government's Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB) and income splitting as its preferred ways of addressing child care. Here it's worth noting journalist Marci McDonald's observation in a Walrus article (2006) that "those around the prime minister drafted [an Ottawa-based Christian evangelical leader] to help sell the government's contentious child-care policy".

Whatever the Marriage Institute report is selling, most people experienced with child care agree that there is demonstrably a shortage of quality child care spaces, particularly for infants and toddlers, children with disabilities, rural communities, part-time and non-standard hours' workers. To most people-especially parents trying to find child care-saying that there is no space shortage is both nonsensical and insulting.

At the same time, there are, and have always been, vacancies in centre-based child care for a variety of reasons. A key reason in Ontario is affordability-high fees and the lack of subsidies-which are rationed. In other provinces affordability is often more related to high fees and subsidies that don't cover the full cost (though usually not rationed). Take, for example, a centre in a low income Toronto neighbourhood with many vulnerable and newcomer families who need child care to work, go to school or take English classes. As there are no subsidies available and no families in the area can pay the hefty fees, the centre is partly empty, with one room is closed entirely.

Thus, there are vacant spaces despite the obvious need and the demand. There are other reasons for vacancies as well, such as age, language and cultural specificity, neighbourhood and parent preferences for certain programs. In fact, that markets like Canada's do not work well to deliver child care is one of the reasons that daycare "proponents" call for a system, not a market.

The IMFC article does make a good point about the need for better child care data and that the data should be publicly available. The breadth and range of data that could help planning and fine-tuning a real child care system is scarce, and has gotten scarcer since the Harper government stopped funding national data collection and applied research.

None of this is either new or news. What is new though, is the clearly staked out political divide framing the child care issue-building a child care system or giving money to parents-that has already occurred in the lead up to the 2015 federal election. On the "give money to parents" side-are the Harper Conservatives and their ideological team mates such as IMFC. On the "build a child care system" side are the "proponents", the federal NDP and, likely, the federal Liberals. It is noteworthy that neither the NDP nor the Liberals have committed to taking the UCCB money away from families but rather are clear that it's income support, not child care. Specifically, the New Democrats have already released their plan for a universal child care system and the Liberals have thus far released their plan for re-profiling the UCCB in a new Child Benefit.

What is also new is that the child care "proponents" (who peskily continue to point out that there are child care space shortages since so many parents can't find the child care they need and want) have articulated a clear vision that should make sense even to the opponents of a national child care plan and, indeed, should appeal to them as a needed support for all families who choose to use it.

The vision depicts a child care system that is not be one-size-fits-all, provides a variety of kind of services, is not compulsory and is accompanied by other family policy like better parental leave and child benefits. The vision is that child care should be available and affordable for all who choose it, high quality, inclusive, publicly-funded and much more publicly-managed. This vision can be found in written form [here](#) [4], and depicted in a short animated video [here](#) [5].

These ideas and vision of a national child care program are the basis of a Canada-wide effort intended to make sure that child care is on the national agenda in the lead up to the 2015 federal election. Based on the public response to this so far, it seems that the parents (and grandparents) across Canada speaking up for child care must not have heard yet that the shortage of spaces is a myth or conspiracy.

So if you want to solve the child care space shortage the easy way, just click your heels together three times and declare it a myth. But if your experience tells you that child care shortages are a real problem, go to [votechildcare.ca](http://votechildcare.ca) and join the movement for quality child care that all families can afford.

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