



CPRN DISCUSSION PAPER

VALUES AND PREFERENCES FOR THE “BEST POLICY MIX” FOR CANADIAN CHILDREN

by

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FOR CANADIAN CHILDREN**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose

What are Canadians' values and preferences with respect to policies in support of children? The current discussion paper details the main findings from the Canadian Policy Research Networks' (CPRN) study of community discussion groups, focus groups, roundtables, and public opinion polls. The results help to document areas of widespread agreement – and the persistent fault lines – that emerge among Canadians in thinking about the “best policy mix” for Canadian children. The analysis challenges governments, employers, communities, and families to think creatively about policy options that resonate with the deep-seated values and preferences expressed by the majority of Canadians.

Methodology

Much of the original data presented in the discussion paper stem from a series of choice deliberation exercises, including the results from community groups across Canada who participated in *The Society We Want* public dialogue initiative. Additionally, several roundtable meetings and focus group discussions afforded different groups an opportunity to examine more directly their preferences for specific policy mixes, often with some consideration of the costs involved. In each of these exercises, the participants engaged in discussions to assist them in their struggles to work through the complex differences and trade-offs among various policy mixes. The results from conventional public opinion polling are examined as a complement to the “choice work.”

Choice Deliberation Findings

The Society We Want public dialogue initiative offered three choices for the groups to deliberate:

- ▶ “a society that invests in children first,” meaning that children should have priority in social spending and that our social programs should put the well-being of children first;
- ▶ “a society that gives our children a debt-free future,” suggesting that children must be saved from what is seen as a spiralling debt and deficit; and
- ▶ “a society that trusts families to raise their children,” meaning that families are primarily responsible for children and whatever investments governments make should help strengthen the basic family unit.

Rarely did groups simply select one of these choices in their deliberations; the options were *not* considered mutually exclusive. Most groups struggled to achieve a more integrated framework. In the search for answers, groups typically used the available choices to develop complex new positions, reordering priorities in ways that captured a better equilibrium. The majority of groups therefore worked through their differing perspectives and resolved different value positions by striking a compromise that balanced the countervailing weight of children's needs, fiscal pressures, and the role of families.

The groups identified a number of possible benchmarks of progress toward enhancing children's lives. More than half of the participating groups identified the reduction of child poverty or securing children's basic needs as key benchmarks of progress. The second most common theme was that of balancing work and child care responsibilities. Woven throughout many of the discussions and subsequent commentaries were concerns about the tension between employment and family life. In most of these discussions, the participants focussed on supports for parents and caregivers and less directly on initiatives directed at children and youth.

More than one third of the groups discussed child care provision or "daycare" in the context of developing benchmarks, although the specific resolutions tended to split between two broad perspectives. On the one hand, the majority of those who discussed daycare issues focussed on the availability of and access to various paid or "formal" systems of care, including some who specifically advocated for national daycare programs. On the other hand, a smaller number of groups preferred increased supports for parents to raise their children without necessarily having to rely upon external child care services. A few groups wanted policies that would recognize the *economic* value of motherhood as an important dimension of the workforce. The preference was that there be more direct financial compensation for "private" childrearing, or at least tax breaks based on *household* rather than *individual* incomes.

Yet despite the consistent recognition that communities, governments, and even corporations should assist families or provide alternatives to support healthy child development, most groups consistently argued that parents and caregivers were the most important resource for children. The idea that most often emerged was that of *providing support to families to assist them in their efforts to raise their children*. Stated differently, parents and other primary caregivers should still have considerable latitude in their decision making with respect to most aspects of nurturing their children's healthy development. At the same time, there should be *adequate institutional supports* in place to facilitate that process, such as parent education programs. There was widespread recognition that "one-size-fits-all" solutions were not viable and that primary caregivers needed more choices at their disposal.

Indeed, a central theme that emerged was the importance of empowering parents to exercise choice in the context of their family situations. One key message was the need for the types of supports that would enable parents to assume *more* responsibility for their children and engage in more effective childrearing practices. The discussion groups, through different language and examples, consistently acknowledged the primacy of parental responsibility for family life and viewed certain programs as helping to facilitate successful parenting.

Policy Preference Discussions

In addition to *The Society We Want* public dialogue initiative, a series of roundtable discussions and focus group exercises permitted parents, adults without children, and youth to participate in discussions about their preferences or "best policy mixes" for children. The "best policy mixes" that emerged usually reflected attempts to balance the needs of children, family responsibilities, and the fiscal constraints associated with public policies. The resolutions at which individuals and groups arrived often required some level of compromise. The most common best mix focussed on helping parents achieve secure and continuing employment through a combination of enhanced parental leaves and a more comprehensive and accessible system of child care. The participants stressed the

need for public policy supports to help families cope with employment. While respectful of the option that some families preferred (or were able) to exercise in having one parent remain at home, they did not consider stay at home supplements as the preferred use of public dollars. Participants favoured relatively generous income supports for unemployed parents or those at the low end of the income ladder to ensure that affected children did not grow up in poverty.

A second common “best policy mix” focussed on helping parents take time out of the labour market to be at home with their children. Those who supported such a policy mix were inclined to support stay at home supplements, especially for parents of young children. Participants wanted active and targeted income supports for those who were out of work, including single mothers, that would enable such individuals to enter the labour market. These participants occasionally added child care or enhanced income supports as potential avenues for addressing the needs of lone parents who were employed. The child care option was preferred typically if the costs could be shared by governments and, on a sliding scale basis, by parents themselves.

The youths who participated shared a broad vision of what would best serve their needs. They tended to identify new and innovative solutions, were often critical of what they saw as conventional approaches, and typically assumed a more holistic approach to the issue of the best policy mix. Before the selection of policy essentials had even started, the participants were eager to identify and discuss options that had *not* been included in the background materials, such as the omission of certain basic needs like clean air and water. Moreover, many youth participants focussed on alternative strategies for assessing their contributions; the labour market was not seen as the only route to success. Indeed, some participants voiced a disenchantment with programs that explicitly focussed on the labour market and school because these were perceived to view young people only as “future productive workers.” Notably, these participants preferred education that served as a means to help them become better citizens and not simply as a means to get a job. Finally, the youth participants were clear that young people needed a voice and a role in decision making. They supported policies that empowered youths more, such as consideration of their preferences in custody proceedings, alternative sentencing for youth, parenting courses, drop-in/referral centres for youths, schools that were open and more accessible during off hours, and cooperative work-study programs.

Another important lesson learned from the focus groups and roundtable exercises in particular relates to the genuine struggle to resolve the tensions embedded in different views on the best policy mix for children. The discussions revealed at times some rather profound divisions about policy, even where individuals might share common values around the importance of parents having primary responsibility for their children or jobs as the best mechanism to combat poverty and support families. There was widespread agreement with these general statements, but far less agreement about the specific strategies or policies that might address these issues.

The evidence from the choice deliberation exercises in general suggests that Canadians reject the notion that solutions will be found quickly or easily through technical fixes, or by means of social policy alone. Participants saw the issues at hand as systemic ones shaped by the broader issues of family transformation, a changing and often more insecure labour market, and social exclusion (particularly among the poor and disadvantaged). They expressed a sense of pervasive uncertainty on a number of fronts. They saw the capacities of individuals and families as threatened across

income groups and labour market situations. Much of this sense of threat came from external sources, such as changes in their work situations, employment opportunities, and social policies.

The participants also noted that there were threats from within – family inadequacy, parental irresponsibility, conflicting expectations, and generational conflicts. Triggered by this assessment, some participants fell into a blaming mode that categorized families as either “good” or “bad.” On balance, however, the dialogue process led most participants to move beyond blame in their attempts to evaluate the more holistic and challenging nature of the problems that families encounter.

Polling Results

The discussion paper next presents the results from a brief historical analysis of public opinion polls conducted over the last two decades that have dealt with issues such as women’s labour force participation, maternity leave, daycare, child care responsibilities and children’s well-being. The evidence revealed that public opinion polls historically have addressed social policy issues related to balancing work and family responsibilities only in a limited fashion, while children’s issues were only rarely the focus of polling questions. The issues typically have been framed as “women’s issues,” thereby both reflecting and reinforcing the societal bias that men should not be as concerned with family policy, nor asked to make the difficult trade-offs between employment and domestic responsibilities. For example, while the polls have inquired about the impact of mothers’ labour force participation on the well-being of their children on several occasions, a parallel question about the impact of fathers’ employment has never been asked.

In general, the polling results showed that Canadians continue to value public spending on behalf of children, including spending achieved through tax increases for services targetted specifically to support children. There were high levels of agreement around several issues. Most Canadians agreed, for example, that health care and education should continue to be universal systems; that jobs are critical to fighting poverty and supporting families; that government funding cuts in recent years have hurt those living in poverty; that there should be some combination of child care and parental leave policies available to working parents, with the costs shared across sectors; and that employers should be doing more to help families achieve a better balance between work and family life.

At the same time, there were some areas of uncertainty, such as in the sphere of income supports and gender roles. Women tended to agree more often and more strongly on most options that created flexibility in the choices at their disposal and those that supported children. The public over the years has expressed strong, consistent support for the availability of daycare services. To the extent that divisions exist, the public generally divides on whether such services should be available universally, or targetted to those in poverty. Moreover, differences of opinion abound with respect to the question of who should be primarily responsible for paying and providing daycare services. On the other hand, the most recent polling data pointed to several broad areas of agreement regarding certain assumptions about family life and policies intended to assist families with children. At least 70 percent (and often much higher percentages) of the general public endorsed the following notions:

- ▶ jobs are critical to fighting poverty and supporting families
- ▶ government funding cuts in recent years have hurt those living in poverty

- ▶ the loss of job security has meant raising children has become more of a challenge
- ▶ a child care system needs to be in place for everyone who needs such services, with the costs to be shared across sectors
- ▶ employers should be doing more to help families achieve a better balance between work and family responsibilities
- ▶ increased funding, including higher taxes, is endorsed if the money is targeted at supportive services for children
- ▶ an enhanced combination of child care and parental leave is needed to help balance work and domestic responsibilities.

The public, however, divides on other issues. For example, widespread disagreement exists on the issue of whether or not parents should be subsidized more directly to remain at home to raise their children. More generally, the polling data confirm that there have been longstanding tensions between paid employment for women and child care responsibilities. In terms of children's well-being, a majority of Canadians believe that women ideally should *not* work outside of the home while their children are young. On the other hand, for a variety of other social and economic reasons, most women with children prefer either part-time or full-time employment. Finally, a consensus has *not* been reached regarding which level of government (federal, provincial, municipal) should assume more of a leadership role in developing child-focussed policies and programs.

Summary Conclusions

In general, the combination of different data sources points to a number of components that should inform whatever policy mix emerges. As general principles, Canadians have reiterated on a consistent basis in both polls and discussion groups that children are a high spending priority, that healthy child development in the early years requires continued high investments, and that health care and education are essentials that should continue to be the backbone of universal programs.

In addition, while the tensions surrounding the work-family nexus cannot be resolved easily, there are some fairly clear messages. Most Canadians view increased employment opportunities as a priority in helping families to successfully raise children. At the same time, families require help to balance some of the contradictory demands between employment and domestic responsibilities. The best policy mix should include, therefore, a combination of “programs like child care or parental leaves,” with both the private and public sectors assuming some responsibility. For example, discussion groups tended to view workplace measures as potentially effective options – 89 percent of those surveyed in polls wanted employers to increase their efforts to provide a better balance between work and family responsibilities. At the same time, many participants in the deliberative discussion groups had reservations about the ability of the private sector to provide systemic solutions. They worried that small employers would find them too expensive while large employers would not reach out to a large enough number and range of families. Thus, while they want the private sector to act, Canadians see governments as playing an important role in stimulating jobs, ensuring job security, and offering options that help families cope with the early childhood years.

Another key component of the best policy mix involves child care. While the public opinion polling results indicated widespread support of child care, the discussion groups generally viewed publicly funded child care as a more controversial issue. The differences of opinion appeared to reflect current labour market status, the degree of past experience with child care, and interpretations of funding mechanisms. Discussion groups often quickly included child care in their best mixes. Participants who were more favourably disposed to this option included employed parents (either couples or lone parents) who already depended on some type of formal child care arrangement. Others supporting such policy mixes were employed parents who had to patch together paid and unpaid care, often because they were not able to afford formal child care. In addition, while there seemed to be less support for a tax-funded universal program of child care, participants were much more likely to support shared cost systems or proposals that included sliding scale payment systems.

An area where Canadians were clearly and profoundly divided pertained to income supports, whether in the form of supplements for stay-at-home parents or with respect to providing basic security for families lacking adequate income. Some polling results, for example, found a fifty-fifty split on the question of whether the government should pay parents to remain at home when their children are young. A deeper exploration of the issue reveals a fault line pertaining to different concepts of “choice” and differences in the perceived gender roles of men and women. The best mix option focussed on the “spouse in the house” option almost always defined a traditional role for women in families and the economy by assuming that mothers would be the ones who would “choose” to stay home while their children were young. Many who supported the stay-at-home supplement reasoned that women were often *forced* to work out of economic necessity and that women should have the option to focus on childrearing, particularly during the early childhood years. These Canadians wanted governments to respect women’s preferences by supporting an avenue that would permit them to remain at home without having to sacrifice income.

The evidence further reveals that Canadians are at a loss to figure out how best to provide income security for families with children that lack adequate income. Sixty-two percent of Canadians surveyed agreed that “just as senior citizens receive old age benefits, government should provide funds to all parents to help them raise healthy children.” Those who were unemployed, or who were at the bottom of the income and education ladders, were more likely to support such a policy (more than 70 percent within each of those demographic categories). Although the split was less dramatic than it was for the stay-at-home income supplements, it nevertheless demonstrates a certain ambivalence among Canadians in general about the provision of income supplements that might be more readily or universally available.

The discussion group participants showed the same ambivalence in considering how to address child poverty without encouraging what they feared as dependency. Although many groups included an income supplement for needy families in their “best mix,” they were adamant that there should be strict criteria in place. Groups debated which families should receive income support, under what circumstances, and how supports should be delivered. Often participants supporting “time out with kids” revealed a curious double standard with regard to those “deserving” of income supports. While they wanted income supplements such that employed mothers might be able to stay at home without earnings losses, they often believed that unemployed mothers or those on social assistance should be compelled to work. Single parents were often targetted in terms of their need to “get a job.” Thus

these participants expressed doubts that social assistance recipients exercised sufficient effort and self-reliance, but they were more sympathetic to the difficulties of employed parents.

At the other end of the spectrum, those selecting the best mix option that emphasized continuing employment saw income supports as a question of social justice or equitable redistribution. They were more likely to want enriched income supplements for those unable to work, pointing to failures of the economy rather than personal failings as the roots of poverty. They were also more inclined to feel that income supports should be in the hands of parents, and that trust and dignity were also at issue in decisions about how to eradicate child poverty.

As a final policy component, Canadians preferred programs or others supports aimed at improving parents' knowledge and skills and argued that these should be widely available free of charge. Each of the different types of discussion groups identified the need for universally accessible programs to improve parenting. Isolation and vulnerability were seen as widespread across families. The participants viewed relatively few parents as having adequate preparation or resources for parenting. Concerns about job insecurity and struggles to balance time had created new and widespread risks, not only for children in poverty and extreme circumstances, but for families in general. Indeed, the preference seemed to be much more in the direction of universal services rather than for those designed to encompass targeted, high-risk families. Groups also wanted community services to be widely available, or to act as community anchors.

The evidence suggests that when Canadians are asked to deliberate on choices to create a “best policy mix” for children, a rough consensus emerges around two or three popular mixes. Canadians not only value children as a spending priority, but most are willing to consider a targeted tax increase for them. They view job insecurity as a systemic problem for families and, consequently, endorse action at many levels: by governments, employers, communities, and families. Universal parenting supports are favoured for families free of charge, while an accessible child care system receives strong support as long as governments recover part of the costs from families that can afford to pay. The more profound divisions arise in considering the best means to deliver income support to poor families. Moreover, there appears to be an important divide around the issue of income supplements for parents who might prefer time out of the labour force while their children are young.

The optimal strategy to developing social and economic policies that adequately represent the values and preferences of Canadians appears to be through a combination of public opinion polling and choice deliberation techniques. The polling captures the breadth of public attitudes on specific issues of immediate interest in a timely and representative fashion. Deliberative discussion permits a deeper probing of core values and the manner in which individuals arrive at their preferences and stated opinions. Hence a focus on broad citizen engagement may be a useful starting point for formulating a societal strategy for children in Canada, supplemented with ongoing public opinion polls on the issues of the day. Where these two strategies can be integrated, meaning where both are constructed and implemented in a complementary fashion with the same substantive focus, the learnings from each can be enriched considerably.

FOREWORD

The Family Network of the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) is involved in a two-year research project designed to address the question, *What is the Best Policy Mix for Canadian Children?* The ultimate goal of the project is to help set the foundation for an overarching societal strategy for children and their families. CPRN hopes to stimulate new thinking about the kinds of interdependent and integrated programs and policies that could improve child outcomes in Canada.

To achieve that objective, greater understanding is required about policy and program interventions and the outcomes that these interventions produce for children. However, a concrete understanding of child outcomes alone is insufficient to enable conclusions to be drawn about what the ‘best’ mix of policies for children might be. In order to choose among options, and provide valid justification for those choices, decisions must be firmly rooted in the values held by citizens who will be affected by those decisions. Thus, the *Best Mix* project also builds upon earlier work by CPRN on Canadian core values and refines this understanding by linking values to child outcomes.

In this report, CPRN staff member Joseph Michalski has produced a textured discussion of values and preferences. It incorporates three sets of findings, from: (a) an extensive dialogue with citizens undertaken in 1997, (b) a poll conducted for CPRN in early 1998, and (c) an historical analysis of all similar polls taken over the past 20 years. By triangulating these diverse sources of public input, this paper makes an important contribution to our understanding of how Canadians view the importance of different kinds of policies designed for families with children.

Other components of the *Best Mix* project include:

- *Comparative Family Policy: Eight Countries’ Stories*, a major research study by former CPRN Research Fellow Kathy O’Hara
- *An International Comparison of Policies and Outcomes for Young Children*, a major research study by Shelley Phipps of Dalhousie University
- *Outcomes for Young Children: Are There Provincial Differences?*, a discussion paper by Shelley Phipps
- *State of the Evidence on the Effectiveness of Policies and Programs for Children*, a background report by researcher Pauline O’Connor
- *Building Better Outcomes for Canada’s Children*, a discussion paper by consultants Jenni Tipper and Denise Avard
- *Comparative Family Policy: Six Provincial Stories*, a research study by Jane Jenson from the University of Montreal and CPRN Research Fellow Sherry Thompson
- *Governance and Accountability for Child and Family Policy*, a discussion paper by CPRN Research Fellow Sherry Thompson, and

- The *Best Mix Synthesis Report* by CPRN staff member Sharon Stroick.

The polling data analyzed for this research paper confirms that Canadians continue to value spending on behalf of children, including spending achieved through tax increases for services targetted specifically for children. They also think that health care and education should continue to be provided as universal programs. Canadians believe that jobs are critical to fighting poverty and supporting families. They think that some combination of child care and parental leave policies is needed to help parents balance their work and family lives, and believe the costs should be shared across sectors.

A central theme that emerged from the analysis of deliberative discussions is the importance of empowering parents to exercise choice in the context of their family situations. While parents and caregivers are seen as the most important resource for children, Canadians recognize there is a need for governments, communities and corporations to provide the kinds of supports that would enable parents to assume *more* responsibility for their children and engage in more effective childrearing practices. Canadians believe that the capacity for effective parenting is threatened by broader issues such as family transformation, a changing and often insecure labour market, and the social exclusion of poor and disadvantaged citizens. These systemic challenges place greater demands on society as a collective to support the work of parents.

The richness of the information gathered on Canadian values about children and families show areas of clear agreement on several fronts about what a ‘best mix’ of policies for children needs to address, including job security, child care and parental leave. However, there are other issues which divide Canadians, primarily related to the provision of income support and security for families with children. What we have learned will serve us well in laying the foundation for a best mix of policies for children and families which is rooted in Canadian values. This research also holds the promise that further deliberation on these issues may help to bridge the divides that seem evident at present.

Judith Maxwell
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1. PROJECT OVERVIEW

For more than two years, researchers and stakeholders affiliated with the Family Network of the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) have been engaged in a project known as the Best Policy Mix for Canadian Children. The overarching goal of the project is to help develop the foundation for a societal strategy to achieve better outcomes for Canadian children. The focal question that has guided the process of inquiry can be stated as follows: "What is the optimal mix of programs and policies that will improve child outcomes in Canada?"

The current discussion paper details the main findings from CPRN's multifaceted study of the values and preferences of Canadian citizens with respect to programs and policies for children. The paper analyzes the results from multiple sources, including public opinion polls, community discussion groups, focus groups, and roundtables. A concluding section draws out the implications of these results for policy development in the Canadian context.

2. BACKGROUND RESEARCH

A key assumption informing this work is that even highly effective policies and programs will not be relevant unless situated within the core value systems of those who stand to be affected. As one social planning document contends, "successful strategies must be based on a system of values which is shared broadly in the community" (Greater Toronto Coordinating Committee, 1991, p. 5). But what are values? And what is the relationship between *values* and *preferences*?

