

## Let's put a national child care strategy back on the agenda

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The impact of the early years on a child's chances for success later in life is indisputable. Thanks to advanced understanding of the relationship among early experiences, brain development and outcomes, we now know what a unique opportunity these special years can provide (1). Evidence continues to demonstrate that the quality, type and availability of child care significantly contribute to the predictions of children's development (2).

As many have argued, this reality is important not just for parents, teachers and paediatricians – and the many others who care for and work with children – but it is also critical knowledge for the future of our nation (3). Investments in quality early childhood care and education have the potential for massive returns down the road. So why does Canada rank so low among developed countries when it comes to overall spending on families and children, and specifically on early childhood care and education services (4)?

Not long ago, national leadership on this critical issue was within reach. In 2004, the federal government at the time committed \$5 billion over five years to “ensure that children have access to high-quality, government-regulated spaces at affordable cost to parents” (5). Agreements were signed between the federal and many provincial or territorial governments, under which the federal government would transfer funds to provinces and territories that developed early learning and child care plans. Fulfillment of the long-awaited vision of a national framework for early childhood education and care was close at hand.

At the time of the discussions, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development praised the collaboration among Canadian jurisdictions, citing it as a strength on which future progress could be made. However, it cautioned that “significant energies and funding will need to be invested in the field to create a universal system in tune with the needs of a full employment economy, with gender equity and with new understandings of how young children develop and learn” (6). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development further recommended that Canada create a national quality framework, and substantially increase public funding for services to young children.

With a change in federal government in January 2006 came a change in policy. The child care agreements were cancelled. Supporting a philosophy of parental choice, the

government introduced a \$100 per month taxable payment to families for each child up to six years of age. It also committed \$250 million in transfer payments to provinces and territories, and tax credits for businesses creating new child care spaces in the workplace.

The child care file was essentially closed, and the vision for a national framework on early childhood education and care was lost. Yet, the need for nonparental care is here to stay. Families rely on child care services more than ever; researchers estimate that at least 70% of children six months to six years of age use nonparental care (7). Despite the widespread use of these services, it is still largely the responsibility of parents to seek, find, afford and monitor care for their preschool children. Regulated spaces represent a minority of the child care options from which families can choose.

At best, Canada's early childhood education and care ‘system’ is a patchwork of policies and programs – creating geographical and income inequities. Families who rely on nonparental care have no assurance that (if they can find it) it will be nurturing and stimulating, and will provide an environment that supports and enhances the development of their children. Measures of quality – including child-to-staff ratios, and minimum qualifications for staff and group size – vary widely across the country.

So advocates continue their call for national leadership on early childhood education and care. All children have the potential to thrive in and benefit from quality early childhood care and education. And all children in care settings have the right to the advantages of a nurturing and stimulating environment. It is not enough to simply ‘look after’ children while parents are away. Child care now goes hand-in-hand with opportunities for early learning, which helps children maximize their developmental potential.

Yet, despite evidence of the benefits of well-designed and well-delivered programs, the level of quality in child care settings is often inadequate to support optimal development for children (7). The Childcare Resource and Research Unit (5) reports that on measures of quality and accessibility – among the key factors that define the kind of care that benefits children – Canada has not made progress in recent years.

The Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS) believes that the only way to achieve sustained improvement is through a national strategy on early childhood education and care.

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This month marks two important milestones for the CPS in the area of early childhood development – the publication of an evidence-based statement on the health implications of child care and the long-awaited release of the third edition of *Well Beings: A Guide to Health in Child Care*. After reviewing the literature, the statement calls for deliberate design of high-quality centres, appropriate child-to-staff ratios, trained staff, and a system of affordable, accessible and high-quality care (8). *Well Beings*, in turn, is one of the tools that can help practitioners and policy makers plan and deliver the best possible care. It provides the gold standard for health and safety policies and practices in child care, as well as evidence-based guidance to help enhance physical and cognitive development of children (9).

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If we expect practitioners and program planners to deliver high-quality services, our country must commit to creating a framework in which this care can be systematically and thoughtfully planned, delivered, monitored and evaluated. The belief that such a system can create itself in the absence of national leadership is simply flawed. "The evidence is overwhelming; the time for Canada to develop its own system of early child development and parenting programs is long overdue" (10).

As Canadian citizens, children have distinct rights, including the right to quality early childhood care and education. The time to invest is now. The CPS calls on all levels of government to work collaboratively and make it happen.