



### **May is child care month, but BC has nothing to celebrate**

*[Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives](#), Rita Chudnovsky, 26 May 03*

After years on the back pages, child care is once again on the agenda. The federal government is talking about a national child care plan and the federal budget included \$935 million for early learning and child care. On March 13th, federal/provincial/territorial Ministers agreed to spend these funds over the next 5 years to improve access to affordable, regulated, quality child care programs.

Here in BC, however, we are moving in the opposite direction, cutting money from child care and "restructuring" child care funding in ways that erode access.

Last year, the government reduced the income threshold at which families could qualify for a subsidy by \$285 per month, and also reduced the size of partial subsidies available to those above the threshold. Before the cuts, for example, a single parent with a 4-year old in licensed group care who earns \$11/hour was eligible for a child care subsidy of \$368 per month. Now that parent's subsidy is only \$246 per month. If she lives in Vancouver, she would be lucky to find full-time licensed group care for less than \$550 per month.

The Province has also cancelled the funding program that made over 15,000 licensed before- and after-school child care spaces available to families for no more than \$7 a day. This program, introduced in September 2000, was widely used and showed that when parents can afford licensed quality care, they choose it.

The results of these cuts are already becoming clear. In the fall of 2002, more than 700 BC child care providers took part in a survey that took a snapshot of how funding cuts and changes in child care policy are playing out in communities and neighbourhoods. The picture they paint is disturbing.

Most noticeably, children from low- and modest-income families are being withdrawn from licensed and regulated child care at an alarming rate. Forty nine per cent of caregivers surveyed report that they have vacancies, often for the first time in more than a decade. And 57% now have fewer children who are eligible for subsidy in their programs.

The reason is clear. Due to cuts to the child care subsidy -- which have already affected more than 10,500 BC families -- many low- and modest-income families can no longer afford to pay for quality child care. They are leaving programs that meet basic health and safety standards and adhere to regulations -- covering staff training, maximum group sizes and other factors that are associated with quality care and positive childhood outcomes -- in favour of cheaper unregulated alternatives. As a result of cuts to the before- and after-school care program, caregivers report that many primary school-aged children are now being left on their own.

Any policy change that pushes children out of regulated child care flies directly in the face of an overwhelming body of research showing that training and regulation are central to the quality of child care and to children's well-being. The evidence is unequivocal: high quality child care supports healthy childhood development, while poor quality care can have a lifelong negative effect. Yet the provincial government's changes threaten to reduce what is already an inadequate supply of licensed child care spaces. Nineteen per cent of surveyed caregivers say they may have no choice but to close their doors in the near future, and 52% are concerned about their future viability.

Perhaps the most disturbing thing to emerge from the survey of child care providers is that we appear to be headed for a two-tiered child care system in BC. This is because programs that serve families who can afford to pay have been affected least by the recent cuts, and will in fact benefit most from the province's new method of determining funding. In stark contrast to the number of licensed caregivers who say they may have to close their doors as a result of the cuts, many others report increasing enrollment or have increased their fees. These programs tend to serve higher income families who can afford to pay and who have not been affected by changes to the subsidy.

This trend towards a two-tiered system will be further entrenched by the new Child Care Operating Funding Program, which began on April 1, 2003. The amount of money that licensed family and group child care programs receive will be based on their actual enrollment. Perversely, the result will be that programs with full enrollment -- which usually serve areas where families can afford to pay for child care -- will receive more money. Programs with vacancies -- because the families they serve can't afford to pay -- will receive less funding, making a bad situation worse.

The tragic irony is that a government that ran on a platform of targeting child care funding to those who need it most is creating a system of quality care for those who can pay, and substandard care for the rest. Surely our children deserve better.

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