Values may be defined as the shared standards by which the members of a society judge what is considered to be desirable (i.e., what is right, true, or beautiful; see Black [1984] and Parsons [1951]). Preferences are the choices that individuals make in applying their values to their daily lives. These are not synonymous concepts. As a general rule, values tend to be more stable and shared broadly by many individuals within communities or even whole societies. The preferences associated with the application of values to different spheres of action are more diverse or even at odds among subgroups of individuals who otherwise share the common, underlying value.

Values thus provide the basis for legitimating – or challenging – the actions of those responsible for developing and enacting public policies. Values help set the parameters of acceptable policy alternatives by revealing the state of public judgment in regard to the moral or ethical side of the different choices under consideration. In short, the development of a framework outlining a societal strategy for better outcomes for children in Canada necessitates a refined understanding of the values and preferences of Canadian citizens.

Part of the policy challenge, however, is that the citizenry does not subscribe to one universal system of values, much less a cohesive set of preferences. For example, Adams (1997) has argued that there are in fact twelve distinct "value tribes" that characterize Canada in the late 1990s. His conclusions

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are based on analyses of annual polls using the 3SC Social Values Monitor or *Système Cofremca de Suivi des Courants Socio-Culturels*. A representative sample of more than 2,000 Canadians each year answers "approximately 250 questions about their fundamental values or beliefs, their personal characteristics and their lifestyles" to generate trends which are ultimately characterized as "clusters" of values (Adams, 1997, p. 46). To achieve a consensus with respect to public policy that integrates the views of such diverse tribes that Adams describes as (among others) "rational traditionalists," "anxious communitarians," "disengaged Darwinists," "aimless dependents," and "thrill-seeking materialists" would seem to be a virtually impossible task.

In *Exploring Canadian Values*, Peters (1995) lays out the conflicts and contradictions experienced by Canadians in the face of changing social policy directions. The study assesses the core values and principles of Canadians across a broad range of policy choices. Peters' findings were based on two sources of information: 1) an historical review of 18 public opinion databases (some 50 polls) between 1979-1995; and 2) a total of 25 discussion groups with Canadians held in eight cities during the summer of 1995. The poll results identified trends in public opinions on social, economic, educational, and health issues. The discussion group participants deliberated and struggled to choose among competing public policy alternatives. Four of the seven choices contained references to children, probing for values related to universality, prevention, responsibility, and other broad principles underlying social policy. The report describes the considerations that Canadians reflected upon in voicing their concerns about radical changes in the social welfare system and in society, such as fears that old assumptions no longer held sway and that fundamental values were at risk.

The participants in the discussion groups attempted to work through their deeper understanding of the appropriate dividing lines between self-reliance and collective responsibility. Most participants acknowledged individual effort and responsibility as a central value, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of the social safety net and the government's role for ensuring that all citizens have the basic necessities in life. As Peters (1995, p. 6) explains, "Canadians' struggle to achieve this balance between collective responsibility and individual self-reliance is integral to the process of working through values and identifying principles to guide decisions about social policies and programs." The evidence from the discussion groups revealed that while Canadians for the most part deeply believed in the importance of self-reliance, individual autonomy, personal responsibility, and freedom, many participants recognized that families and communities were not always able to provide the necessary supports. Moreover, there was a general frustration that governments had only compounded the problem in spite of their efforts to help, an attitude consistently reflected in the documented decline in the public's confidence in government institutions (Nevitte, 1996).

Children were a pivotal point in these deliberations. Regardless of which side of an issue that participants favoured, two basic tenets held sway where children were implicated: that "children are innocent bystanders" and "children are our future." The concept of investing in children, both as a means of underscoring their blamelessness and securing their well-being, reflected a guiding value underlying policy options. Not only were the participants interested in protecting children from the failures of families and systems, there was a sense that prevention, universality, equity, compassion, and fiscal responsibility were cornerstones of the type of society Canadians cherished and should inform the decision making process and program design in Canadian social policy.

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These results are echoed by other recent research. In a number of polls and focus groups, Canadians have stressed children as a priority, thereby achieving a broad consensus that resonates quite well with available research on child development (Ekos, 1998a, p. 23; Shields, 1997; Guy, 1997; Ontario Campaign for Kids, 1998). Whatever their differences on how children should be raised and what supports should be available, most Canadians would still like to have children of their own and are prepared to invest a great deal of their personal resources to help ensure their children’s well-being. In fact, a 1997 Gallup poll found that a majority of Canadians (59 percent) think that they need to have a child at some point in their lives in order to feel fulfilled. One in three stated that the ideal number of children for a family to have is “three or more,” while recent survey data indicate that nearly three in four Canadians between the ages of 20 and 39 intend to have at least two children themselves (Dupuis, 1998). These figures are impressive in light of recent evidence suggesting that the costs of raising a child from birth to age 18 typically exceeds \$150,000, with nearly one third of the costs associated with child care expenditures alone (Vanier Institute of the Family, 1998).

While some of the relevant research will be discussed later in the paper, the evidence clearly bears witness to the public’s concern for children and their understanding of the complexity of efforts aimed at finding solutions (Canadian Policy Research Networks, 1998). For example, a January 1997 national focus group exercise found that most participants envisioned not only an international, but a *Canadian* context for child poverty. Despite a small minority of skeptics, the participants were cautiously optimistic about the capacity of the federal and provincial governments to work together to reduce poverty (Ekos, 1997a). Similarly, in a February 1997 poll of Ontarians, 90 percent rated child poverty as either very important or somewhat important as a national project (Angus Reid, 1997). Notwithstanding this support, Canadians are deeply frustrated by what they see as the current ineffectiveness of existing programs and services targeting children and youth in particular.¹

A December 1995 Angus Reid poll found, for instance, that Canadians were divided on the issue of who should assume responsibility for “the poor” in Canada: 48 percent agreed that “government should have the primary responsibility for seeing that the poor are cared for,” while 43 percent believed that “families should take primary responsibility for caring for their own less fortunate members” (9 percent were unsure). The results partly reflect differences in views based on economic status, with the poor more supportive of government intervention (55 percent) compared to the middle class (48 percent) and especially in comparison with the wealthy (40 percent).

Recent studies highlight an interesting tension surrounding childrearing and how best to ensure children’s well-being in Canada. On the one hand, most Canadians believe in the concept of “family responsibility for children” and prefer “stronger family units.” On the other hand, despite ongoing frustrations with the perceived ineffectiveness of the current system, widespread support exists for

¹Recent research indicates, for example, that while most Canadian children continue to fare reasonably well, several indicators of well-being on average continue to worsen. For example, the growing proportion of children living in poverty, increased teen unemployment, reduced earning power, higher teen pregnancy and smoking rates, and a significant increase in the usage of food banks provide evidence of declining economic security and health for a growing proportion of young people in Canada over the last decade (Hanvey, 1998; Canadian Institute of Child Health, 1994).

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an active government that addresses children’s needs. Canadians appear to be willing to invest in children, as long as these investments are demonstrably effective. There remains much uncertainty surrounding what the nature of those investments should be, which will involve some rather difficult trade-offs (e.g., cash versus services, family responsibilities versus the government’s role, comprehensiveness and universality of programs versus deficit reduction and fiscal responsibility).

The current inquiry focuses on the process of values clarification as a means of furthering our understanding of Canadian preferences on how individuals, families, communities, businesses, and governments can respond most effectively to the needs of children. Operating under the assumption that "Canadians want a deeper-level democratic engagement in the decisions that affect them" (Peters, 1995, p. 78), the research utilizes a variety of information sources that emphasize citizen engagement and the process of choice deliberation. The next section presents a brief overview of the methodology involved, while a more thorough discussion can be found in Appendix A.

3. STUDY METHODOLOGY

A thorough exploration of the values and preferences for the best policy mix for Canadian children requires more than just a review of public opinion polls. Hence the discussion paper synthesizes multiple sources of information and feedback from the general public: 1) community discussion groups that selected the package *Our Children* from CPRN’s *The Society We Want* public dialogue project; 2) a small number of randomly selected groups of individuals who participated in the same exercise as did the community discussion groups; 3) roundtable discussions with children, youth, and parents of young children; 4) a series of focus groups with the general public, which included groups with parents, non-parents or those with children older than 18, and young people aged 16 to 24; and 5) public opinion polling data.

Much of the deliberative discussion has been grounded in "choice work" methods designed to explicitly probe public judgment, or the ethical and normative side of questions, as distinct from public opinion (Yankelovich, 1991). Recent polling data confirm that the majority of Canadians believe that it is "very important...for the federal government to engage citizens in policy development" and that the consultation and engagement process should "reflect basic values of Canadians" and "represent the views of the overall public" (Ekos, 1998b). The current study, therefore, draws upon a variety of public dialogue initiatives as a means of probing more deeply into Canadians’ values and preferences.

The exercises associated with *The Society We Want* public dialogue project engaged community groups and a limited number of randomly selected discussion groups of citizens to reflect upon their values in much greater depth as these related generally to the best mix of policies for Canadian children. The roundtable meetings and focus group discussions afforded several different groups an opportunity to examine their preferences for specific policy mixes, often with some consideration of the costs involved. In each of these exercises, the participants engaged in discussions that were intended not only to raise their consciousness levels, but that further assisted them in their struggles to work through the complex differences and trade-offs among alternative policy mixes.

Section 4 of the paper presents the results from two types of deliberative discussion groups: 187 community groups selected with nonprobability sampling techniques and five randomly selected groups of individuals. Section 5 presents the results from three roundtable discussions and 14 focus groups held in six cities across Canada. Section 6 then summarizes both historical and more recent data based on conventional polling techniques to complement the work on values where relevant. The public opinion data provide a snapshot of Canadian beliefs and preferences regarding a range of issues related to policy options for children (e.g., child care responsibilities, daycare options, government funding for different initiatives, and so forth). The final section of the discussion paper recapitulates the most important substantive lessons to have emerged from the analysis and concludes with some general comments about the relevance of choice deliberation to public policy discussions.

4. CHOICE DELIBERATION: VALUES DISCUSSIONS

The method of "choice deliberation" serves as the foundation for much of the data presented in this discussion paper. The method stems from the notion of "public judgment" that Yankelovich proposes in *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*. Many groups use choice deliberation in exercises intended to foster citizen engagement and a deeper reflection about what the author describes as "top of the mind" responses.² Yankelovich (1991, p. 5) describes choice deliberation as a form of "public opinion that exhibits (1) more thoughtfulness, more weighing of alternatives, more genuine engagement with the issue ... and (2) more emphasis on the normative, valuing, ethical side of questions than on the factual, informational side."

Yankelovich (1991) argues that there are three stages in moving from public opinion to public judgment. The first consists of "consciousness raising," wherein the public develops an increased awareness of the meaning of an issue and a growing sense of urgency that the issue ultimately requires action. The second stage of "working through" involves more of an internal struggle with the conflicts and ambivalence that emerge as a consequence of the consciousness raising process. The working through stage requires an active engagement of the issue in the search for solutions, which tends to be largely an internal or *personal* rather than a *public* process. The third stage refers to the successful "resolution" of the conflicts experienced, which includes the cognitive, emotional, and moral content of the specific issue. The successful completion of the journey through these three stages results ultimately in "public judgment." Thus rather than rely solely on popular reactions to issues generated by anonymous polling situations, the logic of choice deliberation suggests that experts and policymakers can learn a great deal from public deliberations of issues that acknowledge the underlying importance of values – not just information – in shaping the decision making process.

4.1 *The Society We Want* Community Discussion Groups

The current section summarizes information generated from *The Society We Want* project, a public dialogue initiative coordinated by CPRN with a range of national nonprofit partner organizations (Canadian Policy Research Networks, 1998). The initiative encouraged community groups across Canada to examine the core values of their members with respect to one of five social policy realms, including one entitled *Our Children*. The dialogue kits included a fact sheet with social spending statistics and other information pertaining to the circumstances and demographic characteristics of families and children in Canada. The issue guides that organized the community discussion groups set out three possible choices underlying alternative policy frameworks for children, as well as some of the positives and negatives associated with each of the choices. The different positions presented were intentionally difficult to resolve in the hopes of provoking the participants to deliberate their

²In the United States, for example, the Public Agenda and Kettering Foundations have conducted exercises with choice deliberation as a means of understanding values and public judgment with the National Issues Forum. In Canada, the technique has been used by the National Forum on Health, by Citizenship and Immigration Canada in consultations on the meaning of citizenship, by CPRN in the aforementioned *Exploring Canadian Values*, and by others.

core values and consider new options.³

4.1.1 General Overview of Community Discussion Groups

In some 187 community discussion groups from across Canada, eight to 12 participants (though sometimes many more) took part in one of three waves of the pilot project during the period April 1996 to February 1998 (Stark, 1998). The current analysis concentrates on the results from the 48 summary feedback forms focussing on children (which represents nearly 26 percent of the full range of community discussion groups). Some of the results from groups discussing other issues also receive mention, since many of these groups articulated common themes and linkages across all issues.

The specific options for the discussion of *Our Children* were as follows:

- ▶ "a society that invests in children first," meaning that children should have priority in social spending and that our social programs should put the well-being of children first;
- ▶ "a society that gives our children a debt-free future," suggesting that children must be saved from what is seen as a spiralling debt and deficit; and
- ▶ "a society that trusts families to raise their children," meaning that families are primarily responsible for children and whatever investments governments make should help strengthen the basic family unit.

In the discussion groups, participants considered the arguments advanced by proponents and opponents of each choice. These materials were presented both as a springboard for deeper reflection on the personal value systems of group members and as an opportunity to devise new options.

4.1.2 Deliberations Regarding “Our Children”

Rarely did groups simply select one of the above choices in their deliberations; the options were *not* considered mutually exclusive. Most groups struggled to achieve a more integrated framework to acknowledge the many aspects that should be considered in response to the focal question: "What kind of life do we want to ensure for Canadian children?" While some expressed frustration at being offered limited choices, most recognized that these options were grist for their thinking. The participants in most cases did not believe that it was appropriate to trade off one of these objectives against the other, preferring more often than not to construct a compromise that allowed them to achieve multiple objectives.

³The current version of *The Society We Want* tool kit can be found on CPRN's website at: <http://www.cprn.org>.

In the search for answers, groups typically used the available choices to develop complex new positions, reordering priorities in ways that captured a better equilibrium. The majority of groups therefore worked through their differing perspectives and resolved different value positions by striking a compromise that balanced the countervailing weight of children’s needs, fiscal pressures, and the role of families. A typical resolution might include three or more of the following elements: an emphasis on early childhood interventions; targetting at-risk children to reduce crime, juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy, and school dropout rates; maintaining and improving universal systems of support, such as education and healthcare; improving the quality of parenting and ensuring a greater commitment on the part of parents to maximize their potential; creating a more flexible system to include some combination of affordable daycare and/or subsidies for parents who care for their children at home rather than enter the labour market; stimulating the economy to increase job opportunities and families’ capacities to be self-sufficient; and enhancing community or other public supports to facilitate childrearing, particularly for families in crisis.

The exceptions were those groups that narrowly accepted one of the three main deliberative choice options. For example, one gathering of seniors emphasized the theme of family responsibility above all other considerations, concluding that "parents [should] take a greater interest in parenting education programs and provide a more caring and responsible attitude toward their children." That particular group preferred "less government dependency and greater family responsibility." Another group defined themselves as "frugal women who do not live beyond our means" and who believed that "the deficit should be brought down to manageable levels." Yet even as these women stressed fiscal responsibility, there was a recognition that "affordable daycare" and "job opportunities for young people" were necessary components of a more effective strategy to protect children as our "most important resource."

4.1.3 Benchmarks and Values

The feedback forms requested that groups identify possible "benchmarks" or indicators based on their deliberations that would demonstrate in five years time that the issues discussed with respect to children had been addressed adequately or successfully. The single most common benchmark of progress toward enhancing children’s lives was "a decrease in the rate of child poverty." Some groups echoed that comment further through their emphases that children’s "basic human needs" should be met sufficiently and that "minimum standards of living" should be achieved for children regardless of their particular family situations. More than half of the participating groups identified the reduction of child poverty and/or securing children’s basic needs as key benchmarks of progress.

Some groups explored the basic needs theme further in identifying a broader set of benchmarks that included health, education, and various family supports. For instance, the notion that "all children should have equal access to health care and education despite their economic status" received widespread acknowledgment. Another group preferred "a long-term strategy that would require a profound commitment to an ideal in which the average standard of education, good health [and] a minimal standard of living [are] achieved." Still another identified as a benchmark "a measurable increase in the programs and opportunities offered to help families raise their children."

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In the sphere of education, the specific benchmarks ranged from early childhood education opportunities or stimulation, to decreased absenteeism, to measures of high school enrollment and graduation rates. The health benchmarks included measures as broad as access to dental care and specific outcomes such as "lower teen pregnancy" and a reduction in the infant mortality rate. A diverse range of groups identified at least one or more of the following benchmarks relating to children's health and their educational futures: declines in suicide rates, school absenteeism, teen pregnancy, dropout rates, juvenile delinquency, and crime.

Woven throughout many of the discussions and follow-up commentaries were concerns about the tension between employment and family life. In most of these discussions, the participants focussed on supports for parents and caregivers, though some groups were worried about "the lack of job opportunities for young people and [thought] corporations should be helped to take on more of them, and to provide opportunities for training." Others were more concerned about developing supports to directly alleviate some of the pressures children and families in crisis were experiencing. Two specific suggestions for benchmarks were reductions in the numbers of hours that breadwinners had to work and an increase in job sharing. These were viewed as concrete policy options that might permit parents to spend more time with children, or at least to manage other household and daily responsibilities that were squeezed in with children in tow. The theme of balancing work and child care responsibilities was second only to child poverty as a fulcrum upon which many of the discussions centred.

More than one third of the groups discussed child care provision or "daycare" in the context of developing benchmarks, although the specific resolutions tended to split between two broad perspectives. On the one hand, the majority of those who discussed daycare-related issues focussed on the availability of and access to various paid or formal systems of care. Some of these groups spoke to the issue in more general terms (e.g., "universal/accessible/affordable child care"), while others emphasized the importance of corporate support for on-site daycare, including a suggestion for "twenty-four hour daycare for parents who work shift work." One group specifically advocated for an "accessible, affordable, quality national daycare program."

On the other hand, a smaller number of groups preferred increased supports for parents to raise their children without necessarily having to rely upon external child care services. The support might be either direct, such as "incentives from government [through] tax credits for stay at home parents," or more indirect and vague, whereby "women who stay home to raise children with a family structure are recognized for their contribution to society." A few groups wanted policies that would recognize the *economic* value of motherhood as an important dimension of the workforce. The preference was that there be more direct financial compensation for private childrearing, or at least tax breaks based on *household* rather than *individual* incomes.

Another group resolved the tension between these alternative strategies by stating that "home care and/or daycare [should] be an option for all families." The position explicitly recognizes that there are multiple strategies through which different families attempt to meet their financial and domestic responsibilities, which in turn might justify a more flexible public policy. Another slight variation

linking the education and daycare themes cropped up in another group’s discussion, which the group facilitator summarized in part as follows:

On the issue of daycare, there was a strong feeling that this element should be focussed on *an earlier start to the child’s education* rather than daycare simply to permit more freedom of action for the parent(s). The group agreed that the formative period of 1-6 years was crucial to a child’s development and provision for a compulsory reduction in school starting age to three or four was appropriate – particularly for remedial education for high-risk children" [*emphasis in the original*].

Yet despite the consistent recognition that communities, governments, and even corporations should assist families or provide alternatives to support healthy child development, parents and caregivers were still viewed as children’s single most important resource. The idea that most often emerged was that of providing support to families to assist them in their efforts to raise their children. Stated differently, parents and other primary caregivers should still have considerable latitude in their decision making with respect to most aspects of nurturing their children’s healthy development. At the same time, there should be adequate institutional supports in place to facilitate that process, such as parent education programs. There was widespread recognition that "one-size-fits-all" solutions were not viable and that primary caregivers needed more choices at their disposal.

In articulating their deeper sense of values, participants viewed the relationship between families and broader collective responsibility for children as more of a bridge than a divide. The groups envisioned the child primarily as situated within the family, even as the family itself was situated within the community and broader society, with government assuming an active and supportive role as well. The perspective recognizes the contributions of each sector toward the enhancement of the child’s well-being, even as participants emphasized, as one group stated, "a society that puts the family first."

With respect to community involvement, at least one in every four groups identified "community" directly or indirectly in their summary value statements. One group, for example, expressed as their central value that of "compassion," wherein "community is necessarily involved in finding solutions for the kind of life we want for our children." Several other groups included references such as "community is important," "respect for all life with support from the community," and "communities will have to assume more responsibility." The most encompassing description of the community was the following:

We need to create a society where interdependence is encouraged, where families are dependent on the larger community and acknowledge that dependence, and tolerate interference. Institutions must play their role in this scenario.

The discussants expressed a desire that governments should streamline programs and make them more effective, but should also continue to maintain a strong focus on ensuring that Canadian children have the best possible future. These participants saw a role for governments in creating a context for families as a fundamental part of the Canadian social contract. Others believed that "all

children deserve an equal start, no matter where in Canada they live or how successful their families are." Many groups leaned toward "strong government" which "would also resist the corporate and international agenda [and] maintain Canadian values such as compassion, mutual responsibility, humanity, culture, etc."

