



CHILD CARE IN CANADA

WHAT DOES THE PUBLIC WANT?

Fact Sheet I

It is time for public policies to catch up with public preferences. A new national proportionate study of the Canadian public reveals a tremendous disparity between public preferences for child care and the actual state of child care in Canada.

Where are the children?

There are, approximately, 5 million (4,891,300) children in Canada ages 0-12. Three and one-half million (3,308,700) of these children have mothers in the paid labour force. (*Friendly, Beach and Turiano (2002) Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2001. Childcare Resource and Research Unit: University of Toronto, Tables 4 and 28.*)

Why does child care matter?

There is no longer any doubt that the care a child receives during childhood will have a lifelong impact on health, happiness and productivity. With millions of children in Canada in child care, we must ensure that this care is of the highest quality. Our future depends on it.

“The early years are critical in the development and future well-being of the child, establishing the foundation for competence and coping skills that will affect learning, behaviour and health. Children thrive within families and communities that can meet their physical and developmental needs and can provide security, nurturing, respect and love.” (*McCain & Mustard (1999) Reversing the real brain drain: Early years study. Toronto: Ontario Children's Secretariat*)

“Intervening early to promote child development during this critical period can have long-term benefits that can extend throughout children's lives. Governments and other partners currently provide a range of programs and services to effectively support early childhood development. The challenge is to build on existing services and supports to make them more coordinated and widely available.” (*Early Childhood Development Agreement, September 11, 2000*)

“Ministers recognize that quality early learning and child care programs play an important role in promoting the social, emotional, physical and cognitive development of young children.” (*Multilateral Framework Agreement on Early Learning and Child Care (2003) Human Resources Development Canada socialunion.gc.ca/ecd-framework_e.htm*)

What do Canadians think of child care?

As part of a larger project, *Advancing an Early Childhood Development Agenda*, funded by Human Resources Development Canada, the Canadian Child Care Federation partnered with

the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada and contracted Dr. Jennifer Espey to undertake a national study of public attitudes to, and preferences for, child care. The study was conducted with a randomly drawn proportionate sample of 1200 Canadians from November 27 to December 12, 2002. All results are accurate to within +/- 2.9% at the 95% confidence level. The following information regarding public opinion is based on this study.

The Canadian public is almost universally aware of the importance of quality child care to a child's development:

- 94% believe that the most critical years for brain development are the first six years
- 89% believe that regardless of family background, poor quality child care hurts a child's development
- 79% believe that child care providers who have more training provide better care

Child care services have passed some important hurdles in public opinion. Two-thirds of the public see child care as a developmental service for children. Conversely, only 17% see it as 'babysitting'. Canadians also believe that child care is an essential service:

- 94% of Canadians believe that child care is important to allowing parents to participate in the workforce
- 90% see it as important to assisting in a child's education
- 78% see it as important to developing stronger community ties
- 68% see it as an important service to employers
- 89% agreed that “quality child care is essential to the prosperity of Canada”

What do Canadians want for child care?

We tested public preferences for child care in a number of ways to ensure reliability of responses. Overall, it is clear that Canadians believe there can be a publicly funded nationally coordinated system of child care:

- 90% of Canadians think “Canada should have a nationally-coordinated child care plan that ensures that all children have access to quality child care regardless of family income, disability, race or the region of the country they live in”
- 86% agreed that “there can be a publicly funded child care system that makes quality child care available to all children in Canada”
- 73% of Canadians believe that the benefits of providing access to quality child care for all children in Canada outweigh the costs

Yet to date, “Overall, Canada does not have a national strategy for early childhood education and care (ECEC).” (*Friendly, Beach and Turiano (2002) Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2001. Childcare Resource and Research Unit: University of Toronto, p.XIII*) “The range of early childhood education and care services and access to them vary enormously by region and

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circumstances. However, no region of Canada yet provides a system of well-designed and funded early childhood education and care services to meet the needs of a majority of families and children.” (Friendly, Beach and Turiano (2002) *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2001. Childcare Resource and Research Unit: University of Toronto, p. XIII*)

In fact, 71% of Canadians said they do not think that “all children in Canada have the same opportunity to receive quality child care.” The principal reason given for children’s unequal access to quality child care are the financial resources of the family. Other reasons offered were geographic location, a lack of uniform government standards and a lack of available quality care. In fact, analyses of the national data indicate that the public believes that parents are heavily over-burdened while governments are under-burdened.

