

We're not 'there yet' on child care in Canada^[1]

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EXCERPTS

"Are we there yet?" This is a familiar question to any parent with a young child. It's also a question about how Canada supports its families that I ask each month as I pull together the means to pay for my son's child care.

I feel fortunate to have had a space for him at the child-care centres where I have worked as a trained early childhood educator. It gives me peace of mind to know he has been learning and has been cared for by great early childhood educators he adores. And yet, we are among the very few. Too many families are struggling to find child care while they work or study, oftentimes relying on uncertain private arrangements as a last resort.

As assistant director at the Saskatoon Early Childhood Education Demonstration Centre, I speak to parents every day who are trying to find child care in our community. Come September, my son will head off to Grade 1, and I will need to make private arrangements for his before and after care as there is no licensed school-age program directly available in our town.

The reality in Canada is quality child-care spaces are hard to find, they are expensive, and as a result women (yes, it is still mostly women) end up paying the consequences. As it stands, there are regulated spaces for only one in five children. For many Canadian families, child care is the second-highest household expense -- one many are unable to afford, especially with more than one child.

Most people would think it absurd to consider such a haphazard, pay-your-own-way-if-you-can-find-it approach to health care or schooling. These publicly funded systems we cherish and all benefit from were developed as responses to collective social and economic needs. Likewise, the social and economic need for building a child-care system has been discussed for more than 40 years.

Today a real system of child services parents can count on when they need it is more crucial than ever to support 21st-century families and bolster the economy.

When I turn on the news and open a paper lately, I am happy to note the political parties are finally talking about child care. They are putting it front and centre, although they propose vastly different approaches.

To me, the answer is universal child care. This means a system of services like the one my son is lucky enough to attend -- and like the one I won't be able to find come September. These necessary programs are not going to be delivered through a cheque in the mail covering a tiny fraction of the cost and are taxable.

In the lead-up to the federal election, I will be talking with my colleagues, neighbours and family about a real system of quality child-care programs everyone can afford and count on. Quality child care shouldn't be a matter of good fortune, just as accessing health care isn't just for lucky Canadians.

So to quote my son, "Are we there yet?" Not yet, but this election puts us within reach, if together we decide to make it a national priority.

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