The latter theme was echoed in calls for strengthened and more democratic "mutuality" between governments and citizens, "more listening" and "more tolerance" or the call for "a genuine compassionate democracy." Echoing what Nevitte (1996) has described as the "decline of deference" in Canadian society, many groups were distrustful of government while at the same time wanting governments to act effectively on their behalf. For example, one summary contained the following observation:

We do not want someone imposing a vision on us. We do want someone who can draw together the threads of our common vision. We want thoughtful and courageous leaders, but no media puppets.

While concerned about the ability and willingness of current governments to provide long-term and systemic solutions, only rarely did any of the groups accept the notion that governments should abdicate or substantially decrease their role in children's lives. In fact, they continually sought to break through the limits imposed by the agenda of fiscal restraint, preferring instead to attempt to transcend current problems and envision new solutions. These groups in effect focussed on a glass perceived to be more than half-full and insisted on finding ways to ensure that the benefits would be shared more equally.

Comments on the choice to offer children a debt-free future further revealed the participants' views about the role of governments. In striking a compromise, most participants agreed that they wanted to offer children a debt-free future *and* also placed an emphasis on strong social policies to support children and families. Many saw cuts to social programs as necessary but excessive. In their view, cuts should be moderated in order not to further harm vulnerable families and children. Some of these groups voiced concerns that the programs themselves needed reform, but felt that deep cuts only punished users of the current system.

Two minority positions stood, without compromise, at opposite ends of the spectrum. On one side, a small minority of groups argued vehemently that the deficit scare itself was a manufactured myth to serve global corporate interests. These participants wanted the federal government to provide leadership to resist such an international agenda and saw cuts to social programs as completely misguided. They pointed to other strategies, including corporate taxation and higher taxes for the wealthy, as ways that government could retain the social safety net and balance the budget. A somewhat smaller minority at the other end of the spectrum argued that providing a debt-free future should be the highest priority. These participants believed that cuts to social programs were essential in order to get budgets under control, stimulate the economy, and discourage dependency and potential fraud.

4.1.4 Summary Analysis of Community Group Discussions

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The community group discussions revealed that Canadians are not suffering from any illusions that there will be simple solutions to the problems at hand. Participants often identified the difficulty inherent in being asked to separate issues and their ramifications, emphasizing rather the holistic nature of problems and potential solutions, along with the interrelationship of different issues. They felt that by taking a more visionary approach, governments and citizens in tandem might be able to find solutions to the needs of children and families. From this perspective, the best response would be a strategic and systemic view of the labour market and jobs available to parents and others. Another group described their "integrative" view accordingly:

The family is important and we need resources and structures put into place to support that. We need programs that protect children, but foster self-reliance in families. As we raise healthier families, the less money will be spent on ‘band-aids’ down the road, thereby helping to reduce our debt.

Indeed, a central theme that emerged in the analyses involved the importance of empowering parents to exercise choice in the context of their family situations. The implicit message of the above suggestions, for example, emphasized the types of supports that would enable parents to assume *more* responsibility for their children and engage in more effective childrearing practices. The discussion groups, through different language and examples, consistently acknowledged the primacy of parental responsibility for family life and viewed certain programs as helping to facilitate successful parenting.

Many groups expressed the view that discussion group deliberations should have been organized to take much longer in that a first discussion of these multifaceted issues was only able to scratch the surface. To address this problem, some groups chose to reconvene in a series of meetings to deliberate each issue in turn. By returning to the collected set of issues from different angles, they assumed a more integrated perspective. These groups attempted to delve even further below the surface to deepen their understanding of shared or common ground, as well as to explore their differences.

In general, the process of examining choices and deliberating different viewpoints seemed to encourage participants to work through tensions surrounding the fears of interfering with family privacy that were previously reported in *Exploring Canadian Values* (Peters, 1995). While many groups were unable to resolve these tensions in 1995, most *The Society We Want* groups valued families highly without emphasizing what they saw as a false sense of family autonomy. If anything, the vulnerability and isolation of families became more salient in later discussions of how communities and governments could support families and thereby support children at the same time. As one group explained, "It is important that we as families and society as a whole care about and value our children, and that we spend reasonable amounts to insure their well-being." Thus while identifying the family's primacy regarding their responsibility for children, the groups acknowledged as well the critical roles of both community and government in supporting and empowering family members (e.g., "programs and opportunities offered to help families raise their children" or "early intervention and investment are more effective").

A similar perspective on communities and governments was echoed in deliberations across other issue guides used by deliberative discussion groups. The importance of employment and economic growth as part of government’s role was advanced by groups discussing children, the role of government, the social safety net and, not surprisingly, work. For example, two groups dealing with the *Work* issue guide summarized the dilemma accordingly:

We believe that people need to take responsibility for themselves and their families, but that governments should use their resources to stimulate local economies (and thereby employment) in sustainable ways.

Our society cannot be built solely on self-reliance. The reality is that we are mutually interdependent.

The notion of a job as "the best social policy" was a common theme across the various issue guide discussions. Economic status vis-a-vis child poverty was seen as a priority to be addressed not only, or even chiefly, through specific child and family-focussed policies, but through economic growth and employment. For example, one group reported that "families are held accountable for raising their children, and improved job opportunities and [a strong] economy would certainly enhance the environment in which they are trying to function."

In conclusion, the problems in the interface between families and the labour market created what participants saw as a crucial double bind, both for parents unable to participate in the labour force and for working parents who had difficulty making ends meet while raising children. These were acknowledged as critical "external" problems over which parents had little control. From such a perspective, these groups sought more systemic solutions about families and labour markets rather than targetting families in isolation.

4.2 The Society We Want Randomly Selected Discussion Groups

As a means of further validating the community group results, CPRN conducted five discussion groups in the summer of 1997 with randomly recruited subjects in five communities across the country (Shields, 1997). These groups were intended to show how a sampling of Canadians articulated their values in the current context and explored the nature of the trade-offs and struggles they continued to encounter. As with the community groups, these random discussion groups were meant to explore in greater depth the general public’s views on one of three possible value choices with respect to investing in children.

4.2.1 General Overview

A total of 57 individuals participated in one of five groups convened in Fredericton, Montréal, Toronto, Trois Rivières, and Vancouver. The five groups were by no means sufficient in number or scientifically sampled to represent the communities from which they were drawn, but had the advantage of bringing together diverse individuals with different points of view.

In terms of the discussions, these groups used the same materials as those associated with of *The Society We Want* project and engaged in lengthy deliberations with the help of group facilitators. The issue guide entitled *Our Children* served as the basis for orienting the discussion groups. The accompanying information included a fact sheet with key statistics about social spending and the circumstances and demographics of families and children in Canada. The choices offered with respect to investment in children were once again as follows:

- ▶ children should have priority in social spending ("putting children first");
- ▶ children must be saved from what is seen as a spiralling debt and deficit ("debt-free future"); and
- ▶ families are primarily responsible for children and the investments to be made are private ones ("trust families to raise children").

At the conclusion of the deliberative process, the participants completed brief questionnaires containing demographic information and six close-ended, Likert-scale questions dealing with their opinions on various aspects of children and families. These latter results are examined first in the following discussion.

4.2.2 Randomly Selected Discussion Group “Polling” Results

Following the in-depth and often multilayered discussions of the different positions on children, the summary statements elicited relatively straightforward patterns of responses. The participants were asked to agree or disagree with six general statements. The summary results of 52 respondents appear in Table 1 on the following page. The number reveal that a majority of participants "strongly agreed" with two statements: "Families are primarily responsible for children, not governments" (65 percent) and "we should ensure affordable access to daycare, adequate food and clothing, free health care, and a high school education for all Canadian children" (60 percent). Upon collapsing the categories of "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree," the evidence reveals that nearly everyone supported the notion of families having primary responsibility for children (92 percent), but that governments were perceived as having a role as well. In particular, more than 86 percent agreed that affordable access to daycare, health, education, and basic needs should be available to Canadian children, while an equal percentage believed that often "families require some support to help them raise children to the best of their ability."

The other statements elicited a somewhat more diverse reaction from the participants across the five discussion groups. For example, while most agreed that "we've become a society that relies too much on institutions to safeguard and care for children," one in four participants disagreed with that viewpoint. The statement that "the very worst thing we could give our children is the huge public debt we now carry" produced an even more mixed reaction. While nearly two thirds expressed some agreement, there were many who were either neutral (13 percent) or who disagreed (21 percent).

The discussion statements are typical of the more general approach to public polling, which permits only a rather restricted set of responses to particular ideas. In fact, the aggregate responses appear

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to reflect a much greater degree of consensus than actually prevailed in the group discussions. The nuances of *why* individuals might respond as they do remain unexplored based purely on statistical descriptions. The feedback from the randomly selected discussion groups, however, provides important clues to interpreting these results.

Table 1: Summary Responses to Issues from Random Discussion Groups (%)

Statements	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
All social programs should put the well-being of children first.	35	44	8	6	4	4
We should ensure affordable access to daycare, adequate food and clothing, free health care, and a high-school education for all Canadian children.	60	27	0	10	2	2
The very worst thing we could give our children is the huge public debt we now carry.	25	40	13	15	6	0
Families are primarily responsible for children, not governments.	65	27	0	8	0	0
We can't continue to idealize the traditional nuclear family. Many families require some support to help them raise children to the best of their ability.	46	40	6	6	2	0
We've become a society that relies too much on institutions to safeguard and care for children.	35	38	2	13	10	2

Source: Adapted from Shields (1997).
 Figures may not total to 100 percent due to rounding.

4.2.3 Deliberations among Randomly Selected Discussion Group Participants

In their deliberations, the randomly selected discussion groups paralleled the community discussion groups in that participants rarely selected one clear option over another. Most participants and groups as a whole believed that the concerns associated with each option should be balanced. As noted previously, in groups convened by nonprofit organizations, that balance tended to emphasize the primacy of children, within the context of a stronger economy and jobs for parents. These groups frequently assumed a more interventionist stance, convinced of the need for an active role for governments in supporting families. In contrast, the randomly selected discussion groups tended to be more equivocal with respect to the possible role of government. These five groups were more inclined to emphasize the themes of personal responsibility and accountability, coupled with a focus on equality, opportunity, and compassion.

Most participants across the different randomly selected groups believed that the family should come first, even with governments continuing to provide supports aimed at helping families to manage their circumstances more effectively. Hence the compromise most often reached stressed some degree of continued "responsible" investment in children, greater personal responsibility, and an emphasis on the importance of family, despite the recognition that (as expressed in the Montréal discussion) "the autonomy of the family was a myth."

The groups tended to discuss each of the different options in some detail, with the exception of the Trois Rivières group, which briefly reviewed each of the three choices before engaging in a more general discussion of whatever issues they decided might be relevant. For example, they addressed the "invest in children" option primarily by suggesting that "a society that needs to address whether to put children first is a society that already is not paying attention to children" (Shields, 1997, p. 39). The discussion quickly turned to a debate about the merits of mothers remaining at home with preschool children versus daycare or early education programs, followed by a critique of the educational system in general.

The other four groups dealt with the "invest in children" option at greater length. The Montréal group focussed considerable attention on the issues of the lengthier dependency period that children experienced, coupled with increased debt and poorer prospects for gainful employment. Participants expressed concern in particular about what to do about children who were disadvantaged, the pros and cons of the social assistance system, and the possibility of paying women who stayed home to look after their children.

The Toronto, Vancouver, and Fredericton groups offered strong initial support for the "invest in children" option, but usually qualified their responses thereafter. The Toronto group tended to adopt the position that children should indeed be a priority for parental time and attention, but not as a special group privileged above all others for receiving resources. The Vancouver group stressed the importance of investing in *families*, both by encouraging familial involvement and by supporting social programs. Finally, the Fredericton group clearly expressed a divided opinion about the role of government in supporting families and children. Some participants believed that investing in children might be preferable mainly because of the breakdown of families, their limited capacities

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to support themselves, and the need to support especially those who are lacking in basic necessities. In contrast, others felt there was already too much government in general and that existing programs tended to breed the attitude that individuals are not responsible for themselves or their well-being.

An even greater ambivalence surrounded the concept of a "debt-free future," particularly among the Fredericton, Toronto, and Vancouver groups. Some participants argued that the debt issue had been overstated, while a few thought that it was the most significant and urgent issue facing Canadians. The discussions in the randomly selected groups often raised concerns about the country's fiscal crisis as a limiting factor in our collective ability to support families. These participants appeared to be somewhat tentative and fearful, placed more emphasis on debt reduction, and stressed the need for families to take more responsibility with fewer state supports than did their counterparts in the community discussion groups that were discussed previously.

Randomly selected discussion group participants generally agreed that becoming "debt free" was not or should not be the central objective of the policy agenda. Most preferred to support better fiscal management while maintaining key programs and services. Stated another way, the tension between reducing the debt even while sustaining essential programs and services was resolved primarily through a combination of calls for more responsible fiscal management and targeted debt reduction, or "sustainable debt" in the words of one participant from Vancouver.

Several groups developed the theme that children's well-being was tied at least in part to the economy and the abilities of parents to earn a living. For example, high unemployment was a commonly cited external factor that created difficulties for Canadian children and their families. The participants viewed a weak economy and a poor labour market as among the key underlying problems for families and saw this as a fault line in Canadian society. Other job-related factors that created strains included low wages, the need for both parents to find jobs just to make ends meet, time pressures, and the tendency to work two jobs or more overtime as wages, benefits, and security declined.

Yet there was also a sense among many participants within these groups that personal responsibility, including choices associated with becoming parents and decisions about material standards of living, should not be ignored in efforts directed at improving the lives of families and the children involved. The Trois-Rivières group, for example, considered overtly the options of financial compensation for mothers to remain at home to look after their children until age four versus sending children to daycare or preschool programs. Another theme that emerged was that families were unnecessarily stretched in part because of the pursuit of a higher material standard of living at the expense of quality of life, particularly for their children. As Shields (1997, p. 8) summarizes, "There was a widespread feeling that in the tradeoff of time for income, children were being shortchanged." Still, the concerns about inadequate or irresponsible parents were at least as strong as those about insufficient income.

The option of "trusting families to raise their children" had broad appeal yet generated a fair degree of polarization within the groups. In general, the participants tended to emphasize the idea of supports for families more than direct social spending on children or debt reduction as the primary

ends. Some participants believed that families had changed, but in a manner that has not necessarily been in the interests of children. In their view, the benefits of increased women’s participation in the labour force were offset to some degree by a belief that children were less likely to thrive without more involved parental guidance in their early years. At the same time, however, some participants expressed reservations that parents even had the requisite parenting skills to meet the challenges of parenthood.

The participants in randomly selected groups tended both to blame parents more and to trust governments less, at least in comparison with participants in the previously community groups. The "blaming factors" included parental inadequacy regarding the childrearing mission, the rampant pursuit of materialism (e.g., the "latest products"), excessive television as a substitute and inappropriate babysitter, and the failure to take marriage vows seriously or to pay child support following divorce. At the same time, external environmental factors were sometimes considered beyond the control of parents and yet presumed to have a negative impact on children. Some of these factors included consumerism, television, and media culture in general, which participants believed to be contributing to rising crime rates and an increasingly fragmented and hostile world.

The ambivalence surrounding the beliefs that families should be trusted to raise their children and have the capacity needed to deliver on that promise created a dilemma for many of the participants. The solutions were difficult to envision. There were no obvious pathways to success that would comfortably encompass the full range of values expressed by the groups, which included individual *and* collective responsibility, independence, stronger families, equal opportunity, and compassion. Hence the preferences tended to be aimed at policy options focussed more on possible supports for families that would not compromise their personal responsibility or otherwise promote dependency. For example, in the case of the Toronto discussion:

While everyone strongly agreed that families are primarily responsible for children, and almost everyone (eleven out of twelve) agreed that we’ve become a society that relies too much on institutions to safeguard and care for children, everyone also strongly agreed that we should ensure affordable daycare, free health care, and a high school education. One interpretation of this combination of responses is that the group was saying that they supported programs that complemented family responsibility, but not programs that were perceived as usurping the latter (Shields, 1997, p. 37).

The groups generally discounted strategies that emphasized more institutional supports than already existed, while continuing to reaffirm the value of children as a "national resource" and the future of Canadian society. By the same token, children were viewed by some as "self centred" or "over indulged," which in part further fed pathologies associated with childrearing.

4.2.4 Summary Analysis of Randomly Selected Group Discussions

Canadians recruited to participate in randomly selected discussion groups using *The Society We Want* issue guide entitled *Our Children* echoed many of the same themes expressed in community

groups. The five random discussion groups were, however, less resolved in their judgments, often entertaining what might appear to be contradictory notions regarding the various issues, even amongst many of the individual participants themselves. These participants seemed more despairing of finding solutions than their community group counterparts. Their perceptions often included the following pessimistic configuration of assessments: children are in need, families are inadequate, and yet governments do not offer solutions.

The randomly selected groups more commonly expressed the view that the factors most important to healthy development in children were *not* institutional in nature, but rather more personal and without much financial cost. These broad areas of influence included the nature of the caring relationship, values, and role modelling, as opposed to enhanced public sector initiatives. The random groups were more focussed on supporting families in ways that would ensure their willingness and ability to fulfill their childrearing responsibilities. The interdependent nature of individuals, families, and communities received some recognition, while existing government supports such as health and education were considered important to healthy child development as well. Participants thought that any additional public supports should be targeted directly to provide a social safety net for the more vulnerable or otherwise adversely affected segments of society, but without absolving individuals and families of their responsibilities.

There was little sense that long-term solutions would be brought forward by governments, and almost no recognition that Canada might be moving toward a post deficit agenda. The participants expressed more concerns about fiscal constraints than constructive solutions to problems. Their responses seemed to be oriented toward a minimal fix of crisis problems rather than a optimal vision of how to transcend current limitations. For them, the glass continues to appear half empty.

Random discussion groups identified as important a wide range of factors in the changing environment of families. The participants viewed some of these factors as reasons to blame families and parents for their plights and to argue that they needed to take greater responsibility and a more active childrearing role. The balance shifted in the direction of viewing families as primarily responsible for their well-being, with communities and governments assuming a more peripheral role. Many of these factors, however, were broached as reasons to seek to support and accommodate families trapped by circumstances beyond their control, particularly as a result of a weak economy and the attendant high levels of unemployment.

Finally, while the participants emphasized that governments should continue to provide certain basic supports such as healthcare and education, there was a general lack of faith or distrust about the capacity of government to satisfactorily intervene further in helping parents to raise their children. As Shields (1997, p. 11) has noted, "The message seems to be that we should focus more on families, and put more energy and resources into ensuring that they are both willing and able to effectively fulfill their childrearing responsibilities." At the same time, the general view was that this should *not* entail the development of additional institutional supports.

Thus there was a double bind. On one side, the participants viewed families as inadequate, while on the other side they thought that governments were not to be entrusted with further responsibility.

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There seemed to be a general sense, though, that the most effective solution would require a rededication on the part of individuals, families, and communities to the values of self-reliance, responsibility, compassion, and equality. The questions of what types of community responses might be warranted, and the interface between such action and government supports, were not clearly articulated.

5. CHOICE DELIBERATION: POLICY PREFERENCES

5.1 Roundtable Discussion Groups

CPRN convened three roundtable discussion groups to identify and discuss preferred policies and programs, particularly those items selected from lists provided that were considered to be "essential" to raising healthy children. Roundtables were held in Ottawa and Toronto with parent representatives of community organizations. In addition, a roundtable with youth representatives was held in Toronto. The participants created their own "towns" comprised of different policy mixes which were then discussed by the entire group, although reaching a consensus on any particular policy mix was not the ultimate goal.

5.1.1 General Overview of Roundtable Discussion Groups

The roundtable discussion group findings reflect the views of people brought together on the basis of their affiliation with parenting organizations or who were members of a parent resource centre. While these participants may have had a greater investment and experience with the issues at hand, and sometimes were opinion leaders in their communities, they were not representatives of advocacy organizations (with the exception of some participants in the youth roundtable). More specifically, one group of 12 adult participants included parents with young children (at least one under age of six) from the Ottawa and Cornwall areas. A second group of nine adult participants were involved in a Toronto roundtable, while a third roundtable discussion with 11 young people (aged 11 to 26) was conducted in Toronto as well.

The participants first completed a questionnaire and then, through the process of introductions, were asked to indicate the most and least valuable policies that they had experienced. Participants subsequently reviewed a series of policy options during the course of the roundtable discussions. There were eight categories, each containing as many as ten different individual policies:

- ▶ economic supplements
- ▶ balancing work and family
- ▶ the legal system and families
- ▶ child care/early education
- ▶ parenting supports
- ▶ children’s physical health and safety
- ▶ children’s development
- ▶ community spaces and supports

The questionnaires completed by the parents with young children indicated that most participants favoured community-based programs such as parent resource centres, parent drop-ins, and supports for a more engaged role in child care or some type of subsidized child care. Among the Ottawa group participants, however, there were differences of opinion on the latter issue. While one individual responded that the lack of accessible daycare was a problem, a few others identified the lack of universal child care or care provided at work as the real problems. These participants were concerned that the existence of such supports might compel even more parents to work outside of their homes, including many who otherwise would have chosen to be stay at home parents. Still other responses indicated a fair degree of support for more flexible work hours, a child tax credit, and for child care either inside or outside of the workplace.

The questionnaires were not useful as a means of discerning patterns of more or less helpful programs and services. For example, while some in the Ottawa group expressed strong support for play groups as a valuable program, others in the Toronto group rated these as among the least helpful programs. There was significant support in Ottawa for maternity leave, development and enrichment programs for infants and toddlers, prenatal and breast feeding education, and midwifery care. In contrast, some of those in the Toronto group identified breast feeding clinics, parenting courses, and prenatal courses as among the *least* valuable services they had encountered on a personal basis.

