

Ashby: Provincial daycare reforms are bad for women and families^[1]

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EXCERPTS

What is the difference between an infant and a toddler? And what does the difference mean for Canada's poverty reduction strategy? The issues are more connected than you might think.

You might think that the definition lies in the verb "toddle," which implies the ability to move — however unsteadily — under one's own power. This is true of children taking their first steps, and seasoned adults stumbling home from last call.

By contrast, the word "infant" comes from the Latin "infans," which means literally "unable to speak." While we all know that infants vocalize, shrieking with delight or indignation or pain, they have no language.

Compare this to the toddler's well-known ability to say "No!" as early and often as possible, and the differences become clear. It's not just size, or strength. It's agency. It's also the ability, however limited, to defend oneself — as anyone who has walked a tantruming two-year-old out of a grocery store knows.

Why split hairs on this issue? Because the province's proposed new regulations mean that fewer infants may receive care in local daycares. Infants would instead graduate to the "toddler room," formerly the sole province of the terrible twos, at a year old. Previously, they went at 18 months, when most children are walking alone, as well as running and climbing. Some parents worry the new regulations mean their infants could be literally run over by careless toddlers.

But it goes beyond that: those "toddler rooms" would have to get bigger to meet the demand. Many care facilities might be cut out of the opportunity to provide care, simply because their rooms don't meet the size requirements.

In turn, because the new regulations provide less incentive to create space for infants, many care facilities are contemplating ending daycare services for children less than 12 months. For parents who are self-employed, or who don't have a full year of maternity or paternity leave, this creates a terrible predicament. Should they take unpaid leave? Should they risk their jobs to do so?

The average age for a child to begin enrolment in Ontario daycare centres is eight months. But if infant rooms close, parents will simply have to wait.

So what does this have to do with Canada's poverty reduction strategy?

Parents have to work. Period. If Canada cares about creating jobs and opportunity, parents need the resources to go back to work whenever they want, or whenever they have to. In the era of the gig economy and seemingly-endless contract work, fewer workers have access to real maternity and paternity leave.

(In fact, this is why some businesses avoid offering full-time employment; it might make them responsible to their employees, and they might actually have to do right by the people who create their wealth.) So it's wrong to assume that parents only "need" daycare after a full year. Worse, the price of daycare is skyrocketing: in Toronto, the average cost is a median thousand dollars a month. For infants, it's \$1,736.

Are those numbers affordable for young, working families? Can informed women just starting their careers be blamed for looking at those numbers, throwing up their hands, and giving up on child-rearing altogether? No.

The data are already in. Affordable childcare boosts the birthrate. The fastest way for the government to increase the tax base is to pave the way for accessible childcare. More women would have more children if they felt supported by their communities in doing so. It's pretty basic. It takes more than a village to raise a child: it takes a legislature.

On this International Women's Day, let's stop trying to fix daycare by changing the rules and keeping women out of the workforce for longer. The answer to the daycare issue isn't to offer less care. It's to care more: about women, about children and about the economy.

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