



CHILDCARE RESOURCE  
AND RESEARCH UNIT

child care

# BRIEFing NOTES

## Fact or fiction? Seven persistent myths about child care

**Myth #1. Parents who send their children to child care are handing them over to the government to raise.**

**Who said that?** In Parliament in 2011, Federal Cabinet Minister Diane Finley said that a national child care program would mean that "parents are forced to have other people raise their children. We do not believe in that".

### What we know...

Considerable evidence shows that families—in the workforce or not—are the strongest influences on their young children. High quality child care doesn't replace or supplant the family. Instead child care is a family support that complements the care and upbringing provided by the family. It also supports children's healthy development, providing an environment for them to form relationships with other caring adults and children. Parents use child care because they need or want support, not because they want someone else to raise their children for them.

Families need the support that child care can provide. Over the past 60 years there has been a substantial movement of Canadian women into the labour market. The 2012 employment rate was 69.7% for mothers whose youngest child was 0-2 years, 76.6% with a youngest child 3-5 years, and 84.0% with a youngest child 6-15 years. Many women want to work and have careers for the same reasons that men do and many women also need to work for financial reasons. The Generation Squeeze campaign highlights how young families are being squeezed by stagnant wages and increasing costs of living, so supporting young families usually takes two incomes. High fees and limited access to high quality child care make life harder for young families trying to raise children.

**Myth #2. Giving money directly to parents gives them "choice".**

**Who said that?** Andrew Coyne (National Post, October 15, 2014): "The subsidy need not be sent to the daycare provider... to have the desired effect. It can be sent directly to parents, to be allocated to the provider of their choice". Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Globe and Mail, October 32, 2014): "direct financial support for families is better for families than a national daycare program would be".

### What we know...

Experience and policy analysis tell us that directly funding services is more effective for ensuring that parents have child care options that work for them. International evidence shows that in countries with universal access to high quality child care, the bulk of public funds go directly to programs while none of the countries that direct funds to parents are able to deliver the child care choices that parents need.

Why? Directing money to parents through vouchers, subsidies, tax breaks or direct cash payments, doesn't create child care spaces, make child care affordable or improve quality, so parents have little choice when there are few affordable quality options from which to choose.

Since the introduction of the Universal Child Care Benefit and government expenditure of more than \$20 billion, expansion in child care spaces slowed down substantially. Coverage (% of children for whom there is a regulated space) is low—only 22.5% in 2012. Fees are unaffordable for most families and there are indications that the quality of care is generally mediocre.

The reality is that parents' choices are very limited when there are long waiting lists for regulated spaces, while a \$100/month cheque buys at most several

days of child care (of varying quality). And realistically, the 'choice' to stay home is not made possible by \$100/month.

### **Myth #3. A national child care program means state intrusion into the family.**

**Who said that?** A Toronto Sun editorial (October 15, 2014) called a national child care program “yet another scheme to get kids out of the home and into the arms of the state as early as possible”.

#### **What we know...**

One role of the state is to protect and provide for the welfare of all citizens, including children. After affirming that “Parents...have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child”, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (to which Canada is a signatory) identifies the key role of the state in ensuring that parents/guardians have “appropriate assistance...in the performance of their child rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children” (Article 18, Clause 2). This means that national governments have a clear responsibility for ensuring that child care is provided as a support for parents in fulfilling their parenting responsibilities.

A core premise of high quality child care is that the child is part of a family, and that families should be involved and supported. Family and community involvement needs to be part of the policy framework of a national child care program. Thus, a national child care program could be designed to ensure family involvement and support, rather than being an “intrusion”.

### **Myth #4. Canada can't afford a national child care program**

**Who said that?** Andrea Mrozek, CEO, Institute for Marriage and the Family (Calgary Herald, October 22, 2014): “Once enacted as a state-funded plan, it becomes the task of government to figure out how to continue to

pay up. The options in daycare include higher debt and deficit levels, or higher taxes and user fees, neither of which are popular”.

#### **What we know...**

Canada is a wealthy country, seventh of 34 OECD countries in GDP per person in 2012. The question of whether Canada can afford child care is really about choices, priorities and political will. Indeed, international OECD data show that Canada spends a much lower percent of GDP on early childhood education and care than do less wealthy countries. A number of international comparative reports have identified Canada as a ‘laggard’ when it comes to spending (and almost everything else) on ECEC.

Child care is a critical social program that contributes to a healthy and prosperous society. The question should really be, “how can we afford to continue not to have a national child care program?”. The economic and social benefits gained from high quality, universally accessible child care include: increased tax revenue and lower social assistance costs because more parents are working; local economic stimulus linked to child care’s labour intensive nature; better outcomes for children and potential mitigation of costs associated with social support later in life. Most importantly, child care fulfills a fundamental human right for children and families in this country.

Given the federal government’s hefty spending on its package of demonstrably ineffectual and unfair child care-linked programs—income splitting, the UCCB and the Child Care Expense Deduction— at close to \$7 billion in 2015—the idea that Canada “can't afford” to support families with a universal national child care program does not make social or fiscal sense.

One variation of the “Canada can't afford child care” argument is “why should I pay for your child care?”, as heard from Brian in Peterborough on CBC’s *Ontario Today* (October 14, 2014): “I’m a retiree. I don’t see why my tax dollars should be used to finance keeping children in daycare for parents who prefer to make more money by having the wives go out to work.”