The actual roundtable discussions gave participants an opportunity to review a series of policy options in much greater depth and detail, which proved to be a productive exercise. The participants consistently managed a range of program and policy options, considered a broad range of innovative options, and were prepared to articulate their rationales for developing their "best mixes" for policy preferences. There emerged a rather strong consensus in the rationales expressed on issues such as the focus on all families, prevention, programs for infants and toddlers, universality in service supports for parents, income supports for those most in need, and "choice" as the preferred means for resolving labour force participation issues.

5.1.2 Ottawa Roundtable Discussion Results

For the Ottawa roundtable, the desire for inclusive and accessible community services was a core theme underlying each policy mix discussed. The alternatives generally provided variations of the theme, either to emphasize support for working parents or to target prevention and early intervention. The final exercise confirmed that the participants preferred better access to and integration of services rather than an increase in spending on social services. When asked to identify which of three model towns in which they would want to live, the overwhelming majority selected the town with the fewest essentials, but that also had centralized and accessible services as the centerpiece of the policy mix. The Quebec CLSC's (Centre locale de santé communautaire) were raised explicitly as a model to emulate because these offer health and community services within the same complex and provide services directly to their communities.

The participants stressed location as a serious barrier and argued that isolation was an impediment to healthy families. There was considerable recognition of the need to reach out to families and to raise their awareness about available supports. The focus tended to be on the needs of the *parents*,

as well as on parenting as an important form of *work*. The question was posed not only as "Who is responsible for children?" but as "Who is responsible for smoothing the transitions back and forth to the labour market?" The responses to the latter question stressed the importance of governments in helping parents to exercise "choice" about whether to stay at home with young children or whether to enter the paid labour market. The participants preferred income supports for working parents during the early childhood years that would permit them an opportunity to take a break from employment. An enriched income support for parents who were not in the labour market was included as a means of acknowledging the difficulties of single parents. The assumption was that such a policy would provide support to children in lone-parent families whose parent was without work. Interestingly, the mix did not include a child care program.

In summation, eight of the twelve participants supported the above mix and rationale, which underlined early childhood development, supportive services for parents, and income supplements to enhance the choices available to parents with respect to labour market participation. The rationale in part was based on the view that women with young children in their families especially needed a break from labour market participation. The view did *not* reflect the assumption, however, that women should naturally remain at home with their children. Rather the presumption seemed to be that women and mothers typically entered the labour market for the majority of their adult lives, while the "break" from the labour market during the early childhood years was an exception.

Some participants explicitly *excluded* support for child care outside the home in their policy mix, while others supported child care options even if it were not an option that they themselves would choose. Those participants strongly invested in their careers, who were working for economic reasons or other rewards, and who felt that full-time parenting was not their forte placed formal child care at the centre of their notion of a best policy mix. These individuals embraced a rationale that explicitly acknowledged women's labour force participation on economic and social grounds, coupled with the importance of quality child care to support such participation. In addition, these participants included options for income supports for parents who stayed at home in their mixes and accepted that the decision to stay in the labour market might be an individual decision made according to personal circumstances.

The views about the labour market and how to support parents during the early childhood years sometimes divided single parents and couples, such that participants from two-parent families were more likely to signal an interest in staying at home during the early childhood years. The lone parents employed in the paid labour force seemed less enthusiastic about the provision of an income support during the early childhood years. These individuals were more likely to include child care supports for working parents in their preferred mix, expressing ambivalence about the loss of both income and the social linkages that might result from being single parents deprived of the labour market attachments.

The Ottawa roundtable participants ultimately reached consensus on a set of principles as part of a coherent rationale, which was a system described as "the most inclusive, the most accessible and the most preventative." They preferred workable, portable services that would be flexible enough to serve the various needs of their whole community. While there were only two items common to all

three mixes – an enriched income supplement for all single parents in poverty and an advanced maintenance (guaranteed child support) system – the intent was to "achieve these things [the principles], not just the services."

5.1.3 Toronto Roundtable Discussion Results

The Toronto roundtable participants developed three mixes that agreed on each of the following options: an economic support to all parents during the first three years of a child's life, a part-time work option for full-time employees, economic supports for stay at home parents *and* employed parents, informal supports such as drop-ins, regular home visits by paraprofessionals, and violence prevention programs such as kid's help lines. The dividing line in the Toronto roundtable appeared to be whether or not policies should emphasize care for children at home versus child care outside the home. While different individuals had different preferences in this regard, there were certain common policies included in each of the "towns" discussed: economic supports for parents during the first three years of childrearing, a part-time work option for full-time employees, economic supports for stay at home and employed parents, informal supports such as drop-ins, regular home visits by paraprofessionals, and violence prevention programs such as kid's help lines.

The participants reached a consensus on certain broad principles of public policy relating to key issues. For example, regardless of whether parents were raising children in their homes or employed in the paid labour force, the roundtable participants expressed a desire to see parents and families receive adequate economic supports. The consistency of their choices reflected widespread acceptance of the different work scenarios currently being played out by Canadian families. Whether working primarily inside or outside of the home – or attempting to manage both simultaneously – the policy choices confirmed the feasibility and the necessity of economic policies geared to supporting families with young children. A further theme concerned the importance of ensuring that all parents with young children have knowledge of and access to pertinent services and resources to assist with their childrearing responsibilities.

Perhaps more than any other specific issue, the availability and accessibility of services constantly emerged in the context of the Toronto discussions. There was not only consensus about the importance of disseminating information to parents, but there was considerable discussion about the means to accomplish this end. Some of the options considered included government notifications with each birth, flyers through the mail advertising local services, or door-to-door canvassing. Finally, the parents of children with special needs also called for an accessible and inclusive system able to respond to the needs of families caring for children with disabilities.

On the whole, the Toronto roundtable discussants shared a consensus regarding a focus on all families, children at the youngest ages, prevention, and systemic supports for parents. Much of the discussions revolved around the appropriate roles of community services and government in the lives of parents and young families, with a strong emphasis on information sharing. The majority of the participants somewhat reluctantly (because of the fiscal implications) endorsed an increase in services to ensure a more comprehensive, relevant, and accessible system. The sense seemed to be that parents wanted to maintain primary control in the decision making process, but that they were

looking for more information and access to services that would enable them to do a more effective job as parents.

5.1.4 Youth Roundtable Discussion Results

The participants in the youth roundtable shared a broad vision of what would best serve their needs. They tended to identify new and innovative solutions, were often critical of what they saw as conventional approaches, and typically assumed a more holistic approach to the issue of the best policy mix. Indeed, before the selection of policy essentials had started, the participants were eager to identify and discuss options that had *not* been included in the materials. For example, the youth participants raised concerns regarding the omission of certain environmental needs such as clean air and water from the list of options. The participants reasoned that without these basics, healthy development for many young people in Canada and around the world would be impossible.

Many youth participants focussed on alternative strategies for involvement in that the labour market was not seen as the only route to success in their lives. Indeed, some participants voiced a disenchantment with programs that explicitly focussed on the labour market and school because these were often perceived to view young people only as "future productive workers." Notably, these participants preferred education that served as a means to help them become better citizens and not simply as a means to get a job.

The participants were clear as well that youth needed a voice and a role in the decision making process, raising doubts about the ability of many current programs to appropriately reach young people and deliver what is needed. They supported policies that empowered youths more, such as consideration of their preferences in custody proceedings, alternative sentencing for youth, parenting courses, drop-in and referral centres for youths, schools that were open and more accessible during off hours, and cooperative work-study programs. Their preferences included enhanced supports for youth when at highest risk and more interface between young people and the broader community to create a more integrated approach to solving the problems of youth.

The participants agreed on the importance of an active role for governments in social policy. In fact, in the broad political and economic context of decision making and responsibility, there was strong opposition to the devolution of federal and provincial responsibilities. These youth displayed a solid understanding of the local implications of disappearing national standards. Moreover, youth participants referred to the lack of equity between communities as a negative aspect of the current economic system. To address the issue, however, participants preferred a federal and provincial redistribution of funding, while the decision making and priority setting would be done by the community.

Finally, there was relatively little discussion around how young people related to families. The participants discussed instead the community's ability to be responsive to young people and the degree to which they will have both a place and influence within the community. The fundamental issues that arose throughout the roundtable centred on priority setting and issues of inclusion regarding young people. What began as an exercise aimed at identifying common ground on the best

mix of programs evolved into a discussion on the nature of community in relation to governments and the role of youth as involved citizens.

5.2 Focus Groups

The purpose of holding focus groups was to explore the public’s views on the issues of investing in children, the role of government, the needs of families, and preferences for different types of support. The exercise involved having each group discuss and select a series of specific interventions that, in the aggregate, they believed would constitute an effective strategy for Canadian children. The participants were also asked to identify their goals for children, the extent to which these goals were reflected in their choices, as well as any other reasons for selecting their particular mix of programs and policies (Ekos, 1997a).

The objective of these exercises was to discover the policy mixes generated by participants and the rationales that they brought to bear to justify their choices. The discussions encouraged participants to consider the impacts of their choices on children of different ages, as well as on families across a range of structures and income groups. The rationales therefore included several considerations, such as what the policy mix would achieve, how it would be delivered, who would benefit, and what its wider impacts were likely to be, including assumptions about the relationship between families, the labour market, and the state.

Fourteen focus groups were convened in which participants addressed two protocols designed specifically for the project: an "envelope" and a "vision" exercise. The difference between these two types of group exercises were twofold. First, the vision groups were presented with far more programs and policy options (49) than the envelope group (32). Second, the latter group received estimated costs for each program or service. Thus the vision groups were intended to foster wide-ranging discussions aimed at exploring the breadth of possible policy options, while the envelope groups explored the trade-offs among different policy options when costs were factored into the discussions. The programs and policies were grouped into several categories to facilitate presentation and discussion, which are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Categories of Programs and Policies by Type of Group

Envelope Groups (Parent/Nonparents)	Vision Groups (Parents/Nonparents)	Vision Groups (Youth)
Income Supplements Universal Programs Supports to Balance Family and Work Child Care Voluntary Preventative Programs for Children at Risk	Economic Supplements Balancing Family and Work Child Care/Early Education Legal System and Families Parenting Supports Children’s Development Community Spaces/Supports	Healthy Development Legal System and Families Family Supports Educational Supports Community Supports Work Supports

Ekos Research Associates conducted 14 focus groups in Ottawa, Fredericton, Montréal, Trois-Rivières, and Vancouver (plus three pilots conducted in Toronto). The groups consisted of parents, nonparents or those with children older than 18, and youth between the ages of 16 and 24. The envelope exercise required participants to select program and policy options for an ideal Canadian town based on the options’ perceived effectiveness, capacity to work together or "mix" to enhance children’s outcomes, and cost. The vision exercise asked about the effective complementarity or "mix" of programs, but with a somewhat wider range of options and *without* cost considerations. Selected individual participants were encouraged to present a set of effective and complementary options, while other group members were asked to either refine these initial positions or propose alternatives. Ekos (1997a) research conducted the preliminary analysis based on a summary protocol, while the final analysis involved returning to individual summary protocols and coding responses.

5.2.1 Adult Focus Groups

Ten of 11 adult focus groups articulated a common rationale underlying the selection of their choices. Most groups selected programs and policies systematically and as part of an overall rationale. In Fredericton, however, it was only after a program by program selection that a rationale emerged. Only three groups selected a mix solely on a discrete, program-by-program basis (Ekos, 1997a, p. 8).

The adult participants considered whether programs and policies worked together by identifying where options achieved the same objective, then selecting to avoid overlap. Further considerations about how programs reinforced and complemented one another to achieve best results emerged in half of the adult groups. Generally, the adult groups were able to reach consensus on most elements of their rationale. Although reaching consensus was not required, most divisions were eventually resolved by the end of discussions. Differences tended to occur with respect to preferences for particular programs or emphases, not in relation to actual rationales and outcomes for children.

An underlying current throughout these discussions was a profound sense of the massive changes experienced by families today in terms of internal capacities – divorce, lone parenthood, mobility,

isolation from kin, time pressures – *and* in terms of the external environment – unemployment, job insecurity (even among those with long-term employment histories), a fast-track media culture, and a declining sense of family responsibility. Common themes across the rationales of the adult groups included the following: 1) improving outcomes; 2) a focus on prevention; 3) the value of universal services; 4) infrastructure supports; 5) the importance of community spaces; 6) the need for parenting supports; 7) acknowledgement of parental responsibility and choice; 8) uncertainty about income supports; and 9) a division about how to handle the interface between families and the labour market. These themes are discussed below in more detail.

1) *Outcomes for Children*

Although the goals for children were expressed differently across the groups, they shared a common interest in ensuring that children are healthy, both mentally and physically. Parents tended to focus on ensuring children are well cared for, fostering family responsibility, doing the best for children, ensuring that all children have equal opportunities, increasing the time families spend together, ensuring children are protected, giving children a strong start to life, and ensuring that children are healthy. Non-parents expressed similar goals, including ensuring general well-being and basic care, promoting equal opportunity and self-esteem, providing a healthy environment, and fostering healthy social development.

2) *Prevention*

Nearly all of the adult groups placed an emphasis on prevention in the early childhood years (zero to four) through the provision of a range of programs. Exceptions occurred in Fredericton, where participants focussed on having programs throughout childhood and adolescence in order to avoid gaps, and in a group in Trois-Rivières, in which the wide age ranges of participants’ children appeared to influence their discussion accordingly.⁴ Other variations occurred in Ottawa and Montréal. In Ottawa, the discussion focussed on the needs of young children, but in the context of child care and junior kindergarten. These participants did not view three-year-olds as being ready for a structured school environment. In Montréal, the discussion of younger age groups was an artifact of the facilitator’s request to consider the needs of each age group separately.⁵

3) *Universal Services*

⁴The main criterion for selecting parents was that they have at least one child aged six years or under. However, some of the parents recruited for the groups had other children of differing ages, in addition to the child aged six or under.

⁵In this group, the first presenter selected a fairly inclusive selection of programs. As the group was fairly happy with this mix, there was no incentive to discuss any of its components. To stimulate discussion, the facilitator asked them to identify what children needed. This evolved into a discussion of the various needs of the child at different ages.

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Although it was more prominent among groups in the envelope exercise (in which there was a category entitled "universal programs"), a preference for universality was another common theme which frequently arose in group discussions and transcended the type of group and the parental status of the participants. Preferences for universal programs that emerged during discussions also translated into selections of programs and policies. At least half of the groups selected newborn health visits, family resource centres, and recreation programs on a universal basis.

There were some notable exceptions. The major point of tension in a nonparent, envelope group in Trois-Rivières revolved around universal versus needs-based programs. Some people thought that it was too expensive to offer programs to the advantaged, whereas others wanted all programs offered to everyone equally.

There was also some concern expressed regarding who would decide who was at risk and what the criteria would be. Most groups solved this by focussing on the widespread sense of risk shared by all families and the sense that vulnerability was difficult to target in an increasingly complex world. In particular, the difficulties of managing work and family, and the lack of skills and experience of most new parents, left most participants with a sense that crucial services should be accessible to all families.

The most apparent constraint appeared to be the feeling that under current fiscal realities, it would not be possible to afford many needed services. Many participants wanted universal services, but felt that they might be fiscally constrained. If such services were affordable, groups most often felt that these should be universally offered. It is important to note, however, that the discussion of universality was focussed on service provision, rather than on income support or child care per se. On these particular issues, groups were more divided and individuals were more unresolved, as the discussion below reveals (*see item 8*).

4) *Infrastructure Supports*

Participants viewed infrastructure supports, including primary and secondary education and health care, as part of the basic package of universal supports. During the pilot phase, where the groups were offered these as part of their menu of choices in selecting a "best mix," the participants expressed the view that these options should be included without further discussion. The later groups that were offered menus that did *not* specifically include these options often either identified them as basics that could not be ignored or specifically added them to their notion of a mix. The underlying rationale in both these scenarios was that universal opportunities for a good basic education and quality health care were essential parts of ensuring children's well-being. Other elements that participants often nominated as absolute universals that required no detailed discussion were environmental and child pornography regulations. While the idea of eliminating child poverty was treated as a core issue, the views of appropriate measures varied quite widely among participants (see Section 5.3).

5) *Community Spaces*

A number of groups achieved consensus around community spaces and supports, with a focus on activities for parents with young children, children attending school, and youth. The need for leisure activities was identified, particularly in relation to the potential consequences for rates of juvenile delinquency. The participants felt these activities could contribute to the development of values such as discipline and self-confidence.

Discussions about local level delivery and decision making were more limited in these groups than in the roundtables. Most participants had a clear sense of the access issues at the community level, supporting the notion of finding ways to make services widely accessible. The groups emphasized community-based delivery of programs. Some groups simply advocated community delivery, while others were more focussed on communities, community responsibility, and community empowerment. In this vein, groups generally preferred a reduction in government involvement in the delivery of programs and services. In some groups, there was a desire for government funding for programs, while others thought that government should not be funding programs. Those who opposed government funding in this regard viewed the main role of government as one of providing income supports and legislative or policy measures. Two groups expressed a desire for an active role for government in the area of policy development to frame community action.

6) Parenting Supports

The evidence revealed that parenting supports figured prominently in the mixes of a number of groups, including four of the five vision groups. The reasons for endorsing parenting supports varied somewhat, but the underlying motivations were similar. More specifically, parenting supports were viewed as important because "there is more to being a parent than giving birth" (Ekos, 1997a, p. 31). Since parents are not equipped with an innate knowledge of or ability to parent, the idea of parent support programs was viewed as a positive supplement to help address the issue.

The idea of parenting supports was consistent with the rationale that some expressed whereby parents should be primarily responsible for themselves and their children. Some viewed the parenting supports as an important means through which parents in need might be able to acquire essential tools and achieve a higher level of self-sufficiency. The groups that endorsed parenting supports envisioned a full range of options to maximize selections for issues that would be most relevant to those interested in the service.

7) Parental Responsibility

Parenting supports were also raised in connection with the idea that parents should be assuming more of the responsibility for raising their children. Parental supports were not substitutes but, rather, complements to help parents fulfill their responsibilities. The participants viewed parenting supports and community supports as "enabling strategies" in a best mix. Herein the issue of the labour market entered as a prominent reality confronting parents. The focus group participants believed in the importance of creating choices for parents by easing the burden of work and/or making it more affordable to stay at home and allow more time with children.

There was a sense among some participants, however, that parents too often looked to governments for things that they should be responsible for themselves. This sometimes emerged as a feeling that "other people," such as schools or caregivers, were raising children. To address this issue, some participants called for arrangements that would offer families access to facilities and time for activities rather than specific programs.

8) *Income Supports*

The provision of income supports as part of a best policy mix generated conflict within a number of groups and revealed participants' ambivalence about their faith in the ability of parents to assume full responsibility for their children. Some argued that income supplements should be offered only if assurances could be provided that the money would be spent on children. These participants were also concerned that income supports might financially reward parents for having additional children they could not afford on their own. The most extreme position was that people would be motivated to have additional children in order to receive this extra money: "Are we encouraging people to go out and have children when they can't really afford it" since "to them, \$3,000 is a lot of money."

There was an insistence that financial supports not promote further dependency. The concern about financial supports revealed underlying conflicts on the issue of parental responsibility. While participants wanted families to assume a greater role and to act more autonomously, at the same time they did not trust parents to have independent control over financial resources. To this end, some participants argued that support did not have to be financial in nature. They preferred to provide programs or services (e.g., food stamps, clothing) in lieu of financial supports. There was greater confidence that the supports would go directly to the children. In this context, it is important to note that, in contrast to roundtables, the focus group participants were somewhat more judgmental about how income supports should be handled.

Yet other focus group participants argued for direct income supplements. They believed it was important to ensure that parents had control over money to avoid conveying the negative message that "we don't trust you." They pointed to the inherent contradiction of both insisting that parents take responsibility and then denying resources that might enhance their capacities to assume such responsibility. These participants preferred to trust in the good faith of parents rather than put into place a punitive system to avoid the potential abuses of a few.

Groups and participants were also unresolved on whether all families or only those in need should receive income supports. Most thought that only the most disadvantaged should receive any income support, rather than treating income supports as part of a universal program package. These participants advocated targeting income support to those in the greatest need, despite the concern in a few groups that those in the middle of the income distribution range are tired of being taxed without seeing any of the benefits. This view was reinforced by the sense that those in higher income ranges received only a "useless pittance" from the child tax benefit.

Conversely, two Quebec groups believed that the middle class no longer existed. The members of these groups proposed providing income supplements to everyone below a relatively high level of

family income, up to and including the \$60,000 to \$70,000 range. Participants in Fredericton experienced considerable difficulty in making decisions about income supplements. One position held that the supplement should be higher, because "if we're going to give a supplement, then why don't we go all the way." The main counter argument was that taxes would have to increase. Income supports were seen to be important to all families in case they were needed. However, as soon as a case of need arose and a family actually used the income support system, their motives were cast in suspicion. This double-bind is made more complex, as seen below, by the struggle to resolve questions about how to support the interface between families and the labour market.

9) *Balancing Work and Family*

Systemic issues around the interface between families and the labour market generated the greatest differences in focus groups, as they had at the roundtables. The issues raised in the discussions mainly involved the question of choice with respect to formal child care or income supplements for parents staying at home during the early childhood years, the legitimacy of some alternatives, and broader debates about women's roles.

