

Election 2015 blog: When we say "a national child care program", what does this mean? ^[1]

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Author: Martha Friendly ^[2]

Child Care NOW federal election 2015 blog series

Child care has become a key issue in Election 2015. To support the public interest and political debate, the Childcare Resource and Research Unit's blog, Child Care Now, will be published each week between August 12 and October 19, 2015. Blogs will be topical, based on such questions as: What is a "national child care program"? Why does Canada need a national child care program? When we say "high quality affordable" child care, what does this mean? What else do families with young children need, and what's the difference between other family policies (like a child benefit) and child care? The blogs may be based on available documents, some may be written by guest bloggers and they may also be circulated by sources other than the CRRU website, such as *rabble.ca*.

When we say "a national child care program", what does this mean? is the first blog in the series.

The real issue, then, is not whether mothers should work but rather the need to ensure that children are cared for adequately while mothers are at work (Toronto Social Planning Council, 1960).

There has been political debate about Canadian child care for (conservatively speaking) at least 50 or 60 years. Whether it's local, provincial or national, child care is usually debated passionately and intensely on all sides. One of the fundamental questions that has long loomed large in these debates -- and about which there is considerable confusion today is: what is a national child care program anyway? Despite the considerable experience Canadians have with national social programs such as Medicare, how a national program for early childhood education and care could be developed, operate and what it could offer is quite contested even in 2015.

As the fall approaches and debates, forums, panels, media coverage and all candidates' meetings become a daily part of the 2015 federal election campaign, there will be discussion about what "national child care" means. Does it mean: compulsory child care? Or that children whose mothers are not in the paid workforce are not included? "Free" to parents? Full-day centres only? "One size fits all", so no provision for rural communities, non-standard hours schedules or part-time? What about including children with special needs? Will Ottawa Central Planning be sending lunch menus and toddler sleep schedules to Saskatoon, Glace Bay and Kenora?

It's pretty easy to talk about what a national child care program *isn't*, as the spectre of free, compulsory, all government-operated, "institutional", "one-size-fits-all" child care is regularly evoked as a fearsome end result of commitment to a national program. Witness Mr. Harper's August 2015 remark about "one-size-fits-all, bureaucratic daycare schemes that ignore the preferences of individual families" or a comment by an anti-child care organization that under a national child care program, "parents with special needs (irregular schedules, or part-time work) would be left high and dry".

These metaphors misinterpret and reframe the concept of a national child care program that has been proposed and written about by academics, policymakers and advocates from the 1980s until today -- one with regional variation and options in service provision so as to offer "parental choice" (centres, part-time and non-standard /extended hours services, home child care and school-age programs, augmented by better paid, more flexible, more inclusive parental leave) and eventually, accessibility to all families.

National social programs have historically been a unifying theme in Canada, which has been a federation (that is, a system of government made up of a union of sub-units-the provinces and territories) from the beginning. Canadian federalism may have stalled development of the kind of strong social safety net other countries have created but nevertheless, Canada was able to build a national health care program with similar -- but not identical -- programs designed and delivered by provinces/territories under the Canada Health Act. It is this Medicare-type multi-level model that has long been proposed for child care, with federal leadership and collaboration with provinces/territories/First Nations determining program design and delivery within an overarching policy framework.

Other national social programs such as the Canada Pension Plan and parental leave benefits do follow a "one-size-fits-all" model in most of Canada, with Quebec sometimes delivering its own programs. Most ironically the Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB -- introduced when an emerging national child care program was cancelled in 2006) is very much "one-size-fits-all". All families receive the same monthly cheque per child no matter what their income or whether or not they use child care. Indeed, then-HRSDC Minister Diane Finley cited this feature as a positive attribute (the UCCB "treats all families the same whether they live in downtown Toronto, rural PEI or

Inuvik"). Thus, interpretations of Canadian federalism as well as the desirability of "one-size-fits-all" models are quite dependent on ideology and politics.

Tales about parents desperate for a child care space, stories of sometimes dangerous unlicensed arrangements and limited public accountability and -- outside Quebec -- sky-high fees are common to communities across much of Canada. The painfully obvious conclusion to this bleak picture is that families need a national child care program that includes all of Canada. Indeed, the evidence doesn't support the always-optimistic idea that provinces will act as "laboratories of innovation" to produce the proverbial thousand points of light. What we've learned from many years of experience is that without a federal role to provide the "glue" and substantial federal funding to scale up provincial efforts, provinces have remained more similar in what they lack than they are different in their initiatives and intentions.

As the concept paper underpinning the national campaign [VoteChildCare2015](#) [3] envisions, a national child care system would need to grow over a period of years to include all children regardless of families' work status/ income/region. Locally-managed programs would be planned and developed to offer a variety of high quality services with well-trained well-paid educators: centres, part-day nursery schools, kindergarten, regulated home child care and parenting programs for parents staying at home with young children. Children with special needs would be fully included, as they now are in the best child care programs. Services would be non-compulsory, affordable, publicly-funded, publicly-managed, public and non-profit, inclusive and participatory. And broader family policy such as a well-designed child benefit and improved paid parental leave would be available to support families more holistically. You can read the full [ChildCare2020 vision](#) [4] or watch the [vision on video](#) [5].

There is considerable evidence to show that this kind of public policy approach is the most effective way to provide good options ("choice") for families -- that is, an overarching national policy framework outlining shared principles, well-developed service systems designed and administered by each province/ territory, local planning and management, an accountability framework and a voice for parents. Such a program would not only be congruent with Canadian values but consistent with Canadian federalism while providing families with a range of real on-the-ground choices. Demonstrably, it would be hard to dismiss such a program as "one-size-fits-all", institutional or as ignoring parents' preferences.

But perhaps some basic assurances upon which all Canadian families would be able to rely is the right way to go -- assurances that their children will be safe, well cared for, well fed, learning and enjoying a first-rate quality of life-and that parents who go to work or school can do so without worrying about whether their children are safe and happy. Clearly some principles, goals and objectives will be shared because they are appropriate for all children and families "whether they live in downtown Toronto, rural PEI or Inuvik".

On the flip side, everything we know tells us that without a well-conceived, well-implemented, well-funded national child care program based on best evidence, the early childhood education and child care needs of families across Canada will remain unmet.

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