

It's time to rip the band-aid off Canada's daycare crisis ^[1]

Author: Ostroff, Joshua

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EXCERPTS

A petition to get Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to extend maternity/parental leave for Canadians to 18 months is currently making the social media rounds, earning praise from parents and complaints from the childless along with 40,000 signatures.

It addresses a specific offshoot of Canada's national daycare crisis, which is that parents may get a combined total of 12 months of leave but most daycares won't take infants between the age of 12 and 18 months. And when they do, the cost is exorbitant even by the already sky-high standards of Canadian child care.

My wife and I live across the street from a daycare in downtown Toronto, so we put our son on the waiting list literally before he was born. But like many, it only takes kids 18 months and older (though we eventually got him into one of two exception spots for 16-month-olds who can walk).

We managed to find infant care near my wife's office, but that meant our year-old baby was travelling 45 minutes each way to an incredibly expensive daycare so she could go back to work after her parental leave ended.

How expensive?

A study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) found that in 2015 the average cost of daycare in Toronto was \$1,736 a month. Yes, a month. That's \$411 more than it costs for a toddler at \$1,325, but again these are averages. Infant care spaces in Toronto can top \$2,000 a month per child in a city where the median annual income for young families is \$58,000.

And honestly, we were lucky to have the opportunity to pay that much. The Toronto Star reported last year that there are 346,320 kids under 12 in the city but only 64,700 licensed child care spots. As well, almost 90,000 of those kids are in low-income families but there are only 25,000 child care subsidies available.

It's not just Toronto. The average cost for infant care is \$1,200 in Vancouver, \$1075 in Calgary and \$1,400 in Saint John, so this is a problem that stretches from sea to sea. Even when costs are lower in places like Winnipeg, earnings are lower, too, so as a percentage of income it's a wash.

The petition is calling for Trudeau to fulfill a campaign promise in which the soon-to-be PM claimed "We will introduce more flexible parental benefits that will: allow parents to receive benefits in smaller blocks of time over a period of up to 18 months; and make it possible for parents to take a longer leave -- up to 18 months when combined with maternity benefits -- at a lower benefit level."

Due to these lower benefits over a longer time, Trudeau costed it at only \$125 million per year. Maternity and parental leave benefits come from EI, and equal 55 per cent of weekly insurable earnings up to a maximum of \$537 per week for an income of about \$50,000.

You're basically just getting your own money back, especially since most Canadians pay into EI their whole lives and may never need it. But that hasn't stopped folks online from griping about tax increases, especially those without children who don't want to subsidize those who do.

Well, I would like to drop the mic in front of those folks and point out that our children's taxes will support you in your old age. That's how the system works. Young people pay for old people's health care and social security, whether those old people had kids or not. So stow that argument unless you plan to cover your own elder care costs.

With all that said, extending maternity/parental leave to 18 months doesn't actually solve the problem.

It's a ninja turtle Band-Aid that looks cool and will make us feel better until it's peeled off and we are faced with the same bloody daycare crisis we've had all along.

In 2008 UNICEF declared Canada tied for the worst child care out of the world's 25 richest countries. Since then costs have only gone up and access has only gone down. There are available spaces for only one out of every five Canadian kids.

Infant care is the worst part of this problem -- due to higher caregiver-to-child ratio regulations increasing costs for parents and lowering profit for daycares -- but costs are also incredibly high for toddlers, preschoolers and school-age before and after care.

Everywhere, that is, except for Quebec.

The average monthly cost in Quebec is \$174 across all age groups because they have government-subsidized spots that cost \$7.30 a day (regardless of the child's age) for those making under \$50,000 and \$20 a day for those making between \$50,000 to \$150,000.

In other words, infant care in Quebec is as much as 10 times less than in Toronto for median income earners.

So go ahead and sign that petition because more parental leave would be great, especially if it encourages a more equitable care-giving split between moms and dads. But also realize there's even more benefit for moms with universal child care.

A study by Quebecois economist Pierre Fortin found that Quebec's child care plan, which launched at \$5 a day for five-year-olds back in 1997, had resulted in more women working and lower poverty rates, along with the increased tax revenue and economic activity those portend.

Fortin estimated that by 2008, "universal access to low-fee child care in Quebec induced nearly 70,000 more mothers to hold jobs than if no such program had existed -- an increase of 3.8 per cent in women employment."

That calculated to injecting \$5 billion into Quebec's economy, raising the gross provincial income (GDP) by 1.7 per cent.

"The argument can no longer be that governments cannot afford it. This program is paying for itself. It is self-financing. That is the main finding," Fortin told the Toronto Star in 2011, noting that Quebec recoups \$1.05 for every dollar it spends while Ottawa clears 44 cents in pure profit.

This wasn't an issue in decades past, but dual-income families have doubled since 1976 to 69 per cent, or 1.9 million couple families. Meanwhile, single-parent families topped 1.5 million in the 2011 census.

It's clearly high time for Canada to build on Quebec's lead and develop a universal child care program that extends across the country just like universal health care, social security and education already do.

I mean, if anyone understands the benefit of government-funded child care, it's Justin "Nannygate" Trudeau.

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