Although identified as a *child care* rather than an *income* support, many participants interpreted the provision of financial support for parents at home with children as an income support. Many viewed the option as potentially enabling parents to choose whether to stay at home with children or to be attached to the workforce. In fact, six of the ten mixes in the vision exercise and nine of the twelve mixes in the envelope exercise included the income supplement for parents who cared for their own children at home. The option, though, seemed to focus on parents in dual-income families attached to the labour market, thus revealing a deeper ambivalence about the role of income supports.

More specifically, staying at home appeared to be a legitimate choice if someone in the family were attached to the labour market, but seemed to be defined as illegitimate if no one in the family provided earned income. Despite the acknowledgment of job uncertainties and structural difficulties with the labour market, participants seemed to work with a double standard. The standard for parents *not* attached to the labour market evoked suspicions about welfare dependency, fraud, or laziness when options about staying at home were raised. The standard for parents attached to the labour market granted them permission to stay at home and focus on child development in the early years. While some participants objected and took a less judgmental view, the double standard and the "blaming responses" it evoked were relatively common.

These responses were integrally linked to participants' ambivalence about women's role in society and the economy. It seemed to be illegitimate for a woman on social assistance to stay at home, whether she was a single mother or in a two-parent family, but entirely legitimate and a "choice" if the woman had worked previously or her partner received earned income. Single mothers without work were seen as lacking motivation and in need of supports to get working, including child care and, potentially, training or other income incentives. Participants rarely accepted the notion that women with very young children might not be in the best position to work. This was more often discussed as a problem to be overcome rather than a choice in relation to children's needs.

Nonetheless, "choice" was a common theme across rationales, particularly with regard to families and the labour market. The discussions revealed occasionally subtle and sometimes blatantly obvious dividing lines among participants in terms of whether parents (usually discussed exclusively as mothers of very young children) should have the choice to either stay at home or be in the labour force. From the deliberations surrounding how to provide income supports for families with young children, substantial fears and blaming tendencies surfaced among participants.

A few groups, however, reached agreement regarding family and work. For some it was important to ensure that parents were not penalized in their careers simply because they chose to have children. Flex work was also considered to be important. In the envelope exercise, supports to balance family and work were chosen with relative frequency among all the groups. The fact that costs associated with these programs and policies were negligible may have been a contributing factor.

5.2.2 Youth Groups

The three youth groups tended to be less systematic in their selections. The youth group in Montréal attempted to select as many effective programs as possible. In Ottawa, despite having identified different individual rationales, the selections for the final group mix ended up being chosen on a program-by-program basis. In Fredericton, the youth group focussed on programs singly in developing a mix, despite encouragement to think about programs in combination with each other.

There was, however, much consistency among the three youth groups regarding essential programs and policies, particularly between the Fredericton and Ottawa groups. The rationales might have been different, but this is difficult to gauge because there was little emphasis on an overall rationale for the final mix. Nonetheless, the final mixes selected in these two groups were quite similar.

In total, there were 14 programs and policies which were common to all three youth groups. These programs included measures to encourage safe sex, contraceptive information, parenting skills training, allowing children to be heard in custody disputes, before and after school daycare programs, university and work preparation classes, recreation spaces, and cooperative school programs. Although each of these programs was selected in all three groups, different groups placed a slightly different emphasis on them.

Finally, although the youth groups tended to focus mainly on their own needs during the selection of programs and policies, they voiced similar goals for children. In general, they wanted children to grow up safe, healthy and secure, with adequate public spaces to engage in a variety of youth-focussed activities. In contrast to the parent and non-parent groups, two of the youth groups raised the issue of the decision making process with respect to community spaces. The focus was less on whether *parents* should be involved in decision making and more on whether *residents* of a community should have a voice. In the Montréal youth group, the participants were more concerned with whether it should be youth themselves delivering the services.

5.3 Common Themes

The results suggest that in terms of Yankelovich’s stages of public dialogue, Canadians have resolved judgment on some key issues, but remain either in conflict or at a minimal level of awareness on others. Canadians continue to believe that investment in children is a priority. Most acknowledge a role for governments, but many feel restrained about how helpful governments can be in the current fiscal environment. They are clear that addressing the needs of children is not simply a question of child and family specific programs, but requires some recognition of the ways that families interface with the labour market. They are in conflict, however, in how they imagine these issues might be resolved.

Various aspects of the interface between the family and the labour market revealed the most ambivalence and conflict, demonstrating the most unresolved judgment among participants in deliberative exercises. Many thought choices should be in the control of parents, preferring to increase the responsibility that parents must assume. Others saw choice as something potentially dangerous to those parents they felt were not pulling their own weight in society. These participants were distrustful and blaming of the choices they saw some parents making. As an example, they did not want poor parents to have control of income supports. At the same time, they wanted to make income supplements to support a pause from work available to parents in even relatively comfortable income groups, thereby opening up choices for those with higher incomes, but not for others. These conflicts, with the accompanying lack of resolution, suggest that Canadians do not currently share a collective rationale about how to respond most effectively to the needs of families and children.

For example, focus group participants, particularly among the economically insecure, tended to draw images of child poverty from their own observations and their knowledge of their own communities (Ekos, 1997b). In these discussions, the basic images that emerged included hunger, shabby clothing, and poor hygiene. The connection between a child’s diet and his or her ability to learn in school was often noted. The focus group participants generally believed that public policies had actually contributed to a net increase in child poverty levels over the last two decades. Yet despite frustration and distrust in government, they felt that the issue of child poverty was so broad and complex that governments, with their resources, positions of leadership, and legislative power, simply had to be involved in finding solutions. These results are echoed in other random public opinion exercises on children’s issues.

An Angus Reid poll on child poverty, conducted in February 1997 with 800 Ontario residents, revealed that 71 percent of respondents felt that the federal government was not doing enough to combat child poverty. When asked about the best strategy for governments to combat child poverty, the majority of respondents (62 percent) said that the best option was to improve the economy; less than half that number (29 percent) said that the best option was direct assistance through financial and other supports.

In struggling with conflicts over these issues, participants in deliberative discussion groups revealed a tentativeness not only about what should be done, but about what could be done. Even when they were able to envision a comprehensive range of supports that could help families and children, some worried about fiscal constraints and the capacity of government to deal effectively with these issues. Thus, they wanted to design a useful system, but often responded as though they were being asked

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to entertain possibilities that would be discounted on fiscal grounds. They seemed to display a level of fearfulness as well as a kind of despairing doubt that anything could be done.

6. PUBLIC OPINION POLLS

The group-related exercises that have informed much of this discussion paper involved several hundred Canadian citizens of all ages drawn from across the country. The majority of the participants were affiliated with community and nonprofit groups, while a few discussion groups included more "random" collections of citizens. The recruitment strategies, however, were not conducive to producing a representative sample of Canadians. Since much of the participation stemmed from previous affiliations rather than probability sampling techniques, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire population. Moreover, there were some obvious skews in the distribution of participants, such as the fact that roughly two thirds were women. Polling data may be especially helpful to complement the findings of such research.

Public opinion polls remain the most efficient means by which one can capture representative samples of the general public and obtain their views on any number of different issues. If crafted well, polls can capture with a high degree of accuracy the public's current opinions, albeit with the caveat that these speak only to "top of the mind" responses to questions that themselves may contain bias. Examined over time, polls may also indicate relative levels of stability or fluidity in public opinion. Thus the first subsection concentrates on polling results that, over the years, have for the most part only indirectly examined public opinion regarding supports to families and children. The second subsection then reports the main findings from a national poll designed to deal more directly with values and preferences for the "best policy mix" for Canadian children.

6.1 Public Opinion Polls on Work and Family Issues

The current subsection provides a brief historical review of public opinion polls spanning the last twenty years on various social policy issues related to women, balancing work, and family responsibilities.⁶ Two issues in particular stand out from the analysis. First, the public opinion research has *not* captured the issues most relevant to this research in any great detail. Social policies addressing the needs of children in particular have rarely been the focus of polling questions, with the exceptions of issues pertaining to education and, to a more limited extent, the welfare system and poverty. Furthermore, the views of Canadians with respect to issues such as daycare, corporate sector supports for working parents, and family allowances have been captured primarily in more recent polls (i.e., those within the last decade) but only sporadically at best.

A second notable issue pertains to the significance of gender. To the extent that more specific policy relevant questions about the balance of work and family responsibilities have been asked, almost invariably these have been framed as "women's issues." Hence the results presented address mainly the public's views of women in relation to employment and family issues. The public opinion research strongly reflects and even reinforces the societal bias that men are not and should not be as concerned with family policies, nor asked to make trade-offs between paid employment and

⁶Robert Burge and the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Queen's University deserve special thanks for providing access to their on-line data file systems containing the historic polling data of Decima and Environics.

domestic responsibilities. For example, while the polls have inquired about the impact of mothers’ labour force participation on the well-being of their children on several occasions, a parallel question about the impact of fathers’ employment has never been asked. Similarly, a recent cover issue of *Maclean’s* asks “Should mom stay home?” to care for young children, but nowhere does the lead article address the issue of child rearing as an option or preference for men (Chisholm, 1999).

As a result of the above considerations, the various issues examined for the current study included the following: women’s labour force participation, attitudes about women’s employment and the impact on children, the availability and accessibility of quality daycare, daycare funding options, and supportive family policies

6.1.1 Women’s Labour Force Participation

While the proportion of men in the labour force has remained relatively steady over the years, women’s labour force participation has grown dramatically in the second half of the twentieth century. In 1960, for example, only 20 percent of married women were employed in the labour force, as compared with 45 percent of women who were single, divorced, separated or widowed. By 1984, roughly half of Canadian women were participating in the paid labour force and the proportion of married women had surpassed that of their non-married counterparts for the first time (Ghalam, 1997). The data for 1998 reveal that some 58 percent of Canadian women aged 15 and older participated in the paid labour force, including nearly four in five women between the ages of 25 and 44 (Statistics Canada, 1999). Women in Canada comprise nearly half of the total workforce, while most two-parent families are supported by income from both partners. The inescapable reality of women’s labour force participation begs the question about Canadian attitudes toward women’s mass entry into the labour force over the last few decades and the implications for policies in support of child and family well-being.

6.1.2 Attitudes Toward Women’s Employment

Prior to the mid-1980s, national opinion polls in Canada rarely asked about daycare options or family leave policies, especially in regard to dual-earner couples. There was a certain ambivalence regarding women’s attachment to the labour market – which by no means has fully dissipated – that perhaps rendered such questions a bit premature. The focus was on issues such as women’s rights or preferences to work, their capacities, and workplace equality. For example, a 1978 Environics national poll asked women the following: “Given the choice, do you think you would prefer to work full-time as a homemaker, work as a homemaker with a part-time job outside the home, or be employed full-time outside the home?” Almost 42 percent responded that they preferred splitting their time between household responsibilities and part-time work, while one third preferred an exclusive role as homemaker, and 21 percent selected the full-time work option.

Another survey question from the 1978 poll contained a somewhat biased introduction suggesting that “having both children and a job outside the home often raises problems for women who would like to hold an outside job.” The question then offered three main choices. The respondents indicated their preferences with regard to what a woman should do who wants both a job and a

family: "wait until the children are older before getting a job" (57 percent), "return to work part-time as soon as she wishes following the birth of the child" (18 percent), or "return to work full-time as soon as she wishes following the birth of the child" (15 percent). As recently as 1982, only four out of ten Canadians agreed that women should participate in the labour force when they have young children, as compared with nine in ten Canadians who supported women's labour force participation when there were *no* children present (Boyd, 1984, p. 12).

Yet whether or not women have children, an increasingly larger percentage of the public has acknowledged over the years that women are equally as capable of working in the same jobs as men. Three times during the course of 1980-81, pollsters asked the Canadian population to rate the following statement on a scale from minus five (totally disagree) to plus five (totally agree): "There is no job which women are not capable of doing along with men." With each successive poll, the percentages who agreed moderately (plus three) to "totally agreed" increased: from 47 percent to 49 percent to 53 percent by the fall of 1981. Those who "moderately" to "totally disagreed" edged slightly downward from 28 percent to 27 percent to 24 percent. The statement was reframed in 1983 and 1984 as follows: "Mentally and emotionally, women are capable of doing any job a man can do." More than 70 percent of the general population offered moderate to strong support in both years, while slightly more than one in ten Canadians disagreed moderately or even strongly.

In addition to women's rights and capacities to work in the paid labour force, the results from Statistics Canada's 1995 General Social Survey indicate that most Canadians these days believe that being able to work in paid employment either outside or inside the home is very important to their happiness. In fact, 64 percent of females (and much higher percentages of those under the age of 45) and 86 percent of males in the sample believed that being able to take on a paying job was important to their happiness (Ghulam, 1997).

Apart from the general cultural shift toward accepting that women are as capable as men and that many people associate paid work with happiness and feelings of worth (see Armstrong and Armstrong, 1994), there are economic factors to be considered. Although a significant proportion of the population in the 1980s continued to prefer that women have more opportunities to spend time at home with their children, especially during the preschool years, the evidence pointed to widespread acceptance of the idea that women in general often *needed* to work for financial and other reasons. For example, in 1983 more than 60 percent agreed moderately or strongly that "most women work because they need the money to support themselves or their family," while only 11 percent disagreed moderately to strongly.⁷ One decade later, that sentiment continues to be widespread, as more than 70 percent of the respondents in a national sample agreed that "both the man and the woman should contribute to the household income," including three in four women surveyed (Ghulam, 1997).

6.1.3 Women's Labour Force Participation and Its Impact on Children

⁷Other polling questions, however, revealed that roughly half the population agreed that "men with families to support should be given preference for jobs over married women."

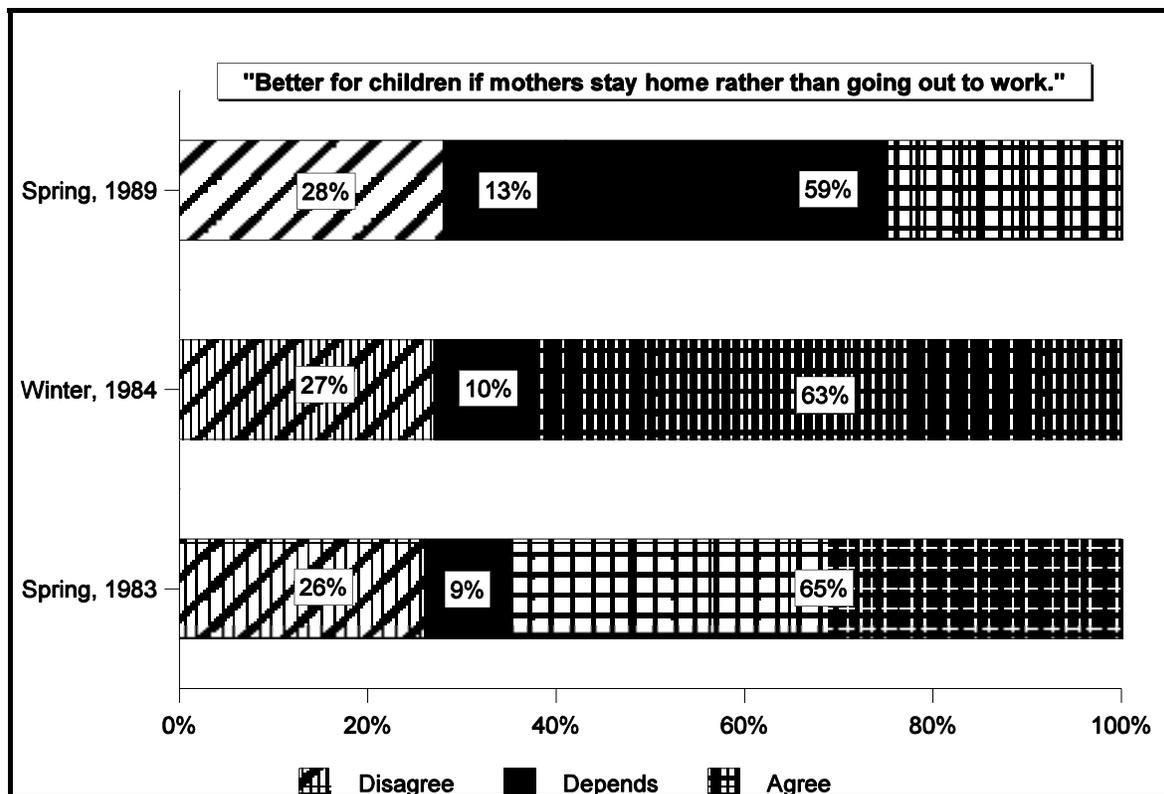
Despite the widespread cultural acceptance of women’s labour force participation and the recognition of economic necessity, the evidence regarding women’s employment when children are present continues to reflect a genuine lack of consensus. In 1983, the Canadian population was divided between those who agreed and disagreed with the following statement: "Women are going to have to go back to the more traditional roles of wife and mother." About 20 percent of respondents agreed strongly, 28 percent agreed somewhat, 28 percent disagreed, and nearly 20 percent disagreed strongly. By 1989, the percentage of the population who agreed at least somewhat had declined to about one third, while 11 percent stated that "it depends," and more than half disagreed (including 32 percent who "totally disagreed").

Ghulam (1997, p. 17) argues that "despite high levels of female labour force participation, many Canadians believe that home and children take precedence over working for pay in women’s lives." She cites the evidence from the 1995 General Social Survey in response to the following statement: "A job is all right, but what most women really want is a home and children." While 46 percent of both men and women agreed with the statement, more than one third of men and some 41 percent of the women disagreed; 18 percent of men and 11 percent of women responded that they did not know or had no opinion. Based on recent measures demonstrating that women on average continue to do the vast majority of housework and unpaid caregiving activities, the practice seems to be that women continue to maintain primary responsibility for home and family.

The potential impact of women’s labour force participation upon their children also received some attention in the 1980s. Although the percentages declined over the course of the decade, the polling results showed clear support for the following statement: "It’s much better for children if mothers stay home rather than going out to work." The results for three time periods between 1983-89 are compared in Figure 1 on the following page.

The evidence indicates that roughly 65 percent of those polled responded at least slightly in favour of the idea in 1983, although that number had declined to under 60 percent by 1989. Thus the results suggest that, through the 1980s, most Canadians continued to value the importance of children’s well-being by stating a preference for encouraging mothers to remain at home with younger children. At the same time, a great many Canadians recognized the importance of equal opportunity and capacities of women in the paid labour force, as well as the economic realities that often compelled women in either lone-parent or two-parent families to enter the labour market.

Figure 1: Public Views on Children’s Well-Being and Mothers’ Employment



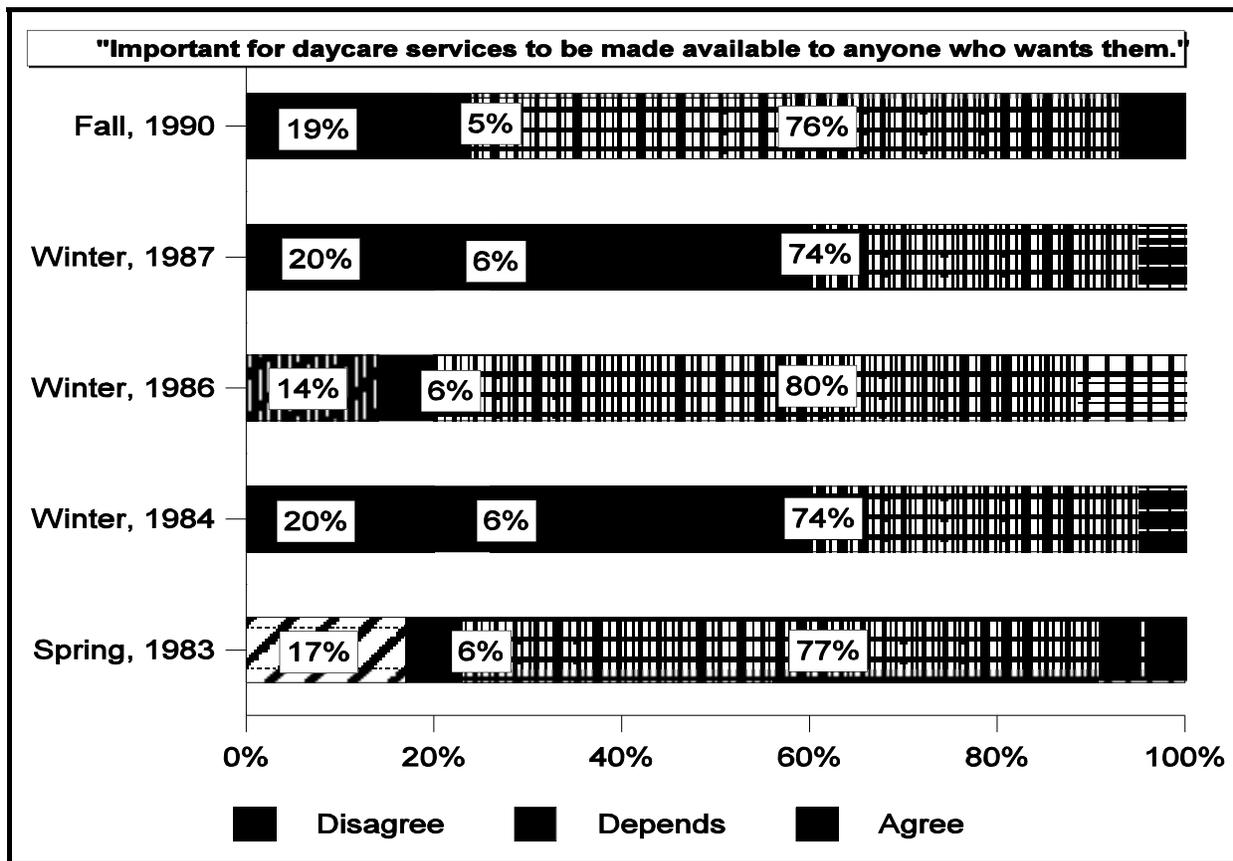
Source: Decima Quarterly.

