

## The “child care erodes family values” argument

### THE FORM OF THIS ARGUMENT IN PUBLIC DEBATE

Part of the resistance to a publicly funded program of early childhood services comes from those who want to safeguard the family’s particular and indispensable role in instilling values into children. The fear is that a system of early childhood services might communicate values that are different from and opposed to the values of the family.

The somewhat more extreme version of these fears is voiced by parents who are suspicious of so-called liberal (or secular) humanist values presumably communicated to children by public institutions. These parents are concerned that a public system will be forced to focus on secular “middle-of-the-road” Canadian values and will water down their own stricter values.

These more extreme arguments can be seen as an extension of concerns about the values instilled in children in the public education system. Advocates of this view see a publicly funded child care system as a further incursion into the role of the family in bringing up children. These views are at the core of much of the home-schooling movement, which advocates removing children from the public school system in order to protect them from indoctrination. For example, the “American home-school world” website quotes Marshall Fritz, president of the Alliance for the Separation of School and State: “Our mission is to re-establish parental control of education by reducing or eliminating the government control which has led to propaganda masquerading as education.” ([www.home-school.com](http://www.home-school.com))

Most Canadians would not share these strong concerns but for some, there remains a nervousness about diluting the influence of the family on the values communicated to young children.

### THE CENTRAL ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN RAISING CHILDREN

It is hard to imagine that any argument would win over those who suspect a liberal conspiracy to indoctrinate children and see child care as the latest tactic emerging from that conspiracy. For the large number of Canadians who do not hold this view but who are nonetheless concerned about the values being communicated to their children, it is important to emphasize the primary role of the family in communicating values to children.

Parents are, and will remain, in any child care system that we can imagine, the primary communicators of values to their children. The existing evidence suggests that the dramatic growth of non-parental care that has occurred in the last 30 years has not changed the preponderant influence of parents on their children. Thus, while child care may expose children to different values held by other children and adults, children understand the difference between their own family and others; even extensive child care does not interfere with the ability of parents to instil values into their children.

To a large extent, this “family values” argument is a non-debate. Parents are—and will continue to be—the determining factor for young children in the transmission of values. By this, we mean that children’s values are overwhelmingly influenced by their parents, even when those children attend full-day child care. Children bond at an early age with their parents and take important cues from them on how to interact with the greater world around them. Research using the National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth in Canada (Willms, 2002) finds that parents are far and away the biggest influence over their child’s development. The studies associated with the NICHD (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) have also found that parents matter more than anything else. The review sponsored

by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 235) surveys the evidence that non-parental care does not undermine a child's primary relationships.

Those who support publicly financed child care are not in the least dismayed by these findings. Healthy, well-functioning families are the key to healthy, well-functioning (and happy) children. Good child care is a necessary support to parents to allow them to work or go to school, and for families to function well at the same time. In fact, key elements of good "process" quality in child care are the relationships and communication between early childhood staff and parents. Staff need to accept and understand parental values, and need to work to integrate parents' knowledge of their own children with the professional expertise of staff. A partnership between parents and staff is likely to provide the most effective context in which children can flourish, with broad compatibility between the values learned at home and in child care.

### **DIVERSITY OF VALUES WITHIN A CHILD CARE SYSTEM**

It is also important to emphasize that many of the concerns about diverse values can be addressed within a publicly financed child care system. The image that concerns some parents may be that of a public system with a universally prescribed curriculum and with teachers all marching in lock-step. Most supporters of publicly funded child care share many of those concerns and have no interest in building a regimented and inflexible system of services.

Where an early childhood education curriculum is developed, it should be broad and flexible. New Zealand has been an interesting laboratory for discussion of and development of a national early childhood curriculum model. New Zealand was driven to develop its curriculum because of concerns about the differences in values between Maori and Pacific Island peoples and the white population with predominantly Anglo-Saxon heritage. The curriculum that has evolved is called Te Whariki and is built around the metaphor of the "woven mat". The curriculum is a set of broad principles seen as providing a framework but allows each early childhood sector to weave its own distinct pattern. Key principles of openness, acceptance of different cultures and anti-racism have been important in building consensus on a set of accepted practices which focus on children's needs.

Most proposals for implementing public funding for child care retain elements of local and parental control that are entirely consistent with having a wide variety of different types of facilities and arrangements within a publicly supported child care system. There are at least two possible models for such a system. In the first, many of the child care facilities would be run by non-profit organizations with different philosophies and pedagogical viewpoints. Many of these facilities would have governing boards (composed largely of parents) able to collectively influence the direction of activities, play and learning. In the second model, child care facilities would be in the public sector, administered locally, but funded under a provincial ministry. There might be a separate ministry, or the system could be run through a branch of the existing Ministry of Education. There would be parental input in each child care facility. As Canada develops its early childhood education and care services, these services could resemble the first model for children less than 3 years of age and be more similar to the second model for children over 3 years of age.

It is true now and it will be true in any new publicly financed early childhood education system that parents will be permitted to choose among a variety of alternative types of not-for-profit child care and early educational institutions. This is what happens in virtually all countries which have comprehensive publicly supported child care, particularly when children are 3 years of age or less (i.e., before school or pre-school). Parents are able to choose from group centre-based education and care, family child care (in a caregiver's home) and part-day programs. Most countries currently provide this variety through publicly-run organizations. Some other countries rely on a mix of providers, some public and some private. In the latter case, particularly for younger children, there is often a range of non-profit and local organizations that provide early childhood services with differing emphases on cultural and other traditions, according to the wishes of the parents served.

