It takes a village: The case for universal daycare [1]

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EXCERPTS

During the Second World War the Ernest Manning government refused to invest in wartime day nurseries for Calgary and Edmonton—despite the fact that so many Alberta women with young children had entered the provincial labour force because their husbands were away fighting. Two decades later the demand for daycare began to soar as more women got jobs outside the home. In 1951 only 10 per cent of Alberta's married women were in the labour force; by 1971 it was 43 per cent. The number of commercial daycares in Edmonton and Calgary steadily grew toward the end of the Manning era. The care provided was generally quite poor because of barebones licensing standards that included no staff-training requirements.

The Manning government, how-ever, unwittingly sparked a golden age for high-quality daycare in Alberta when it passed innovative legislation in mid-1966 specifying that municipal governments could establish preventive social services (PSS). The initiative took advantage of new federal funding in the Canada Assistance Plan, also introduced in 1966, which meant that the cost of programs initiated by a municipality would be shared 20/30/50 per cent by municipal, provincial and federal governments respectively.

I say unwittingly because, although provincial civil servants championed daycare as the sort of "preventive social service" that municipalities should initiate, the Social Credit cabinet wasn't entirely sold on the idea. In late 1967 Alf Hooke, Alberta's minister of public welfare, rejected Edmonton's request for PSS funding for a new "model daycare" to be located in the Glengarry recreation centre and run by the city. Hooke told the Edmonton Journal that full-scale, government-supported daycare programs "are for the birds." He said "There are a lot better places the government can put its money than into babysitting services" and indicated he'd rather pay needy mothers to stay at home with their children than support daycare. The minister added that daycare for people who choose to work "can be left to private enterprise."

The controversy reveals a philosophical divide over the care of young children that persists to the present day. But good daycare has demonstrated positive social outcomes for young children and their families. The Alberta government has taken on considerable financial and regulatory responsibility for daycare services in the past 50 years. The next step should be the introduction of universal daycare.

Our government uses the umbrella term "child care" to cover a wide range of group care programs for children, and restricts "day care" to full-day programs outside of a private residence for children aged 0–6. Among academics, the term "early childhood education and care" has replaced both daycare and child care in recognition of the importance of "learning through play" in well-designed programs. I prefer the somewhat archaic "universal daycare," partly because it's shorthand for "universal early childhood education and care" but also because we not only readily know what "daycare" means without having to do a Google search, but invariably have strong opinions on whether it's a good thing or not.

Alf Hooke's 1967 comments invoked beliefs that still inform daycare policy discussions today. Those who favour child care by stay-at-home parents view the traditional two-parent family with a breadwinner and a stay-at-home parent as ideal. They oppose public investment in regulated daycare, arguing that governments should make it easier for parents to care for children in their own homes. Other viewpoints inform today's conversations around childcare policy. Some promote the unfettered provision of daycare services by private businesses. Some see society as individualist and highly competitive, with quality daycare as a means to cultivate individuals with the skills and aptitudes to be successful in such a competitive environment. Others see high-quality daycare as a way to reduce gender, class and generational inequities, and daycares as sites for building community rather than as mere providers of service. Establishing not-for-profit or public daycares with high parental involvement is their priority.

The strong and unrelenting public protest against Hooke's comments prompted Ernest Manning to overrule his minister on the Glengarry daycare decision, which established a precedent for the funding of high-quality daycare in Alberta. Proposals for new daycares soon came in from across the province, with Edmonton, Calgary and Medicine Hat leading the way. By 1978 Alberta had over 60 such municipally sponsored daycares. Their proponents saw them as exemplars for the quality of care all children should experience.

Indeed, in the 1970s the City of Edmonton believed it had "by far the best daycare program in terms of quality" in the country, with its strengths including community involvement and the integration of health, recreation, education and social services. For instance, the city-

run Glengarry daycare was part of a multi-service complex that included counselling and homemaking services. The city's social workers based at the complex organized mother's-day-out programs, and mothers in the community were encouraged to volunteer at the daycare to improve their child care skills. The daycare was close to both a swimming pool (where the children took lessons) and a city-run public health clinic. Besides routine programs such as immunization, the health clinic administered standardized screening to identify children with developmental delays.