More recently, the 1995 General Social Survey from Statistics Canada asked a representative sample of Canadians whether they agreed with the following statement: "A pre-school child is likely to suffer if both parents are employed." Some 59 percent of the men and 51 percent of the women agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Conversely, 59 percent of the men and 67 percent of the women agreed that "an employed mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work for pay." Slightly more than one in four Canadians disagreed with that statement, including roughly 30 percent of the men surveyed.

6.1.4 Daycare Availability, Quality, and Accessibility

The national polls have addressed issues relating to various aspects of the daycare system since the early 1980s. For example, a Decima poll in the spring of 1983 asked 1,500 Canadians to rank their views of the following on a scale from plus 5 (totally agree) to minus 5 (totally disagree): "I think it’s very important for daycare services to be made available to anyone who wants them." The same question was then asked again in 1984, 1986, 1987, and 1990. The results appear in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Support for the Availability of Daycare Services



Source: Decima Quarterly.

The support for widespread availability of child daycare remained fairly stable throughout the 1980s, with roughly three fourths of the population expressing some degree of approval for the statement. The one exception from 1986, when agreement peaked at 80 percent, coincided with the public debate about the introduction of national child care legislation in Canada. In general, though, public opinion has not changed significantly over the years with respect to support for the availability of daycare, with a clear majority viewing the availability of such services as important and roughly one in five Canadians disagreeing.

A 1983 Environics poll further inquired of a sample of 2,039 Canadians whether or not "child daycare ... should be guaranteed by the government." At that time, slightly more than half (52 percent) responded in the affirmative, 43 percent suggested that government "should not," and the other 5 percent either did not know or did not answer the question. A related question was asked in 1991 by Decima: "I'd like you to tell me ... whether you believe that all Canadians should be eligible to receive [child daycare], or whether only people who have a financial need should be eligible to

receive it?" Some 45 percent responded that "all Canadians" should be eligible, while 55 percent opted for only those with financial need.

A Decima poll from fall 1990 asked the following question: "If the government reintroduced a child care policy, what would you rather see: a free program available to every one who wanted it, a free program available to those in poverty; or a free program that was available to the poor but only if they took skills upgrading courses?" Some 27 percent responded that the program should be universally available, 24 percent suggested that the program should be targeted to those in poverty, and 45 percent preferred a program for the poor with the requirement that they embark upon some type of "skills upgrading."

A few polling questions have addressed issues relating specifically to the quality and accessibility of existing daycare. In both 1987 and 1990, Decima polls asked about the "most serious problem with daycare in Canada today ... the quality of daycare services available, the cost of daycare services, or the amount of daycare services available?" In 1987, the most common answer was the amount of daycare (37 percent) available, which surpassed the cost issue by less than one percentage point. Three years later, the cost had risen to the number one issue among 44 percent of the respondents, while the issue of the amount of daycare available slipped into second with a total of 30 percent.

A 1987 Decima poll further sought to determine in part the general public's assessment of the quality and accessibility of daycare in Canada. Only three percent rated the quality of daycare as "excellent," whereas some 24 percent rated daycare as "good," and more than two thirds ranked daycare as either "only fair" (47 percent) or "poor" (22 percent). In addition, the accessibility of daycare had worsened at least slightly for nearly one fourth of the population by 1989, remained unchanged for 32 percent of those responding, and improved in the views of 45 percent of those who offered an opinion. Finally, while many considered the salaries of those who work in child care or daycare centres as "about right" (44 percent), almost as many claimed that not enough was being spent on them (42 percent). A small group (five percent) reported that "too much" was being spent and the remainder had no opinion or otherwise did not answer the question.

6.1.5 Daycare Funding Options

An issue that always sparks debate involves daycare funding options. In November 1984, an Environics poll asked of a sample of 2,021 Canadians their opinions on the notion that "the government is already spending too much on child daycare facilities." Of those who responded, nearly three in ten agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Most, however, either "somewhat disagreed" (32 percent) or even "strongly disagreed" (38 percent). The following year, a question around government funding for daycare was framed to suggest that increased government spending might result in increased taxes. With this suggestion in mind, these proportions agreed with the following options:

- ▶ five percent – "the government should introduce and pay for a total system of child care for every family"

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- ▶ 10 percent – "the government should increase its spending on child care service for every family"
- ▶ 56 percent – "the government should increase its spending on child care services only for low income families"
- ▶ 21 percent – "the government already provides enough financial support for child care services"
- ▶ two percent – "none of the above"
- ▶ five percent – "don't know"

In 1995, the issue of whether or not federal spending should increase for child daycare was discussed once again as respondents were told to keep in mind "that increasing services could increase taxes." Even so, less than 16 percent believed that the federal government was spending too much for child daycare. Some 36 percent responded that the federal government was spending the "right amount" and 42 percent believed that the government should "spend more." The same Environics poll determined that 53 percent of Canadians agreed that the federal government "should maintain its spending on social programs at their current levels," 25 percent thought that the government "should increase its spending on social programs in areas like pensions, unemployment insurance, and child care," and 16 percent stated that government "should cut back its spending on social programs."

In addition, the issue of spending for child care has been posed directly in relationship to the deficit. In 1988, respondents were asked how upset they would be if, as part of a deficit reduction strategy, the federal government embarked upon "drastically cutting the amount of financial support it had planned to provide for child care." More than one third (34 percent) would have been "very upset," while 31 percent would have been "somewhat upset." Another 17 percent would not be very upset and 18 percent would not be upset at all. A parallel question in 1989 identified cuts in planned support for child care as a specific federal initiative implemented to help reduce the deficit. Approximately 70 percent were "very upset" or "somewhat upset" by this proposition, while slightly less than three in ten Canadians were "not very upset" or "not upset at all."⁸

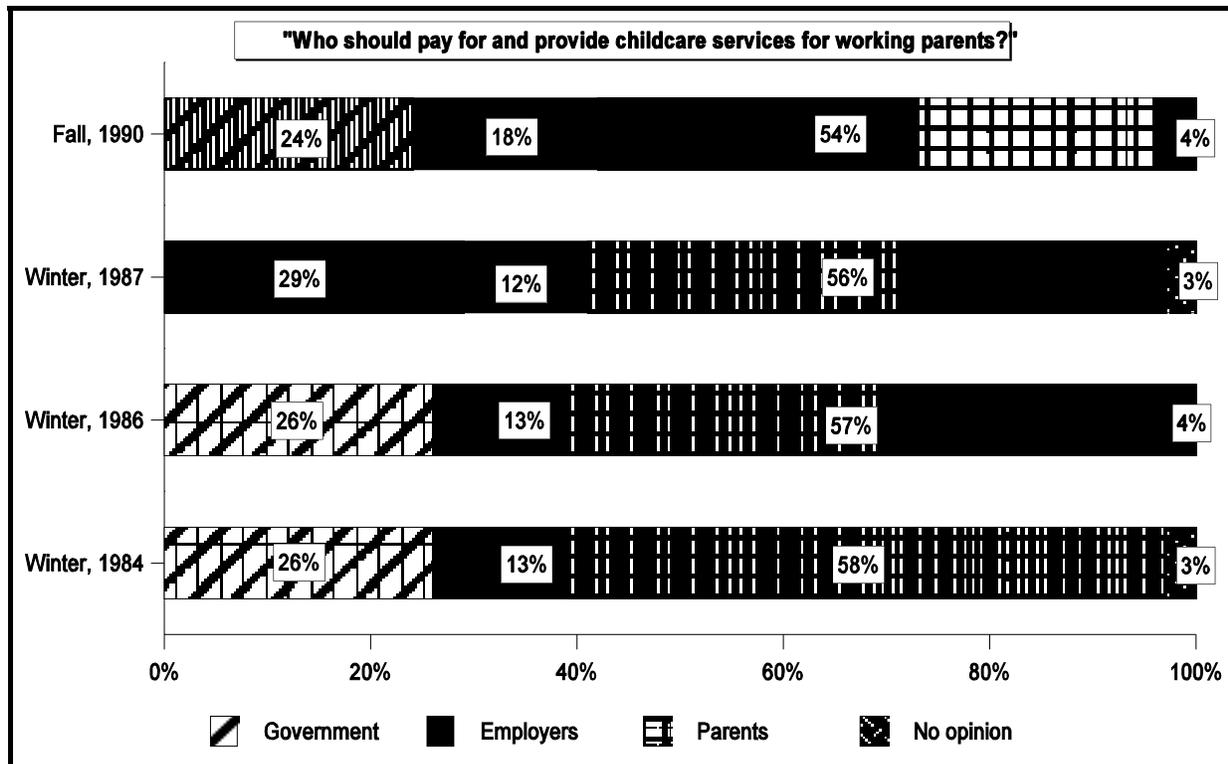
A Decima poll from 1990 asked about two competing strategies to help solve the deficit problems associated with government spending: three fourths supported the idea that "government must continue to provide pensions and new programs like child care because it is the only way to ensure that all Canadians are protected and have access to these sorts of programs," while one fifth (21 percent) supported the idea of shifting "responsibility for social programs like pensions and child care to the private sector and to force business to assume responsibility for providing them."

⁸An Ontario poll similarly inquired about support for "over \$3 million in funding for nonprofit child care," which produced the following results: 14 percent "strongly support," 20 percent "somewhat support," 26 percent "somewhat oppose," and 38 percent "strongly oppose."

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The question of how daycare should actually be funded has been asked on several occasions, particularly throughout the 1980s. In particular, four separate Decima polls included the following question: "Who, in your opinion, should assume primary responsibility for paying for and providing child care services for parents who work? Government, employers, or parents themselves?" The results are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Beliefs about Sectors Providing and Paying for Child Care Services



Source: Decima Quarterly.

The questions regarding who should assume responsibility both for "paying for" and "providing child care services" for working parents (which are admittedly flawed because of their "double-barrelled" nature) may support the Canadian preference that parents should be primarily responsible for ensuring that their child care needs are met. The 1980s witnessed a gradual shift, however, in that by the end of the decade an increasingly large percentage believed that government and employers should assume more responsibility than previously. Moreover, a November 1985 Environics poll asked about who "should be primarily responsible for paying for child daycare facilities in the workplace – government, business, or the individuals and families who use the services?" Here the responses shifted slightly, such that 12 percent believed government should be primarily responsible for pay for such facilities, 20 percent believed business should absorb the

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costs, 42 percent suggested that the individual families should pay, and 22 percent volunteered that a combination of sources should cover these costs.

In contrast, both 1984 and 1990 Decima polls offered three choices for assuming responsibility for daycare services that yielded quite different results. More specifically, the respondents were asked who should “take the primary responsibility for providing [daycare]: private sector, volunteer organizations, or government.” In 1984, just over 40 percent preferred the private sector, 18 percent chose volunteer organizations, and 40 percent opted for the government. By 1990, the figures had shifted slightly by way of reduced support for the private sector (34 percent), increased support for volunteer organizations (22 percent), with continued strong support for government (41 percent).

One of the more interesting questions that highlights some of the tension and ambiguity around the public’s reaction to the question of funding for child care stems from a fall 1990 Decima poll, which asked of respondents: “How important is it that the federal government reintroduce legislation to implement a national daycare program?” While about nine percent suggested “not important at all” and 12 percent chose “not very important,” far more respondents opted for “somewhat important” (40 percent) and “very important” (38 percent).

In addition, there have been a few questions over the years that have more directly addressed the question of government funding in support of daycare initiatives spearheaded by the corporate sector. For example, a 1986 Decima poll used the following question: “Would you strongly support, support, oppose, or strongly oppose government offering financial incentives to companies who provide child care or daycare facilities to their employees in the workplace?” Most respondents would either “strongly support” (21 percent) or at least “support” (54 percent) the idea, while 18 percent were opposed, and six percent were strongly opposed.

Identical questions were asked in 1987 and 1990 pertaining to strategies for how governments might best ensure the availability of quality, affordable daycare services: “provide financial assistance directly to parents, provide financial assistance directly to daycare centres, or provide financial assistance to employers to establish daycare facilities for their employees.” The responses were quite similar for both polls, such that slightly more than 25 percent of Canadians preferred direct financial assistance for parents, between 36 and 38 percent preferred financial assistance for daycare centres, and just over 30 percent supported the option of financial assistance to employers.

Finally, the 1987 and 1990 Decima polls asked respondents to consider whether only government-operated or nonprofit daycare centres should be eligible for financial assistance, or whether or not all such centres (including those in the private sector) should be equally eligible to receive government financial support. The results from both years were virtually identical, with roughly 38 percent supporting the idea that only government or nonprofit centres should be subsidized, while nearly 59 percent agreed that all daycare centres should be eligible for financial support.

6.1.6 Supportive Family Policies

One final area that deserves some consideration concerns Canadian attitudes toward family-oriented policies supported by government or in the workplace. For example, on the issue of maternity leave, in 1986 most Canadians polled (60 percent) believed that 15 weeks of unemployment insurance was "about right," 23 percent viewed 15 weeks as "too little," and almost 17 percent considered 15 weeks to be "too much." That same poll found a comparable distribution regarding the legal requirement that employers must guarantee a worker her job for at least 17 weeks during a maternity leave. As well, more than half the population (55 percent) responded that they favoured the notion of "the government requiring employers to make up the difference and provide one third of a woman's salary while she is away on maternity leave." Another 33 percent "opposed" the idea and 11 percent were "strongly opposed." Among those who favoured a government policy that employers should make up the difference in salary, 67 percent would still support the idea even if that meant the costs "had to be passed on to the public through higher consumer prices."

On another matter, a question from a 1985 Environics poll inquired of respondents: "Do you think the government should or should not replace programs like family allowances, child care credits and social assistance to the needy with one program which would ensure a minimum income for everyone?" The citizenry was clearly divided on this issue, with 42 percent in favour and 44 percent opposed. Another nine percent offered "depends," while the remaining five percent did not answer.

The mid-1980s polls also inquired about the importance of a company having a daycare facility as a deciding factor in job selection. While roughly half viewed that as "very important" or "somewhat important," another 23 percent viewed the existence of daycare facilities as "not very important" and 27 percent stated these were "not important at all." In 1990, a clear majority of Canadians (roughly 62 percent) agreed that "companies with more than 200 employees should be forced to provide free, on-site daycare facilities for those employees who have children under school-age." Three in ten disagreed with that statement, while another eight percent were of the opinion that it "depends."

The growing demand for the corporate sector to be more supportive of family-friendly policies can also be observed in a June 1996 Environics poll. That poll revealed that the vast majority of Canadians believed that it was either "very important" (51 percent) or "somewhat important" (36 percent) for corporations to "allow flexibility for employees for child rearing and family responsibilities." In addition, 76 percent acknowledged the importance of corporations providing "child care programs or policies for their employees."

6.2 CPRN's Polling Questions

Since polls historically have touched upon family-oriented policies only tangentially or indirectly through a focus on "women's issues," CPRN researchers developed an original set of polling questions and commissioned Environics to conduct a national telephone poll between January 22 and February 4, 1998. The purpose of the poll was to survey a representative sample of the general public about their attitudes regarding various ways of helping families and their children, the

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importance of different factors in meeting the needs of children, and various sectors’ roles in developing policies and programs targeting children.

The first section of the poll concentrated on attitudes toward various ways of helping families and their children. The respondents were asked the following question for nine different items, which were rotated at random: "Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements:" The public’s responses are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Public Opinions about Policies Designed to Help Families

Statements	SA	A	D	SD	DK
Children under the age of six should be the key priority for public policy.	34	36	18	6	6
The loss of job security in recent years is making it harder and harder for parents to successfully raise their children.	52	29	12	6	1
Employers should increase their efforts to provide a balance between work and family responsibilities.	52	37	5	4	2
Even in two-parent families, most parents now need a job in order to earn enough to support their families.	63	25	6	5	1
Jobs are the best solution in the fight against poverty.	66	23	7	3	1
A child care system should be available for all families, with the costs shared by governments and families themselves.	40	36	12	11	1
Government should pay parents to stay at home while their children are young.	24	26	25	24	2
Programs to improve parents’ knowledge and skills should be available free-of-charge for all families.	52	34	9	4	1
Just as senior citizens receive old age benefits, government should provide funds to all parents to help them raise healthy children.	25	37	21	16	1

Key:

SA = Strongly Agree

A = Somewhat agree

D = Somewhat disagree

SD = Strongly disagree

DK = Don’t know/not applicable

Figures may not total to 100 percent due to rounding.

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The results indicate that Canadians believe that employment continues to be the key mechanism through which poverty should be eradicated and through which families are able to secure enough income to support their families. The statement that "jobs are the best solution in the fight against poverty" elicited the strongest support of any statement, as 66 percent "strongly agreed" and another 23 percent "agreed." Those classified as having lower income and less education were more likely to strongly agree with the statement supporting jobs as the best solution. Similarly, nearly two thirds strongly agreed (and 88 percent agreed overall) that "even in two-parent families, most parents now need a job in order to earn enough to support their families." Again, a higher proportion of the unemployed and low-income respondents strongly agreed with this statement. A third statement suggesting that the loss of job security has made it more difficult for parents to raise their children received considerable support as well, with 81 percent expressing some level of agreement. Those who reported less income and education were more likely to agree with this view, as were those who identified themselves as currently unemployed.

A second focus of this section of poll concerned potential policy supports in relation to striking a balance between work and family responsibilities. Many believed that "children under the age of six should be the key priority for public policy," with roughly 70 percent expressing some agreement, especially among those with lower incomes. Nearly nine in ten respondents either strongly agreed (52 percent) or somewhat agreed (37 percent) that "employers should increase their efforts to provide a better balance between work and family responsibilities." There were several distinct groups who were more likely to strongly agree with this last statement, including women, those with children, homemakers, and the unemployed. Roughly three fourths further believed that child care should be available to families everywhere "with the costs shared by governments and the families themselves." Once again, those with less education and those who were unemployed were more supportive of the idea.

On the other hand, there was a much less favourable reaction to the notion of direct government transfers in support of families raising children. The idea that "government should pay parents to stay at home while their children are young" was almost evenly divided into the four response categories, split between those who agreed and those who disagreed. Almost half of the homemakers in the sample, however, strongly agreed with that view. Moreover, the categories of females, the unemployed, and those with less education and lower incomes were more inclined to favour government supports for parents to raise their children. Similarly, while a majority (62 percent) supported the notion that "government should provide funds to all parents to help them raise healthy children," a significant minority (37 percent) dissented from that view. Homemakers and the unemployed were considerably more supportive of this statement.

Some additional results from the CPRN national poll can be summarized in brief as follows:

- ▶ some 86 percent believe that programs to improve parents' knowledge and skills should be available free-of-charge for all families;
- ▶ 92 percent of Canadians want a combination of "programs like child care or parental leaves to help families balance work and family responsibilities";

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- ▶ 84 percent view "regulated and supervised child care as the best solution to providing a safe and educational environment to the children of working parents";
- ▶ 68 percent believe that government must take an active role in funding communities to provide services for children, while, in contrast, some 28 percent believe that communities should provide services without government funding;
- ▶ the sample tended to be divided on whether the federal government (35 percent), provincial governments (33 percent), or municipal governments (22 percent) should take the lead in developing policies and programs for children;
- ▶ some 89 percent agreed that "government funding cuts in recent years have hurt poor families and their children";
- ▶ the most important factors in meeting the needs of Canadian families were: strong health care system (99 percent); community-based services available to all children (95 percent); regular home visits by professionals for children at risk (92 percent); early learning program for poor children (91 percent); income supports to alleviate poverty (90 percent); strong education system (88 percent); and programs like child care or parental leaves to help families balance work and family responsibilities (82 percent);
- ▶ some 62 percent of the respondents believed that the federal government was spending "too little" on children compared to other areas, while 34 percent believed the spending to be "about right"; and
- ▶ 74 percent would support a tax increase "if I knew that it was specifically designated to support services for children."

In general, the polling results show that Canadians continue to value spending on behalf of children, including spending achieved through tax increases for services targeted specifically to support children. The evidence reveals a high level of agreement around several issues. Most Canadians agree, for example, that health care and education should continue to be universal systems; that jobs are critical to fighting poverty and supporting families; that government funding cuts in recent years have hurt those living in poverty; that there should be some combination of child care and parental leave policies available to working parents, with the costs shared across sectors; and that employers should be doing more to help families achieve a better balance between work and family life.

At the same time, there are some areas of uncertainty, such as in the sphere of income supports and gender roles. Women tend to agree more often and more strongly on most options that create flexibility in the choices at their disposal and that support children. As presented earlier in the paper, the deliberative discussion groups served to amplify some of these underlying tensions, as citizens engaged in exercises designed to clarify their value stances on and preferences for different potential mixes of policies available from a menu of options.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The current discussion paper has helped to paint a portrait of Canadian values and preferences for the "best policy mix" for children, going beyond the broad strokes of public opinion polls. Choice deliberation has helped to contextualize these results with some of the more subtle – and sometimes not so subtle – shadings or meanings that underlie public opinion. The findings presented offer a deeper understanding of the struggles that Canadians are experiencing during a volatile period of social and economic change.

