



## ***Lessons from the Statistics: Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2004***

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On June 16, 2005 the [Childcare Resource and Research Unit](#) at the University of Toronto released a [comprehensive study on the status of the child care services in Canada](#). In the following article the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada addresses the implications.

### **What are the main findings of the study?**

Two main themes emerge. First child care is very vulnerable to political change. Improvements made by one government can evaporate under its successor. The second is that no trend holds for the entire country. For example, while access has improved overall, in Alberta it has declined. Canada-wide public spending on child care has more than doubled; but in B.C. and Alberta it fell since 2001. And while the number of spaces increased overall; program closures overtook openings in three provinces and spending per space fell in six. All these developments raise concerns about quality as well as access.

### **What do the findings mean?**

The study again emphasizes that a comprehensive approach is required by governments to address the related and perennial problems of early learning and child care: quality and accessibility. It also points to the need for a national pan-Canadian approach to child care policy to maintain some assurances for Canadian parents that regardless of periodic changes in provincial/territorial governments, access to high quality early learning and child care will continue to improve in all regions.

### **How can the data be used?**

It could tell us if public money is going to its intended purpose – for example, are provincial/territorial child care budgets growing at least by the same amount as new federal transfers? Data and research are also required so we know if progress is being made towards meeting the goals of the new national early learning and child care program – the “QUAD” principles of Quality, Universality, Accessibility and Developmental programming set out in the 2004 federal election platform. Data and research can also point to policy strengths and weaknesses specifying where allocations are needed to address access and quality shortcoming. For example, research suggests that it is counterproductive to increase access without improving quality.

### **What can we conclude from the current information?**

The data tells us federal funding for early childhood initiatives went to the provinces and territories without sufficient strings attached. Provinces that have decreased child care spending as they received new federal funds continue to cash their cheques from Ottawa. As Ottawa becomes a major player in child care funding it owes Canadians an accounting of where their tax dollars are going and what they produce.

**But Federal Minister Ken Dryden has frequently said that he can not hold the provinces accountable for the funding?**

A dangerous statement from a government that is vulnerable on accountability issues. All governments signed an agreement last fall indicating their commitment to develop their child care services consistent with the QUAD principles.. A line can be drawn from each statistic in the study to one or more of the QUAD principles. If provincial/territorial plans don't address the principles, the federal government would be justified in withholding funds until they do. Moreover this is the message that child care organizations have consistently delivered to governments. We don't want public funding going to bad child care.

**What would you like to see in the policy package?**

We need a clear statement that child care promotes child development as it allows parents to work, study or contribute to their community. Government leadership is needed for infrastructure supports so each community isn't required to develop services from scratch. There must be recognition that central to quality are the people who deliver the program. They need to arrive appropriately trained; and stay because they are adequately compensated and supported to do their job well.

Outside of Quebec, child care as organized excludes most families from participation, compromises quality and is a barrier to expansion. Needed is the 'paradigm-shift' the OECD\* recommends – a conversion from child care services that are reliant on high parent fees and targeted subsidies to publicly funded programs.

**What about the argument that provinces and territories need flexibility?**

The QUAD principles don't restrict programs that reflect regional needs. All Canadian families should have equitable access to high quality, developmental programs. This should be as much a right in Newfoundland as it is in BC.

**But some provinces want to give the money directly parents to allow them to make their own child care choices.**

Interestingly the jurisdictions that make this argument preside over the most deficient child care services. The fact is parents everywhere don't have real choices because quality child care is not available or affordable. A new national program should be designed to address these deficits. Child care needs to be a key component of a comprehensive family policy that includes income supports, parental leaves and affordable housing. Improvements are needed in all these areas. But to claim that child care is a program solely for working parents is erroneous. In Quebec where child care is affordable and eligibility not restricted to the family circumstance, stay-at-home parents regularly enroll their children in centres for the early learning benefits.

**Minister Dryden indicates that more money is the answer. Once the provinces are 'hooked' on the money all else will fall into place.**

We have the lessons provided by other countries. In most of continental Europe parents are 'hooked' on good publicly delivered, community-based programs for their young children. In Britain, the U.S. and Australia entrepreneurs are 'hooked' on the public money that has made them wealthy owners of corporate child care. Money is important and so is the policy it comes packaged in. If federal money comes to the provinces without an enforceable requirement that it be used to develop quality programs, open to all families

for an affordable fee, then it will expand the problems we have. The steps we take now will determine the child care we will have in the future. We need to start off on the right foot.

### **Should Ottawa play tough?**

As the prime funder of this new initiative, the federal government assumes a particular responsibility to ensure accountability for the investments it makes on behalf of Canadians. Right now Ottawa would be hard pressed to tell us where its money has gone or the difference it has made.

### **How can one program both educate children and support parents to work?**

A single program with multiple functions is more cost-effective, eliminates the program bouncing that many young kids are subjected to and better responds to the changing needs of families. What we now have is kindergarten, nursery and pre-schools programs established to educate children, resource centres support parenting and child care is for working parents. Ottawa could use its funding to encourage provinces to address their service patchwork and provide a stable base for expansion.

### **What is a fair amount for parents to pay? Should it be \$7 a day everywhere like in Quebec?**

A flat fee is not the only way to make child care affordable. We agree with the OECD that parents should contribute no more than 20% of the total costs. Depending on family income, some parents could pay more, others less.

### **There seems to be competition for the money. Ottawa wants more spaces; parents want lower fees; educators want more pay. Who gets their needs met first?**

All three must be addressed simultaneously. It is counterproductive to expand if there is no trained workforce to meet staffing requirements. It is equally counterproductive to expand if parents can't afford to send their children or there is so much instability that programs close as fast as others open.

### **Is Ottawa offering enough money to accomplish everything you want?**

No, at most the federal government estimates its contribution will support another 100,000 spaces, far short of what is needed and certainly not enough to address current service shortcomings. The Prime Minister committed to a universal program, and the Finance Minister indicates a successful first 5 years could result in more funding. While it will take time to provide enough service for all children whose parents want them to participate the projected surplus means there is room for much bolder steps.

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\* *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004)*. OECD Thematic Review of ECEC: Canada Background Report and Country Note. Paris.