Alberta's preventive social service system of high-quality daycares was phased out starting in the late 1970s. The Peter Lougheed government chose instead to rapidly expand the number of subsidized spaces. Despite the strength of "pro-family" conservatism in Alberta, Lougheed and subsequent governments were motivated, even up to the present day, to invest considerable public money in regulated child care because of mothers' high rate of labour force participation. By 2015, 60 per cent of Alberta mothers with a youngest child aged 0–2 were in the labour force, as were 72 per cent of mothers with a youngest child aged 3–5.

Government subsidizes daycare so that parents can afford regulated services. Subsidizing daycare has proven cost-effective, since it increases income tax revenue and decreases public spending on social assistance. Government regulates daycare because young children are vulnerable. The province stimulated a rapid expansion in regulated daycare by paying generous operating allowances for each filled space.

Private businesses, including a few daycare chains, extended their role in the Alberta daycare system throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s as free market conservatism shaped public policies. The ending of operating allowances in 1999, however, made it much harder to achieve a sizeable return on investments in daycares. During the dark days at the end of the Klein era (2005–06) Alberta ranked dead last among provinces in spending on child care.

In 2013–14 the province spent $263-million on regulated child care (including after-school care for older kids), with about half of this ($127-million) going to income-tested subsidies. Most of the rest went to initiatives such as staff wage enhancements and centre accreditation, which provide benefits to all children enrolled in a program. Alberta spent $2,657 per regulated child care space in 2013–14, well behind Saskatchewan, Quebec and Manitoba (ranging from $4,870 to $4,407) and ranked seventh among the 10 provinces.

In recent years the daycare agenda has been shaped by those who aim to reduce the number of people on welfare; to this end, quality daycare is targeted at "at risk" children as a cost-effective way to improve human capital and the independence of children and parents.

The case for universal publicly funded daycare is not an easy sell. "Universal" means available to everyone. Publicly funded means no parental fees for any program, since even modest fees can discourage enrolment by lower-income families. But as University of Calgary population health researchers Lindsay McLaren and Lynn McIntyre note, "There is a powerful logic to directing efforts and resources to those who need them most."

However, targeting only poor families has the unintended consequence of excluding many children in middle-income families—the majority of Alberta children—from high-quality daycare. Lower-income families' participation in such programs would be subsidized, while higher-income families aren't deterred by the costs of high-quality daycare (currently $1,000 or more per month for a 3–4-year-old in Calgary). Middle-income families, however, are particularly price sensitive when it comes to child care, simply because they don't have much discretionary income. These families tend to eschew high-quality care in favour of lower-cost options (sometimes regulated but often not). This is an understandable decision when parents are struggling for money—especially when so many are unaware of the consequential differences between mere child-minding and well-conceived early childhood education and care. Universal daycare of uniformly high quality would free middle-income parents from having to choose low-cost child care to balance the budget, and it would create a level playing field across economic classes.

Targeting support by conventional measures such as family income is also problematic because it fails to identify the majority of children "at risk" and most in need of the comprehensive benefits of high-quality daycare. As researcher Gillian Doherty wrote in 2007, "Vulnerable children live in families across all income levels and in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. Although the incidence of vulnerability is highest among children in poverty, the largest number of children, approximately 75 per cent, live in middle-income households." Universal daycare would allow for more accurately targeted support because a greater number of vulnerable children would be enrolled and their needs (and those of their families) would become apparent to trained staff.

A variety of specialized programs would give these children and their families the extra assistance they need. Universal daycare is therefore not just an alternative to targeted support but a way to deliver interventions to children who otherwise wouldn't appear on the province's radar until kindergarten. These interventions shouldn't be left to the school-age years, since, as an impressive recent body of research on brain development has demonstrated, many human competencies are formed in the preschool years, with much neural circuitry being established in the brain of the developing child.

Selective targeting has the additional drawback of stigmatizing a program and its participants. McLaren and McIntyre argue that it presents a "significant risk of further marginalizing, excluding and compromising the dignity of those who are already most disadvantaged." As a consequence, many families don't place their children in targeted programs, to avoid the hassle of the screening process or any association with a service for "the needy." A universal program, however, carries no stigma and encourages the enrolment of more children in need of early interventions to promote cognitive, language and social-emotional capacities.

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