A good response to Brian is that—just as Canadians who are still in the labour force pay taxes to cover his health care costs, CPP, OAS, long-term care, clean drinking water, environmental protection, roads, and so on, young Canadian families need to have society’s help paying for child care when their children are young. As Canadians, we help each other across generations.

**Myth #5. Child care programs targeted to the poor are “more effective”.**

**Who said that?** Ben Eisen, Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (CBC radio, September 26, 2014): “the top priority in this area should be access to high quality childcare for lower income families” because ... “positive lifelong developmental effects from child care participation is much stronger for low income families than it is for middle income families”.

**What we know...**

Universal programs are actually the best way to ensure that at risk children get early childhood services. Research shows that vulnerable children are found in all socio-economic groups, not just in poor families. Canadian research shows that 70% of vulnerable children live in families who are not poor. This means that targeting child care to low income families can actually mean that many vulnerable children will be left out. In this way, universal programs reach a higher proportion of vulnerable children than targeted programs.

As well, while the research does show that high quality child care may benefit vulnerable children more, there is strong evidence that high quality child care is good for all children and that poor quality may be negative for all children.

At the same time, early childhood services as community institutions in which all families participate have the capacity to strengthen equity among diverse groups and social classes, enhancing social solidarity. The idea that “programs for the poor are poor programs” speaks to the idea that underpins public education and public health care in Canada—

that programs in which all Canadians have a stake and support are those universal programs we all share.

**Myth #6. A national child care program means a “massive bureaucracy” and “one-size-fits-all” [federal] “government-run” services.**

**Who said that?** Candice Bergen, Minister of State for Social Development (CBC TV, October 15, 2014) branded a national child care program as a “one-size-fits-all big, huge government-run program”. Her National Child Day statement (November 20, 2013) said that “a one-size-fits-all model of institutionalized daycare does not provide support to the majority of Canadian parents”.

**What we know...**

The spectre of a national child care program run by a massive Ottawa bureaucracy and delivering identical “one-size-fits-all” programs is regularly trotted out as a terrifying picture. This misinterprets and reframes the way a national child care program has been envisioned and proposed by experts, policymakers and advocates from the 1980s until today.

The vision of a national child care program has long been that of a coast-to-coast system growing over time to include all children whose parents choose it. It is envisioned as a continuum of high quality services—centres, part-day preschools, regulated home child care and parent support programs, offered with reasonable flexibility as to schedules.

The idea is that all families would have a reasonable choice or could choose not to participate at all. Services would be affordable, publicly-funded, publicly-managed, inclusive and democratic. In addition to child care, other family policy and supports such as improved maternity/parental leave would be strengthened.

These are the broad brushstrokes of how to ensure real options for families. This would mean putting in place an overarching national (Ottawa) policy framework – similar to the Canada Health Act—

to include shared principles, sustained public funding, an accountability framework, as well as robust service systems designed and administered by each province/territory, local management and planning, and a voice for parents. But the suggestion that a national child care program would be “one-size-fits-all” or a massive Ottawa bureaucracy operating child care centres is a misinterpretation of legitimate public policy proposals.

Some government programs such as pensions and parental leave benefits do follow a “one-size-fits-all” model in most of Canada (with Quebec sometimes delivering its own programs). And, as then-HRSDC Minister Diane Finley has noted, the Universal Child Care Benefit is also “one-size-fits-all”; as she said, it treats all families the same “whether they live in downtown Toronto, rural PEI or Inuvik”. Thus, the desirability of “one-size-fits-all” depends on ideology and politics.

**Myth #7. Child care is “bad” for children. Participation in child care has a negative impact on behaviour, as well as emotional, social and/or cognitive development.**

**Who said that?** ‘Poor behaviour is linked to time in day care’ (New York Times headline, May 26, 2007); ‘Why daycare can have a negative effect on your child’ (Huffington Post headline, November 5, 2013); ‘Is subsidized daycare bad for kids? A surprising new study says Quebec’s \$7-a-day daycare is leaving children worse off’ (Maclean’s headline, July 11, 2011)

**What we know...**

This myth primarily persists in Canada, the US, Britain and Australia -- countries where child care is weakly developed and has not become mainstream. There are two key policy responses to the idea that child care services are “bad” for children. First, child care must be considered in its specific context. An ideal family policy context would include well-paid parental leave, time off for child illnesses, supports for families experiencing difficulty, and labour force practices that do not force parents to work long hours under

stressful conditions - in other words, a family and child-friendly society. This context shapes, for example, whether children go to child care at 6 weeks or whether parental leave is available for a year, and more flexible than it is now.

Second, quality is of definitive importance. The research on the effects of early childhood programs provides overwhelming evidence that it is quality that shapes the impact of child care on child development. Indeed, poor quality child care may be negative, especially for vulnerable children—a “double whammy”. On the other hand, good quality programs are shown to enhance children’s experiences and development. Participation in high quality ECEC programs is sometimes described as a protective factor for some vulnerable children. There are many complex issues about defining quality, overall, there is solid agreement that it is quality in child care, not participation per se, that makes the difference for children.

Overall, the research supports the idea that high quality child care provided in a context that includes other family supports is a benefit to children, not a detriment. According to one influential analysis of this:

“While child care of poorer quality is associated with poorer developmental outcomes, high quality care is associated with outcomes that all parents want to see in their children, ranging from cooperation with adults, to the ability to initiate and sustain positive exchanges with peers, to early competence in math and reading”  
(J. Shonkoff & D. Phillips, 2000)