Canadians are right. Child care fees are the largest single cost of raising a child in Canada today – 33% of the cost of raising a child is attributed to child care compared to 23% attributed to providing shelter to a child. (Canadian Council on Social Development (1998) *The Progress of Canada’s Children 1998: Focus on Youth*). Government investment equals only \$386 per child 0-12 across Canada with tremendous disparity based on province. In Quebec, an average of \$980 is spent per child compared to highs in the rest of the country of \$338 in Manitoba, \$273 in British Columbia and \$232 per child in Ontario. The lowest investments are in Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan. (Friendly, Beach and Turiano (2002) *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2001. Childcare Resource and Research Unit: University of Toronto, Table 13*)

Perhaps, not surprisingly, 90% of Canadians believe that “government could do more to ensure that all Canadians have access to quality child care”, and many specific policy options receive strong public support across all demographic groups and regions of the country:

- 96% of Canadians support regulating all child care services to meet quality standards
- 96% of Canadians support providing training and resources to child care providers
- 96% support ensuring that children with special needs be included in community child care services
- 96% support providing parents more information on how to select quality child care
- 89% support increasing public funding for quality child care
- 88% support increasing the wages of child care providers

Currently, the regulation of child care varies significantly depending on the province, with **all** provinces falling short of public preferences. Regulated child care spaces for children 0-12 range from a low of 4.2% in Newfoundland and Labrador to a high of 21.1% in Quebec. Most provinces have enough regulated spaces for only about 10% of children under the age of 12. Moreover, the financing of child care has dropped by almost \$70,000,000 in constant 2001 dollars since 1992. Recent efforts to assist children have not been focused on child care. To date, only an estimated 8% of Early Childhood Development Initiative funds and an estimated 7% of the National Child Benefit reinvestment strategy funds are spent on regulated child care. The median hourly wage for qualified, trained child care workers in Canada is \$11.62 (Friendly, Beach and Turiano (2002) *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2001. Childcare Resource and Research Unit: University of Toronto, Tables 30,*

14, 15 and 21) There is no policy in any jurisdiction that ensures children with special needs are included in community child care. Seventy-one percent of families with a child with special needs reported having a very difficult time finding child care and two-thirds of families with a child with special needs reported that one parent either lost or had to give up a job involuntarily in order to care for their child. (Irwin and Lero (1997). *In Our Way: Child Care Barriers to Full Workforce Participation: Experienced by Parents of Children with Special Needs and Potential Remedies.*) Proportionately, 10% of all early childhood education and development monies should be allocated to creating child care for children with special needs.

A step in the right direction

This year the federal, provincial and territorial governments are taking a promising step toward a nationally coordinated system of quality child care. The most recent federal budget made a commitment to quality child care, allocating \$935 billion dollars over 5 years. This money will be invested under the terms of the Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care, an agreement reached by federal and provincial-territorial governments on March 12, 2003:

“Federal, Provincial, Territorial Ministers Responsible for Social Services reached agreement on a framework for improving access to affordable, quality, provincially and territorially regulated early learning and child care programs and services. This initiative builds on the September 2000 First Ministers’ commitment to improve and expand early childhood development programs and services. Ministers have committed to make additional investments in early learning and child care, as another important step in helping to promote young children’s development and supporting their parents’ participation in employment and training.” (Human Resources Development Canada socialunion.gc.ca/ecd-framework_e.htm)

Canadians are supportive of these commitments:

- 89% of Canadians said it is important to offer the same level of service to everyone
- 89% said it is important to make quality child care available to everyone
- 88% said it is important that child care be inclusive of children with special needs
- 90% said it is important to make quality child care affordable for everyone

Canadians believe that quality child care is an essential service to children, to parents, to communities and to employers. The future of Canada depends on it. The Canadian public strongly supports policies to ensure that all children in Canada regardless of special needs, income, or region, receive quality child care. Canadians expect governments to ensure that quality child care is available, accessible and affordable to everyone. There is strong majority support across all demographic groups and regions for a publicly funded, nationally coordinated child care system.

It is time for public policies to reflect public preferences.