In practice, we imagine that a variety of pedagogical approaches to early learning will be acceptable within the publicly funded system, particularly for younger children. That means we can anticipate a variety of child care centres that might stress musical education experiences, or physical activities or special exposure to environment and nature. In some provinces such choices are already possible within the public school system.

Of course, there are some, but arguably reasonable, limits to the diversity of values that will be encouraged and accepted in these early education facilities. The basic group values of inclusion, tolerance, and diversity would be important in all services. The number of parents who would broadly disagree with these values would be very small. Any society depends on its ability to build a core of commonly held values and beliefs. These values and beliefs are democratically determined and are represented in our legislation and our human rights codes. One advantage of child care is that the essential Canadian values of tolerance and diversity are more easily transmitted in a group setting with children from different backgrounds.

Communicating these values to children is essential but at the same time Canadians generally respect the rights of parents to educate their children in the parents' values and beliefs. This creates a natural and inevitable tension that exists whether or not there is a publicly funded child care system.

It is easy to portray this tension in inappropriate ways, suggesting that we must somehow choose between one extreme and the other. Either parents retain full control over the values to which their children are exposed or all control is somehow ceded to some central agency. The reality is hardly that stark. This tension between parental and societal values (often manifested for most parents in the choice between wanting to control their children's experiences and wanting their children to be integrated into the wider culture) is resolved in our society through a series of compromises. We presume that similar types of compromises will occur in child care.

What is not generally specified is the limits that one might place on the values that might be championed in child care institutions. It might be true that if Canada were to decide to radically expand its funding of early childhood education, there would exist a number of special interest groups that would seek to open child care centres with specific learning or other agendas. Determining which of these will be permitted within the publicly supported system requires more debate than has yet occurred.

A publicly funded system would have to establish and enforce standards of various types. We imagine that these standards will establish two types of guidelines in the "values" area. There will be standards both for what must be included and for what must not be included in any funded centres. The first set of standards are likely to focus on educational values—that is, on what kinds of experiences we would require in all centres. These are not likely to be difficult for different groups to agree on. The second set of standards—standards of what must not happen in the centre—are likely to focus on issues of inclusion. Thus, while we are willing to allow particular groups to have clear orientations within their particular centres, the centres must not act in ways that specifically exclude, either *de facto* or *de jure*, significant groups within society. This is a fine line, and one that will not always work perfectly. A good model may be contained in the rules applied to Catholic schools that operate within the educational systems in a number of provinces in Canada.

Our answers in this section may be unsatisfying to those who would prefer simple solutions to complex problems. And there is legitimate room for much debate on these issues amongst supporters of publicly financed early childhood services. But there exist in Canada tensions between multiculturalism and the need to build a Canadian identity, and between local and central jurisdiction. These common concerns in Canada are hardly limited to child care. Because a child care system can be somewhat more decentralized even while it is publicly funded, we would expect that the resolution of these tensions will be somewhat easier in the child care field than in other areas of public debate.

The debate on values tends to focus on differences among families. It is also important to emphasize that there is considerable consensus in Canada on the values that ought to be communicated to children. Most Canadians want their chil-

dren to be honest, to value learning, to treat others with respect, and so on. We would expect that most parents will feel comfortable with the limits that we imagine being imposed in a publicly funded child care system. The goals and values of most parents in Canada would not be compromised by their children's participation in the system.

### **EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES WILL NOT BE COMPULSORY**

Even these very broad guidelines for early childhood education discussed in the previous section will not be acceptable to every parent and every organization in Canada. There exist groups in Canada that feel uncomfortable with the values embraced by most Canadians. As we argued at the beginning of this chapter, these groups want their children shielded from those values. They view any publicly funded child care system as an attack on their values and on their ability to shield their children. They also fear that child care itself may erode the control that parents have over the values of their children in basic and threatening ways.

This attack on child care is no different than the general attack on those values in the public school system. Some parents have chosen to opt out of the public education systems in Canada. We might expect some of the same parents and groups to opt out of any publicly funded early childhood educational system.

In some sense, this opting out is somewhat easier for young children than for school-aged children. Education of all children is mandatory in Canada, so that those who choose to home-school their children or to start up independent schools must meet certain centrally determined criteria for curriculum and achievement. We would not propose that early childhood education be made compulsory.

No parent or child would be required to participate in the publicly funded child care and early educational experiences that we propose. Parents may choose simply to keep their young children at home (and would not be required to submit plans for home-schooling) or to send them to private institutions of their own choosing. This continues the tradition in the majority of provinces that kindergarten is not compulsory. However, just as when parents choose private schools, they are not relieved from the requirement to pay taxes to support the public system, we also anticipate that parents will not withdraw resources from the publicly supported child care system if they choose not to use it. The flexibility and diversity represented in Canada's child care system must be sufficiently broad that only a very small number of parents feel compelled to opt out over the issue of "values."

### **SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENTS**

Some parents are concerned that publicly funded early childhood services will erode the values communicated to children within their families. We believe that these fears are exaggerated, and that most Canadians will be able to feel comfortable within any reasonably-designed child care system. The reasons for this belief are as follows:

- Parents will remain the most important influence on their children. Even children in full-day child care from an early age are primarily influenced by their parents. Thus, children will continue to derive their primary values from their parents.
- Child care centres and early education facilities will have considerable freedom to reflect different pedagogical approaches and cultures. This freedom will be limited by certain restrictions against exclusionary practices, but the vast majority of Canadian parents will be able to enrol their children in facilities whose values are compatible with those of the family.
- No parent would be required to participate in the system.