

Quality child-care benefits children, families, the economy ^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

Campaign 2000: End Child and Family Poverty in Canada, July 2015, states: "Families today face increased challenges associated with precarious, part-time work, dismal social assistance rates, limited access to training and shortages of affordable housing and quality child care. Many are left with no choice but to turn to food banks to feed their children." As Carol Bellamy, former CEO of UNICEF, has said "the physical, emotional and intellectual impairment that poverty inflicts on children can mean a lifetime of suffering and want — and a legacy of poverty for the next generation."

So it is good news that children and family issues have been raised by all major political parties in this federal election and they are offering families with children additional financial benefits and/or increased access to child-care services.

But what investments would make the most difference for children and their families? We believe investment in child care outweighs all other initiatives:

Licensed child care is good for children. Children who attend quality child care have lifelong benefits. For example: the High-Scope Perry Preschool longitudinal study of 123 children born in poverty demonstrated that adults at age 40 who had taken the child-care program at three and four years had higher earnings; were more likely to hold a job; had committed fewer crimes; and were more likely to have graduated from high school than adults who did not have that child care.

Child care benefits the family. Most women with children require child care as their income is needed to support the family, even if they would prefer to stay at home to look after their child. When affordable and accessible child care was made available in Quebec, there was an overall decline in poverty by 50 per cent. Workforce participation, hours worked and annual earnings increased and fewer women were on welfare.

Child care brings a huge return on investment. Economist James Heckman has calculated that there is a \$7 return to society for every dollar invested in early childhood education.

Affordable child care acts as a spur to economic growth. When it is available, both parents can then afford to work, a third worker in the child-care field is added, and all three pay taxes.

In spite of all these known benefits, Canada does not invest strongly in young children. David MacDonald and Martha Friendly in 2014 showed "at best Canada spends half the OECD average and one third of the recommended minimum of one per cent of GDP for children 0 to five in child-care programs." This would be even lower if Quebec did not contribute 60 per cent of Canadawide spending. Carolyn Ferns and Martha Friendly demonstrated in 2014 that less than a quarter of all children under six have access to licensed child care.

The child-care situation in Hamilton is no better. The Ontario Municipal Benchmarking Initiative (OMBI) in 2013 found only 16.4 per cent of children 0 to 12 has access to licensed child care. These spaces are not evenly distributed. The Hamilton Early Years Community Plan 2012-15 shows there are fewer in low income and rural areas and range from 32.2 per cent for all children in Ancaster to 0 per cent in north lower Hamilton, north of Barton. The Social Planning and Research Council 2013 bulletin "Recession Impacts: Unemployment" found that Hamilton has only sufficient money for subsidies for just under half of Hamilton's children living in poverty.

The present situation is a nightmare for many mothers. "Obtaining child care that works for me and my girls has always been a challenge. There have been times when I've qualified for daycare subsidies and times when I haven't. But, most recently it's not been worth the headache to even try. You can spend months on a wait list for a child-care subsidy. In the meantime, as a single mother, I might be offered a job that I have to decline because I don't have child care I can afford yet. This is only compounded by the high cost of child care in Hamilton and all over Canada. In my case there was a time when the amount I paid monthly for daycare was more than I paid in rent. It meant that even working full-time we still lived below the poverty line.

"This is not just about the money it costs. It's about finding affordable and quality spaces that allow me to work and support my family

knowing they are being well cared for.

"A national universal child-care program would go a long way to help change my life for the better. Lack of child care disproportionately affects women and children living in poverty and we have the capacity to fix this. It would be great if it could happen while my children are still young enough to benefit." — Celeste Licorish

Affordable and accessible quality child care is the only social program that directly benefits the healthy development of the child, improves the economic health of the family and acts as a spur to the economy. In this federal election, political parties must recognize that investment in affordable and accessible quality child care is needed now.

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