The relative stability of values within individuals may yet, in the aggregate, coincide with differences across cohorts or subgroups within Canada that have different lifestyles. Whatever the source of their differences (e.g., generational, gender, or other cultural factors), the values that Canadians express are often translated into a wide range of preferences with respect to social policy issues. Neither deliberative exercises nor public opinion polls alone can represent a comprehensive and accurate picture of values and preferences. The results from each source are not necessarily right or wrong, but, instead, must be understood together.

Recognizing the interdependency of these different techniques, what are the main lessons learned from this multi-method approach to the study of Canadian values and preferences? In what ways can a focus on value and choice deliberation inform the broader public policy debates in ways that transcend a more simplistic focus on public opinion polls? These are the main considerations of the concluding section.

7.1 Substantive Lessons

The first issue concerns the range of substantive lessons learned through the combination of public opinion polls and public dialogue initiatives. These lessons flow quite naturally from an integrated examination of the multiple sources of data, each of which helps to identify important themes that have surfaced through a more conscious effort to tap into Canadian values and preferences for the best policy mix for children.

Public opinion polls, which reflect only the "top of the mind" responses of the general public, oversimplify and tend to ignore the more subtle issues and nuances that may influence how the population translates widely shared principles into different public policy options. The exploration of Canadian values and preferences through choice deliberation techniques reveals the fault lines beneath the surface: different segments of the population stand on different sides of the issues as one moves from the level of submerged values and preferences to overt policy alternatives. Stated differently, the fact that large majorities of the population may express similar views in public opinion polls does not mean that everyone will therefore readily endorse the same policies.

The polling results point to a number of areas where broad agreement exists across the population, as well as areas of more pronounced differences. Many of the conclusions to be drawn are reasonably straightforward. Clear majorities of Canadians, for example, express the following:

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- ▶ most women prefer to work outside of their homes, at least on a part-time basis, even with small children;
- ▶ women are an increasingly large, permanent, and necessary part of the labour force; and
- ▶ women are as competent as men, yet routinely disadvantaged in the labour market.

By the same token, the public tends to view women’s labour force participation as problematic to some extent, particularly in regard to the healthy development of their children. At the same time, there does not seem to be an emerging groundswell of support regarding extended maternity benefits.

The public over the years has expressed strong, consistent support for the availability of daycare services. To the extent that divisions exist, the public generally divides on whether such services should be available universally, or targetted to those in poverty. Moreover, differences of opinion abound with respect to the question of who should be primarily responsible for paying for and providing daycare services.

The most recent polling data reveal several broad areas of agreement regarding certain assumptions about family life and policies intended to assist families with children. At least 70 percent (and often much higher percentages) of the general public endorse the following notions:

- ▶ jobs are critical to fighting poverty and supporting families
- ▶ government funding cuts in recent years have hurt those living in poverty
- ▶ the loss of job security has meant raising children has become more of a challenge
- ▶ a child care system needs to be in place for everyone who needs such services, with the costs to be shared across sectors
- ▶ employers should be doing more to help families achieve a better balance between work and family responsibilities
- ▶ increased funding, including more taxes, is endorsed providing this could be targetted at supportive services for children, and
- ▶ an enhanced combination of child care and parental leave is needed to help balance work and domestic responsibilities.

The public divides on other issues. For example, widespread disagreement exists on the issue of whether or not parents should be subsidized more directly to remain at home to raise their children. More generally, the polling data confirm that there have been longstanding tensions between paid employment for women and child care responsibilities. For the benefit of the children, a majority of Canadians believe that women ideally should *not* work outside of the home while their children are young. On the other hand, most women in general prefer either part-time or full-time employment for a variety of social and economic reasons. The idea of women with small children working in paid employment outside of their homes has continually produced a fair degree of ambivalence among many Canadians. Finally, a consensus has *not* been reached in regard to which

level of government (federal, provincial, municipal) should assume more of a leadership role in developing child-focussed policies and programs.

In looking at the evidence from choice deliberation exercises, the main lesson learned relates to the genuine struggle that characterizes many individuals’ efforts aimed at resolving the tensions embedded in different views on the best policy mix for children. The discussions revealed at times some rather profound divisions, even where individuals might share common values around issues such as the importance of parents having primary responsibility for their children or jobs as the best mechanism to combat poverty and support families. Exploring and understanding these divisions are particularly helpful from a public policy standpoint if one has an interest in understanding why some policies may be received more favourably than others, or why some may be more effective than others.

The results of the various deliberative discussion groups on children suggest that Canadians reject the notion that solutions will be found quickly or easily through technical fixes, or by means of social policy alone. Participants in both community and random groups saw the issues at hand as systemic ones shaped by the broader issues of family transformation, a changing and often more insecure labour market, and social exclusion (particularly among the poor and disadvantaged). They expressed a sense of pervasive uncertainty on a number of fronts. They saw the capacities of individuals and families as threatened across income groups and labour market situations. Much of this sense of threat came from external sources, such as changes in jobs, employment opportunities, and social policies.

However, participants also noted threats from within – family inadequacy, parental irresponsibility, conflicting expectations, and generational conflicts. Triggered by this assessment, some participants fell into a blaming mode that categorized families as "good" or "bad." On balance, however, the dialogue process led most participants to move beyond blame in their attempts to assess the more holistic and challenging nature of the problems families encountered.

The "best policy mixes" that emerged in the various deliberative discussion groups reflected the aforementioned assessments that attempted to balance the needs of children, family responsibilities, and the fiscal constraints associated with public policies. The resolutions at which individuals and groups arrived often required some level of compromise. **The most common best mix focussed on helping parents achieve secure and continuing employment through a combination of enhanced parental leaves and a more comprehensive and accessible system of child care.** The participants stressed the need for public policy supports to help families cope with employment. While respectful of the option that some families preferred (or were able) to exercise in having one parent remain at home, they did not consider stay at home supplements as the preferred use of public dollars. Participants favoured relatively generous income supports for unemployed parents or those at the low end of the income ladder to ensure that affected children did not grow up in poverty.

A second common "best policy mix" focussed on helping parents take time out of the labour market to be at home with their children. Those who supported such a policy mix were inclined to support stay at home supplements, especially for parents of young children. Participants wanted

active and targeted income supports for those who were out of work, including single mothers, that would enable such individuals to enter the labour market. These participants occasionally added child care or enhanced income supports as potential avenues for addressing the needs of lone parents who were employed. The child care option was preferred typically if the costs could be shared by governments and, on a sliding scale basis, by parents themselves.

In general, the combination of different data sources points to a number of components that should inform whatever best policy mix emerges. As general principles, **Canadians have reiterated on a consistent basis in both polls and discussion groups that children are a high spending priority, that healthy child development in the early years requires continued high investments, and that health care and education are essentials that should continue to be the backbone of universal programs.**

In addition, while the tensions surrounding the work-family nexus cannot be resolved easily, there are some fairly clear messages. Most Canadians view increased employment opportunities as a priority in helping families to successfully raise children. At the same time, families require help to balance some of the contradictory demands between employment and domestic responsibilities. **The best policy mix should include a combination of "programs like child care or parental leaves," with both the private and public sectors assuming some responsibility.** For example, discussion groups tended to view workplace measures as potentially effective options, while 89 percent of those surveyed wanted employers to increase their efforts to provide a better balance between work and family responsibilities. At the same time, many groups had reservations about the viability of the private sector to provide systemic solutions. They worried that small employers would find them too expensive while large employers would not reach out to a large enough number and range of families. **While they want the private sector to act, Canadians see governments as playing an important role in stimulating jobs, ensuring job security, and offering options that help families cope with the early childhood years.**

One key component of the best policy mix involves child care. While the discussion groups generally viewed publicly funded child care as a more controversial issue, the public opinion polling results indicated widespread support of child care. The differences of opinion appeared to reflect current labour market status, the degree of past experience with child care, and interpretations of funding mechanisms. Hence discussion groups often quickly included child care in their best mixes. Participants who were more favourably disposed to this option included employed parents (either couples or lone parents) who already depended on some type of formal child care arrangement. Others supporting such policy mixes were employed parents who had to patch together paid and unpaid care, often because they were not able to afford formal child care. **While there seemed to be less support for a tax-funded universal program of child care, participants were much more likely to support shared cost systems or proposals that included sliding scale payment systems.** The responses were particularly noteworthy in light of the fact that recent evidence suggests that the

economic benefits of providing high quality licensed child care clearly outweigh the costs of such an allocation of public funds (Cleveland and Krashinsky, 1998).⁹

An area where Canadians were clearly and profoundly divided pertained to income supports, whether in the form of supplements for stay-at-home parents or with respect to providing basic security for families lacking adequate income. One survey item from the CPRN poll, for example, divided the population in terms of whether the government should pay parents to remain at home when their children are young. A deeper exploration of the issue revealed a fault line pertaining to different concepts of "choice" and differences in the perceived gender roles of men and women. The policy mix focussed on the "spouse in the house" option almost always defined a traditional role for women in families and the economy by assuming that mothers would be the ones who would "choose" to stay home while their children were young. Many who supported the supplement reasoned that women were often *forced* to work out of economic necessity and that women should have the option to focus on childrearing, particularly during the early childhood years. These Canadians wanted governments to respect women's preferences by supporting an avenue that would permit them to remain at home without having to sacrifice income.

Who preferred a best mix focussed on "time out with kids"? In the discussion groups, they were more likely to be women in two-parent families who were not currently working themselves. While proclaiming the need for choice, proponents of this mix expressed little empathy or understanding for women who preferred to work when children are young. In fact, they sometimes judged these choices as severely misguided. In contrast, both working women in two-parent families and working lone mothers were less than enthusiastic about the income support option during early childhood years. They expressed ambivalence about the loss of both income and social connection that might result from removing themselves from the labour market. Finally, because the "time out with kids" option tended to *exclude* more generous income supports, single mothers receiving social assistance rarely identified this element in their preferred "best mix."

The evidence further reveals that Canadians are at a loss to figure out how best to provide income security for families with children that lack adequate income. Sixty-two percent of Canadians surveyed agreed that "just as senior citizens receive old age benefits, government should provide funds to all parents to help them raise healthy children." Those who were unemployed, or who were at the bottom of the income and education ladders, were more likely to support such a policy (more than 70 percent within each of those demographic categories). Although the split was less dramatic than it was for the stay-at-home income supplements, it nevertheless demonstrates a deep-seated ambivalence about income supplements that might be more readily or universally available.

The discussion group participants experienced contradictions in considering how to address child poverty without encouraging what they feared as dependency. Although many groups included an

⁹While the evidence continues to be debated, Doherty's (1996) review of nearly two dozen studies examining the long-term effects of non-parental care concludes that high quality care actually provides a number of benefits with respect to healthy child development, particularly in the realms of peer relationships and various indicators of educational performance.

income supplement for needy families in their "best mix," they were adamant that there should be strict criteria in place. Groups debated which families should receive income support, under what circumstances, and how supports should be delivered. Often participants supporting "time out with kids" revealed a curious double standard with regard to those "deserving" of income supports. While they wanted income supplements such that employed mothers might be able to stay at home without earnings losses, they often believed that unemployed mothers or those on social assistance should be compelled to work. Single parents were often targetted in terms of their need to "get a job." Thus these participants expressed doubts that social assistance recipients exercised sufficient effort and self-reliance, but they were more sympathetic to the difficulties of employed parents.

At the other end of the spectrum, those selecting the mix that was focussed on continuing employment saw income supports as a question of social justice or equitable redistribution. They were more likely to want enriched income supplements for those unable to work, pointing to the failures of the economy rather than personal failings as the roots of poverty. They were also more inclined to feel that income supports should be in the hands of parents, and that trust and dignity were also at issue in decisions about how to eradicate child poverty.

Single mothers on social assistance were inclined to view income supports as an issue of fairness as well. In these and earlier group discussions (Peters, Wason, and Grasham, 1994), they defended their need for income supports as a basic "mother's allowance" that allowed them to provide for very young children. They anticipated entering the labour force in the future, while experiencing considerable frustration that the general public should continue to view them and their situations in such a negative light.

As a final policy component, Canadians preferred programs or others supports aimed at improving parents' knowledge and skills and argued that these should be widely available free of charge. Each of the different types of discussion groups identified the need for universally accessible programs to improve parenting. Isolation and vulnerability were seen as widespread across families. The participants viewed relatively few parents as having adequate preparation or resources for parenting. Concerns about job insecurity and struggles to balance time had created new and widespread risks, not only for children in poverty and extreme circumstances, but for families in general. Indeed, the preference seemed to be much more in the direction of universal services rather than for those designed to encompass targetted, high-risk families. Groups also wanted community services to be widely available, or to act as community anchors.

The evidence suggests that when Canadians are asked to deliberate on choices to create a "best policy mix" for children, a rough consensus emerges around two or three popular mixes. Canadians not only value children as a spending priority, but most are willing to consider a targetted tax increase for them. They view job insecurity as a systemic problem for families and, consequently, endorse action at many levels: by governments, employers, communities, and families. Universal parenting supports are favoured for families free of charge, while an accessible child care system receives strong support as long as governments recover part of the costs from families that can afford to pay. The more profound divisions arise in considering the best means to deliver income support

to poor families. Moreover, there appears to be an important divide around the issue of income supplements for parents who might prefer time out of the labour force while their children are young.

7.2 Methodological Lessons

In terms of the methodology, differences between polls and groups, and between conventional focus groups and deliberative groups, have been amplified through the current study. A strict reliance upon polls may invite quick fixes and easy resolutions that stand in sharp contrast to what Canadians believe when afforded an opportunity to delve more deeply into the issues. Even conventional focus groups may be events in which citizens spend time venting rather than resolving conflicts and moving towards solutions. Deliberative processes that offer opportunities for values clarification may offer participants the security to tolerate ambiguities in resolving issues.

The choice deliberation methodology affords stakeholders an opportunity to delve beneath the surface to assist with the process of working through some of the unresolved dilemmas, stereotypes, and contradictions surrounding important issues. The exchange of information in discussion group settings can be uncomfortable by challenging or even undermining preconceived notions of "how the world works," but the benefits in terms of defusing myths and breaking down stereotypes are potentially tremendous.

7.3 Looking Forward

The process of values clarification offers opportunities to foster understanding, respect differences, build bridges, and reflect upon innovative solutions. The key for public policy, however, involves combining the values clarification exercises with research to generate a more informed and, ultimately, *actionable* agenda.

In simplest terms, people may express values or prefer options that do not achieve desired results, or do not achieve those results effectively relative to other options. Only when value constraints and research are considered together can we know both what Canadians want and what actually works. Research has particular significance when policymakers want either to clarify values or generate a clear sense of preference, especially when deliberative discussions reveal misconceptions or misinformation that may be stalling public discourse. Two examples stand out from the current research study.

First, the results from the discussion groups revealed that some participants were surprised to learn that child care proponents wanted a sliding scale payment system. With this clarification in mind, they were more likely to identify this as a preference in their best policy mix. The issue was then included as a survey item on the CPRN poll, written explicitly to draw attention to a child care system "paid for by government and families themselves." More than three fourths of Canadians agreed with the statement, including more than 80 percent of those currently unemployed.

A second example concerns income supports. The stereotypes about welfare caseloads, particularly single mothers on welfare, continue to influence preferences on how to provide income supports.

Many Canadians hold a pejorative image of single mothers as long-term welfare recipients, despite empirical data to the contrary. The evidence indicates that for most recipients, social assistance represents a temporary and often transitional supplement in response to major life changes (Bane and Ellwood, 1986; Cheng, 1995; Duncan and Coe, 1984; Duncan, Hill, and Hoffman, 1988). The data further reveal, for example, that most social assistance recipients expect to receive such help as a temporary means to address situational crises and fully expect to enter or re-enter the labour market once they are able (Goodban, 1985; Michalski and Wason, 1999). Debunking the prevailing stereotypes about people receiving social assistance can support more informed debate about what we want for children, the value of childrearing, labour force attachment for men and women, and better policy options.

Finding ways for families, communities, governments, and others to play a role in achieving better child outcomes seems to be a core concern of citizens (Ekos, 1998). Deliberative choice work and further values clarification may be important means of fostering acknowledgment of shared responsibility across all stakeholder groups and among citizens. Values clarification exercises thus are critical as a means of enhancing both citizenship engagement and commitment to the policy-development process. By the same token, well-intentioned policy analysts and government officials cannot develop responsive or supportive policies on issues relating to the family and the labour market *without* understanding how individuals and their families manage their daily affairs, what the core values and preferences are that guide their decision making processes, and how the various social and economic policies currently in place impact upon their lives.

The optimal strategy to developing social and economic policies that adequately represent the values and preferences of Canadians appears to be through a combination of public opinion polling and choice deliberation techniques. Polling captures the breadth of public attitudes on specific issues of immediate interest in a timely and representative fashion. Deliberative discussion permits a deeper probing of core values and the manner in which individuals arrive at their preferences and stated opinions. Hence a focus on broad citizen engagement may be a useful starting point for formulating a societal strategy for children in Canada, supplemented with ongoing public opinion polls on the issues of the day. Where these two strategies can be integrated, meaning where both are constructed and implemented in a complementary fashion with the same substantive focus, the learnings from each can be enriched considerably.

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APPENDIX A: STUDY METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

The following appendix provides the methodological details of each of the data sources associated with the preceding report. Each subsection includes an explanation of the purpose, methodology, data processing, and analyses associated with the particular data sources.

Methodological Details of Data Sources Used

The method of "choice deliberation" serves as the foundation for much of the data presented in this report. The method stems from the notion of "public judgment" as proposed by Yankelovich in *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*. Many groups currently use choice deliberation in a variety of exercises intended to foster citizen engagement and a deeper reflection about what the author describes as "top of the mind" responses. Yankelovich (1991, p. 5) describes choice deliberation as a form of "public opinion that exhibits (1) more thoughtfulness, more weighing of alternatives, more genuine engagement with the issue...and (2) more emphasis on the normative, valuing, ethical side of questions than on the factual, informational side."

Yankelovich (1991) argues that there are three stages in moving from public opinion to public judgment. The first consists of "consciousness raising," wherein the public develops an increased awareness of the meaning of an issue and a growing sense of urgency that the issue ultimately requires action. The second stage of "working through" involves more of an internal struggle with the conflicts and ambivalence that emerge as a consequence of the process of consciousness raising. The working through stage requires an active engagement of the issue in the search for solutions, which will be largely an internal or *personal* rather than a *public* process. The third stage refers to the successful "resolution" of the conflicts experienced, which includes the cognitive, emotional, and moral content of the specific issue. The successful completion of the journey through these three stages results ultimately in "public judgment."

In the United States, the Public Agenda and Kettering Foundations have conducted exercises with choice deliberation as a means of understanding values and public judgment with the National Issues Forum. In Canada, the technique has been used by the National Forum on Health, by Citizenship and Immigration Canada in consultations on the meaning of citizenship, by CPRN in the aforementioned *Exploring Canadian Values*, and by others. Rather than rely purely on popular reactions to issues generated by anonymous polling situations, the logic of choice deliberation suggests that experts and policymakers can learn a great deal from public deliberations of issues that acknowledge the underlying importance of "values" (and not just "information") in shaping the decision making process.

Most of the original data presented here speak to the processes associated with values clarification and the struggles with which different Canadians have had in their efforts to develop a sense of shared public judgment about the best policy mix for children. By the same token, conventional public opinion polling can be a helpful and complementary counterpoint to much of the "choice

work" conducted in recent years. The polls reveal, at least at a superficial level, the state of public opinion as reflected in the "top of the mind" beliefs and preferences that individuals express. The challenge then becomes that of marrying these different approaches to knowledge-building in a constructive way for policy development purposes.

The two exercises associated with *The Society We Want* public dialogue project engage citizens to reflect upon their values in much greater depth as they relate generally to the best mix of policies for Canadian children. The roundtable meetings and focus group discussions afford different groups an opportunity to examine more directly their preferences for specific policy mixes, often with some consideration of the costs involved. In each of these exercises, the participants are required to engage in discussions that are meant not only to raise their consciousness levels, but that further assist them in their struggles to work through the complex differences between and tradeoffs among different policy mixes. In a nutshell, these types of data collection are direct outgrowths of the "choice deliberation" methodology described previously.

Such information then has two highly practical implications for understanding public opinion poll results. First, multiple sources of data provide a more holistic and contextual view of the decisions at which individuals arrive in responding to polling questions or when asked simply to choose among different alternatives. Coupled with an historical review of polling data, these data directly assist with the interpretation of contemporary public opinion polls. In short, public opinion results reflect only the "tip of the iceberg." The values and preferences that underlie "public opinion" in fact extend much more deeply below these surface responses.

Without engaging in the process of choice deliberation, the policymakers and the public alike have nothing more to draw upon other than polling data, which only imperfectly represent the more cherished values and underlying rationales associated with different preferences. The polling results, therefore, can only weakly inform policy analysts about preferred directions. The parallel process of engaging individuals, groups, or even whole communities in choice deliberation exercises produces much richer information about where people stand and actually assists them in arriving at "public judgments" as defined by Yankelovich (1991) rather than simply "public opinion."

