

Election 2015 blog: Time-warp: Forty years later, parents still carry most of the responsibility for child care ^[1]

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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](#) ^[3] and the [Broadbent Institute](#) ^[4].

Time-warp: Forty years later, parents still carry most of the responsibility for child care is the fourth blog in the series.

All blogs in this series may be found on the [CRRU's website](#) ^[5]

Time-warp: Forty years later, parents still carry most of the responsibility for child care

When I was a parent in a university co-op daycare centre in the 1970s, it was clear that the parents were responsible for it. Parents initiated the centre and later expanded it. It was supported by parent fees. Parents spent half a day a week "participating" as quasi-staff and governed the centre, holding interminable meetings. Parent "work parties" built furnishings and even a new playground. York University contributed space, utilities and in-kind resources but mostly the parents were responsible for keeping the centre going, fundraising, building, and even determining the programming. Governments played a pretty limited role, contributing some dollars as fee subsidies and monitoring to ensure minimum standards were met.

The daycare co-op was a terrific experience. We were lucky enough to have time and resources to put into it and many of us learned a lot. Our kids had a wonderful child care experience -- perhaps the parent involvement that generated supportive social networks and long-time friendships made it special.

But that was then. It was the mid-1970s and the powerful influences of the 60s were still with us. It was a decade before employed mothers were a majority and long before the "generation squeeze" phenomenon had shifted the reality of parenting for young families who no longer had spare time to make homemade granola to sell at child care fundraisers.

The data show that today's "generation squeeze" is working at contract jobs, paying off student loans, trying to balance the budget while carrying huge mortgages, sky-high rent or condo costs -- and child care fees are more pricey than university tuition. And it's no longer the case as it was in the 1970s that a modestly paid job could keep a family with only one working parent (usually the father) above the poverty line.

It's pretty stunning to recognize that Canadian family life has experienced massive social change but that things haven't really changed

when it comes to responsibility for child care. Today the basic Canadian premise about child care still harkens back to the 1970s: child care is still a private family responsibility, with only limited assumption of responsibility by federal and provincial governments.

It's still parents who, if they're lucky, need to scramble to secure a quality space for their child by getting on ten waiting lists, often paying hefty "waiting list fees" to do so. Or they use unregulated care, which they manage completely on their own with no public oversight. And in most of Canada, parents pay hefty fees for child care, whatever the type.

Parents are also often responsible for initiating child care programs and then maintaining them. And even after the substantial hard work of finding appropriate space, raising funds, buying (or finding) equipment, setting up the program, hiring staff, going through the licensing process, then governing and maintaining a hard-won program, it's still often up to parents to keep it going. Too often, there is little or no support from government.

This lack of support from governments for parents has been highlighted recently in Ontario. This week, new legislation and some regulations came into effect. Among these are several new well-intended rules for unregulated child care including limiting the number of children per caregiver to two under age two and including the caregiver's own children in the numbers. But -- as a journalist looking at Ontario's child care "modernization" observed, "it sounds as though it's been left to the parents to monitor this, as no one else will be." Absolutely right -- they're on their own; it's the responsibility of parents to monitor the new provincial rules as unregulated care receives no public oversight.

In Ottawa, parents at the threatened Beausoleil Day Care -- one of only three francophone city-run child care centres in Ottawa -- formed an advocacy group called SOS Beausoleil but were unable to keep the centre going when city renovations slated it for eviction. The parent group has been pressing municipal officials for solutions (as they should be) but what's striking to me is that the provincial government has been a non-player -- absent from the parents' struggle.

Another story about parents left to sink or swim on their own: TLC Daycare, a 25 year old centre in Markham is being turfed out by the landlord, the City of Markham. In order to keep going in alternative space, the parent-run centre would need to add either substantial market rent or the cost of extensive renovations to their budget, thereby increasing the fees. That is -- it's entirely up to the parents to save the centre, as appeals to the landlord have fallen on deaf ears. Again the Ontario government (which carries the constitutional responsibility for child care) isn't part of the solution. There is no provision for ensuring that good centres like this don't just shut down -- the "responsible" government is nowhere to be seen.

The media reported about another instance of parents trying to pick up the pieces as a result of what could be called a "hostile takeover" at Scotia Plaza, a George Brown College lab school. The centre, in downtown Toronto, has been located in purpose-built commercial space for 25 years under an agreement with the developer. But archetypal big-box child-care operator Kids & Company offered up market rent when the centre's lease ran out. The parents (although they didn't operate the centre) contemplated mounting their own \$2.5 million fund raiser to cover the cost of the increased rent so as to be able to compete with the profitable Kids & Company for the facility but to no avail.

It's not that Ontario hasn't put a fair amount of effort and resources into early childhood education in the last decade, as have a number of other provinces. But the job is far from done. And unfortunately for families, child care -- an essential service for many -- has fallen by the wayside in much of Canada. What's missing is the coherent joined-up scaled-up public policy and substantial, sustained well-directed public funding needed to make the significant changes to support families in 21st century circumstances.

There's no doubt that child care across Canada is languishing. While there's been a 30 year push for a national child care program, there's never been a time that its absence has been so glaringly obvious. It's painfully evident that families across Canada need a federal government that will work as a leader and as a partner with the provinces to develop public policy that will assume much more of the responsibility, shifting it off the shoulders of the overextended young families who now carry most of it.

But a national child care program isn't only about the federal government. Part of the vision of a national child care program is well-designed *provincial/territorial* policy and well-supported, well-planned provincial/territorial program development. It is here that Ontario and other provinces could -- should -- be taking action now. This means developing solid policy that lays it all out in the long-term goals, objectives, targets, timetables, as well as a coherent, supported implementation plan.

It also means, though, immediate action so the provinces begin to share some of the responsibility with parents. Given the demonstrated need for high quality child care, surely one immediate kind of action would be to stop allowing good quality public and non-profit programs to close without the provincial government stepping in to help.

Last week, one of the advocates for the Markham centre, who happens to have been, for many years, Manager of Children's Services and then Deputy City Manager in Toronto, said all this in two sentences. "This is why we need a national child care policy in this country," said Brenda Patterson, whose undergraduate degree is in Child Studies. "*At the very least* (my italics), we need a policy where child care centres are not constantly at risk of losing their space."

Amen to that. It's not the 1970s anymore and young Canadian parents shouldn't be expected to pay the rent, feed the kids, go to school, find jobs, pay off their student loans and mortgages and care for their aged parents while receiving so little support from their governments with what should be a stable, affordable public service. It is neither rational nor the right thing to continue as we are.

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