



Investing in Children Should be Our Next Priority

By Judith Maxwell

Why must an investment in children be part of the next federal budget?

Changing employment patterns and restructured families have placed enormous pressures on Canadian parents and their children in recent years, making it far more difficult for parents to cope. On the work side, about 70 per cent of Canadian mothers with young children work full time, and there are now many full-time jobs that do not pay enough to support a family. On the family structure side, there has been a steady increase in the number of lone parent families. Cuts in government programs have also reduced the community supports available to parents or made them more difficult to access.

Government policies, whether addressed directly to families or affecting them indirectly through employment and tax policy have a major impact on how families cope when they are threatened by change — and on whether families truly flourish when times are good. But governments are not the only policy actors here. Employers in the public, private and voluntary sectors also have a significant impact on how families cope. Employers can ignore families, leaving them to struggle on their own, or they can help them meet their changing and varied needs. Similarly, community groups can

provide supportive programs such as home visiting, recreation, and parenting resources.

Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc. has just completed a three-year research project, which published *A Policy Blueprint for Canada's Children* in October 1999. The final research report, *What is the Best Policy Mix for Canada's Young Children?*, was published in January 2000. It summarizes the research that underpins the *Policy Blueprint* on policy practices, policy thinking, public values, and the outcomes achieved by children in Canada and comparable countries.

We contend that all citizens should care about the well-being of children, for two reasons:

First, children are “nested” in multiple environments: the child within the family, the family within the larger community of neighbourhoods and workplaces, the community as defined by different geographic and political boundaries, the public institutions (such as schools) that provide community infrastructure, and the governments that provide the resources and policies that allow each of these nests to function well.

Second, recent studies show that children from all income groups are experiencing developmental problems such as bullying or missing a

year in school. About 70 per cent of these children are not poor.

In the past, government support for children included universal education and health care, as well as some limited recognition of the costs of raising children which was provided through family allowances and tax exemptions. However, in recent years, the help given by most Canadian governments has often come in the form of support for the poorest families, distributed through social assistance, tax deductions, child benefits, and some subsidies such as those for child care. Even schools and the health care system have experienced cuts.

Now, however, there is more discussion about the risks of developmental delays and about fostering parents' labour force attachment. These topics have arisen because we know more about how critical child development is to human, social and economic development. Further, our research identified strong connections between the outcomes Canadians desire for children and the employability skills employers are seeking when they hire new people.

Help Is At Hand

When all the actors who form the societal nest in which children live work in concert, their actions combine to foster the enabling conditions needed to ensure child well-being



and healthy development. The three enabling conditions identified in our research are: adequate income, effective parenting and supportive community environments. Several actions can be taken to foster these conditions:

- *Adequate income*, preferably earned income, can be assured by recognizing the cost of raising children, significantly reducing the cost of child care for employed parents, and providing additional income support to families with low earned incomes, social assistance payments or maintenance payments.
- *Effective parenting* can be supported through improved paid and unpaid parental leaves, flexible employment hours and schedules, improved access to health and developmental programs as well as community resource centres, and enhanced availability of developmental child care and preschool care for both employed and stay-at-home parents.
- *Supportive community environments* can be provided for children through access to reliable education, health, social and recreational services, by providing integrated delivery for all these services, by creating “child friendly” spaces and systems, and by collaborating across sectors to promote better outcomes for all children.

The federal government can kick-start these efforts by acting on the promises made in the October 1999 Throne Speech related to increasing its investment in children and improving parental leaves. By declaring

Box 1 Policy Actors and Their Roles in Supporting Children

Federal government

- Improve maternity and parental leave benefits.
- Lower taxes for families with dependent children.
- Extend the Canada Child Tax Benefit.

Provinces

- Extend the right to parental leave.
- Foster and oversee the development of a more consistent network of services to meet the needs of children and families for child care, parenting supports, health services and developmental aids.
- Develop a “single window” for children’s services, using existing centres such as schools, community centres or health clinics. These community resource centres will require cross-sectoral partnerships in order to integrate service delivery and ensure effective assessment and referrals.

Employers

- Provide flexible work time options.
- Supplement parental leave benefits.
- Provide support for child care.
- Develop leaves and other supports for family responsibilities.

Voluntary Sector

- Provide access to reliable education, health, social and recreational opportunities.

there will be federal money on the table for healthy child development, the government will clearly demonstrate it is ready to work with the provinces to set priorities that will improve outcomes for all young children. Although the federal government can take the lead in this regard, all policy actors must be prepared to act (see Box 1).

The short-term effects of federal action are likely to be modest, providing parents and caregivers with greater peace of mind in knowing help is on the way. In the medium term, change will be seen by the mobilization of a wide spectrum of Canadians to create a societal strategy for children. However, it is in the long term that the greatest effects will be seen. By 2010, for example, through steps taken now and by sustaining

the momentum, Canada should be able to demonstrate that:

- Pan-Canadian goals exist for children and families which are widely understood and actively supported by governments, public institutions, employers, communities and families.
- Parents are better able to care for their children because these goals provide adequate income, access to help with parenting and supportive community environments.
- Families have meaningful choices about how to raise their children and can make what they believe to be the best choices, not forced choices, for their children and families.



- Public policy recognizes the extra financial burden of raising children.
- Federal-provincial financing relationships for early childhood infrastructure are in place and accepted as sustainable.
- Provinces have increased their early childhood infrastructure, measured by the number of regulated child care spaces available, by the number of community resource centres in place, and by a qualitative assessment of both integration across sectors and partnerships within these community networks.
- Employers are actively engaged in supporting families with children, as measured by enhancements to parental and family leave programs and increased flexibility for employees to negotiate employment hours and schedules.
- The Canada Child Tax Benefit has removed all children from social assistance, is alleviating poverty and helping more parents support their families with earned income.
- Child outcomes are monitored and evaluated through instruments such as the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth and other research tools.
- Based on the reporting of child outcomes, corrective actions are taken through policy adjustments in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

A long-range children's budget in 2000 should include a mix of tax and spending measures that constitute the first important steps toward a societal strategy for children that provides the best mix of policies for our youngest citizens. Canada would then be on its way to achieving the highest of ratings as a place for children to grow and prosper, supporting the next generation of people who will make this country a desirable place to live and work.

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