

Election 2015 blog: Quality child care shouldn't be just a matter of luck ^[1]

Posted on 19 Aug 2015

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. 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.

Quality child care shouldn't be just a matter of luck is the second blog in the series and is based on a presentation delivered as the annual Margaret Laurence Lecture ^[3] at Trent University in March 2015.

All blogs in this series may be found on the CRRU's website ^[4]

Quality child care shouldn't be just a matter of luck

If anyone had told me back in the 1970s when I was a young parent at York University Cooperative Daycare Centre that parents would still be attributing their success in Canada's child care crap-shoot to "luck" in 2015, I wouldn't have believed it. It is hard to fathom -- how can it be that 45 years after the Royal Commission on the Status of Women and three decades since the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment called child care "the ramp that provides equal access to the workforce for mothers", finding and affording child care is still a matter of luck.

Yet in today's Canada -- which aspires to being "modern", "world class" and a good place to raise children -- "I was just lucky" is a theme that one hears over and over from parents. And it's not just in their heads -- the lack of a national child care program means that "luck" is the reality for most families in most of Canada most of the time.

How often do you hear young parents say "I was lucky with child care"? This can mean "I was lucky I found a great babysitter". Or "I was lucky my partner and I were able to juggle work and child care" or "my mother was retired and was willing to help". Or "I had a good boss who allowed me to work flexible hours". Too rarely, it's "I was lucky I got a great high quality child care space" and -- even more rarely -- "I got a subsidy that covered enough of the fee so I could afford the great child care space I was lucky enough to get".

The reality is that even if parents are well-informed, well-organized and do all the right things to improve their chances (like putting their names on 10 waiting lists immediately after the positive pregnancy test), in Canada today, finding and paying for high quality child care is really mostly a matter of luck.

Whether parents can find and pay for quality child care that fits their needs, and their child's needs depends on a complex amalgamation of life-circumstances: where they live provincially and locally; how wealthy they are; their work or school schedule; whether they have family living nearby who are willing and able to pitch in; their language, and sometimes culture; whether their child has additional or special needs, who their employer is; who the government is.

The key explanation for this is that in Canada early childhood education and child care is a patchwork, not a system. Why do we have a patchwork? The key reason is that we -- like the other countries that show up poorly in international comparisons [1] -- rely on a child care market in which governments take only limited responsibility. In this environment, child care is treated as a private family responsibility -- over which families often have little control -- not a public good. As a result, access to services (affordability and availability) and their quality is tremendously uneven not only across Canada's regions but within each province/territory and even neighbourhood.

Instead of designing and building a coherent system with long-term goals, planning, substantial public funding, public planning and public management, Canada mostly falls back on market forces and a consumerist approach based on parent fees and demand-side funding (like tax breaks and cheques-through-the-mail). In this approach, determining where child care services will be set up (and who they're for) is usually an individual or private matter -- rather than establishing public planning [2] processes, this responsibility is usually left up to parent or voluntary groups or entrepreneurs. As well, child care services outside Quebec rely in large part on parent fees, while provincial/territorial fee subsidy programs are by and large not designed to reliably ensure access even for the low income families for whom they're intended.

Overall, we rely on market forces for shaping, creating, maintaining, delivering and financing Canadian child care. And -- as the literature shows -- a market model generally fails to work for child care. It's no wonder that child care is mostly a matter of luck for parents!

So what needs to happen? What kind of public policy is needed to ensure that affordable, quality child care becomes an entitlement and part of the social infrastructure, not a matter of luck and market forces? The short answer is that we need both federal and provincial/territorial governments involved in developing coherent, comprehensive policy. This needs to include clear plans for moving from the current market to a system, that is services that are much more publicly-funded, much more publicly-planned, much more publicly-managed and delivered as high quality not-for-profit and public programs.

While child care policy is undoubtedly complex, and along the way to a national program many choices would need to be debated and decided, the evidence that supports the idea that families in Canada would benefit from a much less haphazard approach is quite unambiguous.

This year is obviously a critical one for Canadian child care as the outcome of the next federal election will have significant implications for its future. The political choices are shaping up to be unusually clear. Whether the outcome of the next federal election will mean that child care remains a matter of luck or whether it will mean that Canada will finally begin to build the universal, high quality and comprehensive national child care system that we, our children and our children's children deserve still remains to be seen.

[1](See, for example UNICEF (2008), <http://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/08/12/chil...> [5])

[2] The City of Toronto's just-released new five year Service Plan offers a good illustration of many of these ideas at the local level. It sets out principles and goals, targets and timetables and is backed by a base of broad community participation; data and research.

Tags:
election [6]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/blog/election-2015-blog-quality-child-care-shouldnt-be-just-matter-luck>
Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/blog/election-2015-blog-quality-child-care-shouldnt-be-just-matter-luck> [2] <https://childcarecanada.org/blog/author/martha-friendly> [3] <https://www.trentu.ca/genderwomensstudies/> [4] <http://www.chi/documents/research-policy-practice/15/08/child-care-now-blog-%E2%80%93-election-2015> [5] <http://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/08/12/child-care-transition-league-table-early-childhood-educatio> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/election>