Finally, the results of such research reflect more accurately the dynamic nature of arriving at the "solutions" that people endorse, which are not any more permanent than the values and preferences identified (though these are often fairly stable at the individual level). Thus the process of arriving at public judgment requires constant nurturing and renewal. The evidence of change can be captured only superficially through the analysis of public opinion polls. But the dynamics of values clarification and the identification of preferences both occur within the context of a shifting social landscape, or one that reflects gradual movements and occasional clashes of the demographic, economic, and cultural plates upon which the iceberg rests. Hence even the most majestic of icebergs inevitably will change in ways not necessarily visible to the naked eye of public opinion. The process of choice deliberation can help to capture some of the more subtle changes that shade the public judgments of the citizenry. Indeed, the process of engaging the public in choice deliberation may not only help to bring their more deeply held values and preferences to the surface,

but almost certainly will influence the final judgments rendered or "public opinions" that are offered in response to polling questions.

Community Discussion Groups

Purpose

The data from the community discussion groups derive from *The Society We Want*, a public dialogue initiative coordinated by CPRN with a range of national nonprofit partners. Citizen groups across the country examined core values surrounding five broad areas of social policy, including one titled *Our Children*. In each case, participants considered three choices and arguments for and against each choice. The purpose was to explore the personal value systems of each participant, as well as to provide feedback to CPRN through a semi-standardized format.

Methodology

Population/Sample

The pilot phase of the TSWW project took place over three waves during the period April 1996 to February 1998. During the nearly two years of the pilot phase, 187 dialogue groups of eight to twelve people (though some were much larger) community based groups deliberated five issues: *Our Children*, the *Social Safety Net*, *Health*, the *Role of Government*, and *Work*. There were approximately 1,900 individuals in total who participated in these community discussion groups.

The groups were not representative of the Canadian population, even though they were distributed across the country with individuals from both urban and rural backgrounds. Most of the participants came together on the basis of their affiliation with Canadian nonprofit organizations, including churches, community foundations, service agencies, social planning councils, and other types of citizen groups. Hence while the findings from these discussions enrich our understanding of the ways in which committed Canadians work through social policy choices, the evidence cannot be generalized to the entire population because of a lack of sample representativeness.

Data Collection Procedures and Instruments

As described previously in the report, the procedures incorporated "choice deliberation" techniques in a manner consistent with the approach that Yankelovich (1991) describes in *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*. The method has been used widely of late in a variety of exercises intended to foster citizen engagement and a deeper reflection about what Yankelovich describes as "top of the mind" responses. Groups that offer deliberative choices are designed specifically to probe the deeper levels of the public mood, taking into account the fact that groups are learning events, and using that as a basis from which to probe for deeper structures and judgments.

The issue guide *Our Children* from *The Society We Want* initiative set out a series of choices for deliberating core values and considering new options. With each choice, arguments made by proponents and opponents of that choice were presented. A fact sheet included some of the key statistics about social spending and the circumstances and demographics of families and children in Canada. The three choices offered with respect to investment in children were: a) children should have priority in social spending; b) children must be saved from what is seen as a spiralling debt and deficit; and c) families are primarily responsible for children and the investments to be made are private ones.

In the current context, it was crucial to ensure that group members felt safe to express individual perspectives without reservation. The discussion groups afforded the participants a chance to learn from each other and revise their judgments, raise doubts about the way in which the questions were framed, experience internal conflicts over priorities, and round out their perspectives as part of their deeper reflection. The community discussion groups were thus intended to examine whether Canadians have developed a sense of shared public judgment in terms of how key conflicts and struggles could be resolved.

Data Processing and Analyses Conducted

With rare exceptions, the community discussion groups were not videotaped or recorded in any fashion. Instead, group feedback forms served as the basis for data analysis. These forms contained a limited number of close-ended questions that were coded and entered into a computer program for analysis. The current analysis concentrates on the results from 48 summary feedback forms focussing on children, representing nearly 26% of the total. The feedback forms gathered the following information from the discussion leaders:

- What measures or indicators would show, in five years time, that we as a society have been successful in addressing this issue (*Our Children*)?
- Express in one sentence the one key value the group feels is an essential part of the Canadian identity.
- Group levels of agreement or disagreement on the following: 1) "All social programs should put the well-being of children first." 2) "We should ensure affordable access to day care, adequate food and clothing, free health care, and a high school education for all Canadian children." 3) The very worst thing we could give our children is the huge public debt we now carry." 4) "Families are primarily responsible for children, not governments." 5) We can't continue to idealize the traditional nuclear family. Many families require some support to help them raise children to the best of their ability." 6) "We've become a society that relies too much on institutions to safeguard and care for children."
- Demographic information, including number of participants in different age groups, family structure, education level, and employment status.

Frank Stark, University of Guelph, conducted the analysis of open-ended responses for each of the three waves of the TSWW pilot phase, which involved the following general approach. In wave 1, Stark analysed indicators and related to scales of values which emerged from the analysis. The

responses of the groups in wave 1 seemed to fall into a range of responses (in terms of both preferred indicators and essential values) for each issue which appeared to express a bi-polar, bi-dimensional "scale" or "gradient" of values. The notion of individual responsibility lay at one end of the scale, with collective responsibility and strong government at the other end. These were crude five point sets of categories, with somewhat arbitrary mid-points and two other points were added to increase variability and to provide for specific intermediate positions. The absence of any clear unidimensionality of values limited the utility of the scales, but these were employed in an effort find a pattern in the data. In the second and third waves, the procedures were even simpler. The responses to each substantive item were recorded and subsequently the indicators and values were sorted by the number of mentions. For Wave 3 only, all issues were analysed inductively using NUD-IST, and then indicators and values sorted by number of mentions.

The data were then re-analysed by typing the verbatim responses from the feedback form into a word processing program. The responses were again sorted thematically by the indicators and values raised. The follow-up analysis focussed both on the percentage of times an issue was identified across the groups, as well as the intensity of the responses, i.e., the extent to which the group leaders provided greater explanation or clarity in elaborating on their groups choices.

Random Discussion Groups

Purpose

CPRN conducted five discussion groups in June 1997 with randomly recruited subjects to provide a comparison with the community groups. These random discussion groups were intended to show how a cross section of Canadians articulated their values and the nature of the trade-offs and struggles they continued to encounter. The identical *The Society We Want* kits were utilized with these five groups, again with the purpose of exploring in depth the general public's views on one of three possible value choices with respect to investing in children.

Methodology

Population/Sample

The five random discussion groups were not sufficient in number to represent the population or even their particular communities as a whole. A total of 57 individuals participated in one of five groups located in Ottawa, Fredericton, Montréal, Trois-Rivières, and Vancouver.

Data Collection Procedures and Instruments

Once again, the issue guide *Our Children* from *The Society We Want* served as the basis for orienting the discussion groups. In contrast to many of the community discussion groups, however, these sessions were facilitated by more experienced individuals. The accompanying information included a fact sheet with key statistics about social spending and the circumstances and demographics of

families and children in Canada. The choices offered with respect to investment in children were as follows: a) children should have priority in social spending; b) children must be saved from what is seen as a spiralling debt and deficit; and c) families are primarily responsible for children and the investments to be made are private ones.

Data Processing and Analyses Conducted

These data were gathered, processed and analysed based primarily on the results from the discussion leaders’ feedback forms and written transcripts of the sessions. Shields (1997) then conducted a thematic, qualitative analysis of the discussion results, broken down by each of the above three choices. These analyses were written up in narrative form, highlighting the major areas of consensus and disagreement that emerged for the three investment choices. Shields includes as well some general commentary on the process of how each discussion group unfolded. The reporting indicates the general manner in which the discussions unfolded, both in terms of chronology of events and the key points at which facilitators intervened to help steer the discussions in a particular direction. The analysis includes as well some commentary on the dynamics of how each group worked through their choices, focussed primarily on major themes or issues that emerged.

The information on benchmarks and values selected by each of the five groups were translated verbatim from the feedback forms, though the analysis includes as well some commentary at the manner in which groups arrived at their conclusions. In addition, the group’s ratings of summary statements are presented descriptively for each of the five groups individually and in the aggregate.

Roundtable Discussion Groups

Purpose

The main purpose of the roundtable discussions was to identify and discuss preferred policies and programs, particularly those items selected from lists provided considered to be "essential" to raising healthy children. These findings largely represent the views of people who were brought together on the basis of their affiliation with nonprofit or community organizations. It is important to note that these groups included local churches, agencies, foundations, and workplaces asked to reach out widely to citizens. Thus, while these participants may have had a greater investment and experience with the issues at hand, and sometimes were opinion leaders in their communities, they were not representatives of advocacy organizations (with the exception of some participants in the youth roundtable).

Methodology

Population/Sample

Two roundtables were held with parent representatives of community organizations and one with youth representatives in May and June 1997. The participants from the three roundtable discussions were either parents of young children nominated by community groups and organizations providing and developing policies and programs for children and families *or* young people identified with youth focussed organizations. More specifically, one group of 12 adult participants included parents with young children (at least one under age of six) from Ottawa and Cornwall area. A second group of nine adult participants were involved in a Toronto roundtable, while a third roundtable discussion with 11 young people (aged 11 to 26) was conducted in Toronto as well.

Unlike more general focus groups, all of the parents were associated to some degree with parenting organizations such as Better Beginnings, or were members of a parent resource centre. The participants were contacted through their affiliated organizations. In view of their backgrounds, there was some anticipation that these participants would be reasonably well informed about the range of available options, i.e., were more likely to be conversant with issues in the public debate and advocacy positions.

The Ottawa roundtable included 11 women and one male, at least four of whom were francophones. Their income levels varied considerably: from one single mother with two children under the age of six, whose annual income from social assistance was less than \$12,000, to three women whose family incomes were more than \$80,000. The Toronto roundtable included participants from Toronto, Sudbury, Guelph, and Walpole Island. The seven women and two men included two First Nations people and three women of colour. Their incomes were highly variable as well, with two participants from families with incomes between \$60,000 to \$80,000 and five indicating incomes that were below \$30,000 (one was below \$6,000).

The youth roundtable included young people from Toronto and Bradford, some of whom could be described as active youth advocates. There were 11 participants in total, who ranged from 11 to 26 years of age. The group was divided between five females and six males. Two of the participants were Black, while one was Asian.

Data Collection Procedures and Instruments

Prior to the roundtable discussions, all participants received basic information about the Best Policy Mix project in the form of a one page description. The information sheet included a description of the process for the roundtable discussion and the stated goals, i.e., to hear from parents of young children on their experience and their assessment of the options.

The participants first completed a questionnaire and then through the process of introductions, participants were asked to indicate the most and least valuable policies that they had experienced.

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During the course of the roundtable discussions, participants were given time to review a series of policy options. There were eight categories, each containing as many as ten different individual policies: 1) economic supplements; 2) balancing work and family; 3) the legal system and families; 4) child care/early education; 5) parenting supports; 6) children’s physical health and safety; 7) children’s development; and 8) community spaces and supports.

As they reviewed the policy options, participants were asked to select items that they believed to be "essential" from the lists provided to create the type of community in which they wanted to live. Having created individual mixes, volunteers were asked to describe their mixes for the group, with the goal of creating several distinct "towns" reflecting the essence of participants’ views. The participants then engaged in a discussion of these different towns, their strengths and weaknesses, which of the policy mixes was most desirable, and ultimately the town in which they would prefer to live in the best of all possible worlds.

The materials for the youth roundtable were modified from those used in the roundtables with parents, although based on essentially the same methodological and substantive framework. There were six categories with a total of 47 possible policy options. The categories included the following: 1) healthy development; 2) the legal system and families; 3) family supports; 4) educational supports; 5) community supports; and 6) work supports. The design of the pre-discussion questionnaires required that participants identify those programs that they had used and had found to be particularly useful or, in some cases, unhelpful.

The plan was for the roundtable participants to follow much the same process as had the parents. While many of the same exercises were undertaken – the selection of essentials, creation and group discussions of towns – the process unfolded differently as participants were eager to identify key policy options that had not been included in the original materials, including the omission of basics such as clean air and water, as well as the governments’ inability to both target and deliver programs effectively for youth.

Data Analysis Procedures

The information from these sessions was collected primarily through the initial questionnaires and the moderators’ summary notes of the process and the physical evidence generated during the course of the discussion to be described momentarily. The data were analysed primarily as a chronological description of the preliminary discussion, followed by a somewhat more detailed description of the distinct "towns" that were created. As individual participants outlined their choices, their proposed town was documented and illustrated for the group through the use of wall mounted materials. The rationales for creating these different towns were discussed, which then generated some compromises or "policy changes" within the different primary mixes considered.

As a final exercise, participants were then asked to select their preferred town and indicate their level of support for that particular mix. Hence the analyses were thematic in nature, following primarily a loosely recorded prioritization of issues and choices that were discussed in moving through the roundtable protocol.

Focus Groups

Purpose

The purpose of the focus groups was to explore the public’s views on the issue of investing in children by selecting from different possible interventions in terms of what they thought would be the most effective strategy or package of programs and policies for children in Canadian society.

Methodology

Population/Sample

Fourteen random selected groups were conducted in both highly urban and small urban centres across the country between May and July 1997. The specific locations of the focus groups included Ottawa, Fredericton, Montréal, Trois-Rivières, and Vancouver (plus three pilots conducted in Toronto). The groups consisted of parents and nonparents (or those with children older than 18), and youth (or those between 16 to 24 years of age). The responses of groups randomly recruited were intended to represent the general public, or more specifically: 1) parents of young children; 2) adults with no children under 18; or 3) youth aged 16 to 24. In all cases, the groups included both economically secure and insecure individuals.

Several focus groups were convened in which participants addressed two protocols designed specifically for the project: an "Envelope" and a "Vision" exercise. The objectives of these exercises were to discover the policy mixes generated by participants and the rationales that they brought to bear to justify their choices. The discussions encouraged participants to consider the impacts of their choices on children of different ages, as well as on families across a range of structures and income groups. The rationales therefore included several considerations, such as what a mix would achieve, how it would be delivered, who would benefit, and what its wider impacts were likely to be, including assumptions about the relationship between families, the labour market, and the state.

The fourteen focus groups with the general public were conducted in both highly urban and small urban centres across the country between May and July 1997. The specific locations of the focus groups included Ottawa, Fredericton, Montréal, Trois-Rivières, and Vancouver (plus three pilots conducted in Toronto). The groups consisted of parents and nonparents (or those with children older than 18), and youth (or those between 16 to 24 years of age).

The responses of groups randomly recruited were intended to reflect the views of three distinct groups: 1) parents of young children; 2) adults with no children under 18; or 3) youth aged 16 to 24. In all cases, the groups included both economically secure and insecure individuals.

The participants completed questionnaires that inquired about their experiences and satisfaction with various programs and policies targetting families prior to entering the focus group discussions.

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These initial questionnaires stimulated and helped to focus the thinking of the focus group participants. The protocols offered participants a simulation exercise or "game" in which they selected among options and deliberated choices in a group setting. For example, one person would present their particular version of the preferred mix, which would be labelled with a particular colour. As the participants discussed the mix, there invariably emerged a new perspective that was then recorded in a different colour to avoid confusion. Participants were encouraged to find common ground, but were given the latitude to disagree if a consensus were not struck. Individual level data on preferred program options and the reasons behind them were gathered at the end of the session.

The Envelope Protocol engaged participants in an exercise to select program and policy options for an ideal Canadian town, based on their perceived effectiveness, their capacity to work together or "mix" to enhance children's outcomes, and their cost. The Vision exercise asked about the effective complementarity or "mix" of programs, but with a somewhat wider range of options *without* cost considerations. Selected individual participants were encouraged to present a set of effective and complementary options, while other group members were asked to either refine these initial positions or propose alternatives.

Data Collection Procedures and Instruments

The participants completed questionnaires that inquired about their experiences and satisfaction with various programs and policies targeting families prior to entering the focus group discussions. These initial questionnaires stimulated and helped to focus the thinking of the focus group participants.

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Data Processing and Analyses Conducted

Ekos research conducted the focus group analyses in the following manner. First, each moderator prepared audiotaped reviews of their sessions based on a summary protocol and the existing materials from the sessions, which typically included the participants' questionnaire responses and flip charts. The reviews were thus organized according to the following questions:

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1. What were the programs and services participants felt were most valuable to themselves, based on the initial discussion around the list of programs and services presented on the questionnaire they completed just before the group? The least valuable?
2. Was the group able to create one mix or were two or more mixes developed? How did the process work? To what degree was the group able to think about combinations or mixes of programs and policies as opposed to individual program components?
3. Did participants begin to articulate a strategy? That is, to what extent were participants thinking about the following issues in whether or not programs and policies are: a) systematic (planned as a whole, rather than as a list of discrete programs); b) integrated (programs and policies work together, complement each other, or are at odds); c) comprehensive (addressing the needs of children across their whole lives, and across the range of their possible experience). Were the participants divided on any of the above issues?
4. What is (are) this group’s mix (or mixes)? What were the primary differences between the mixes (if multiple mixes chosen)? a) Were there any programs or policies that all agreed on? What was viewed as essential?; b) Were there any programs or policies that were not chosen and would never be chosen? (e.g., not thought to be effective or useful)?; c) Were there any programs or policies that were not chosen because they were thought to be covered off by other programs or policies already chosen?; d) Did participants identify anything that is missing from this mix?
5. Did participants take a laissez-faire approach to families with regard to whether or not social policy and programs have a role except in cases of extreme need, or did they see a relatively active role for government in developing policies for children and families?
6. What is (are) the primary rationales behind the selection of the final mix/strategy? That is, did the way participants discussed either strategy (or individual programs) tend to be more or less: a) parent or family focussed; b) labour market oriented or home oriented; c) coercive or relying on incentives; d) relying heavily on regulatory measures or providing programs; e) referring programs to be remedial or preventative; f) focussed on all children or only children targetted as being "at risk" children; g) focussed around birth, or early childhood, or some other "age relevant" approach; or h) focussed on other major dimensions?
7. To what degree did participants raise the following kinds of issues: a) the deep structural changes families face with changes in the labour market; b) the latest data on children’s outcomes; c) the limits of our current programs and strategies, including their effectiveness, particular gaps or programs they saw as problematic or not meeting their goals for children and families.
8. What is (are) the primary reason or rationales driving the selection of the final mix? How did people justify their choices, including what are the goals of children, who will benefit the most and the least from this mix, what are the consequences for families receiving the supports (or not), and are there similar effects for lone- and two-parent families?
9. How did participants think these programs and policies should be delivered? Did the discussion focus on community based delivery? Did questions about the role of the federal or provincial government
10. On the whole, to what degree was the group open to making fundamental change in terms of spending? In the envelope exercise, was the amount spent on children seen as too little?

Did this change over the course of the discussion? At the end, did they want to spend more or less?

11. To what extent did participants bring the following kinds of evidence forward: a) their own experience; b) others’ experiences; and c) knowledge from reading newspapers, etc.
12. What did participants think of the focus group discussion process?

The analyst then listened to the tapes and summarized the results by themes, or a loose matrix analysis of the issues. Ekos (1997) research conducted the preliminary analysis based on a summary protocol. The final analysis involved returning to individual summary protocols and coding responses.

CPRN Polling Data

Purpose

The purpose of this national telephone poll, conducted by Environics on behalf of CPRN between January 22 to February 4, 1998, was to survey a representative sample of the general public about their attitudes regarding various ways of helping families and their children, the importance of different factors in meeting needs of children, and various sectors’ roles in developing policies and programs targeting children. The items included were an outgrowth of the choice deliberation process, such that these reflected many of the themes with which discussion groups had struggled in the various exercises described previously.

Methodology

Population/Sample

The sample model was based on the stratification of the population by ten regions in Canada, with a two stage cluster sample utilizing currently listed telephone numbers in the first stage and randomly generated cluster of numbers in the second stage. From within each multi-person household, respondents 18 years of age or older were screened for random selection using the "most recent birthday" method. In total, some 1,503 respondents were interviewed (for a completion rate of 28% among those contacted), which produced a sampling error of plus or minus 2.5 percent in 95 out of 100 samples.

Data Collection Procedures and Instruments

The telephone interviews were conducted by experienced interviewers at the Environics central location in Toronto. Field supervisors were present during each interviewing session to ensure accuracy in interviewing and recording of responses. The interview schedule was developed by CPRN, with some consultation advice provided by Environics. The final questionnaire included the specific questions or sets of questions relating to the following:

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- attitudes toward various ways of helping families and their children (e.g., "Governments should pay parents to stay at home while their children are young.")
- preferred means, other than day care, to care for children
- should communities provide services for children without government funding
- which level of government should lead in developing policies/programs for children
- have recent government cuts hurt poor families and their children
- importance of various factors in meeting the needs of Canadian families (e.g., "strong education system")
- government spending on children
- support for tax increase to support services for children
- how much more in taxes are people prepared to pay

Data Processing and Analyses Conducted

The data were entered using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) technology, with at least ten percent of the interviews monitored unobtrusively for quality control. The data were then analysed descriptively, such that each question asked was described in terms of the percentages of respondents who "strongly agreed," "somewhat agreed," "somewhat disagreed," and "strongly disagreed" with each item asked. These percentages were broken down further on the basis of a number of demographic characteristics, including region, urban centre, community size, work status, income, industry sector, gender, age, education, and presence of children. Finally, Environics provided estimates for both unweighted and weighted sample results.