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## **Parents need more and better choices**

**Jane Jenson and Judith Maxwell**

Despite what some editorials are saying these days, no one involved with children - not parents, educators, policy makers - thinks that all Canadians have adequate means for combining paid work and family life. Parental leaves are insufficient and enough reliable and quality day care is simply not available.

Only about 1 in 4 Canadian pre-schoolers whose mother is employed has access to a licensed child care space. The others are in informal care or in limbo, juggled among relatives, friends, neighbours, and so on. This kind of care is not the best choice for the children and it is certainly not parents' first choice.

Subsidies for regulated day care do exist. But they are targeted to low-income parents, leaving hundreds of thousands of parents who earn 'too much' struggling to pay monthly child care bills, on average of at least \$850 for a licensed space.

In another disturbing trend, provinces like Ontario, New Brunswick and BC, as well as some federal programs, now encourage social assistance recipients, as part of their 'transition-to-work' packages, to use their subsidies for informal care (read babysitters, neighbours, relatives), because it will remain 'affordable' when or if they get a job.

It does not have to be like this. In the 15 member states of the European Union, between 75 and 99 percent of all pre-school children aged 3 to 6 are in educational child care programs, whether or not both parents are employed. Many also offer generous parental leaves so that fathers and mothers can care for their young children full or part-time. These countries set a standard for investment in early childhood development which far surpasses Canada's.

Here are the hurdles facing parents during those critical pre-school years. Financial barriers: Good quality pre-school child care for 40 hours a week costs about \$10,000 a year in all provinces except Quebec (since the government instituted its policy which creates a flat rate of \$5 a day for a daycare space). Up to \$7000 can be deducted from one parent's taxes, but the family still has to come up with the full amount out of its monthly income and wait for the (partial) tax refund in the spring. For parents earning the average family income in Canada of about \$57,000 a year, these costs can be a horrendous burden ? as big as the mortgage. Their only alternatives are to give up one income or to settle for unregulated, informal care. Supply barriers: Even if parents have the money, there are simply not enough places. Waiting periods for places in the best centres can be two or three years, and in the meantime the children are rapidly growing up.

So, what could be done to ensure that Canadian parents can better balance family life and the need to earn a living? Many editorialists argue that the only efficient way to help children is to leave more money in the hands of their parents. But bear in mind that a tax cut of only \$200 for every tax payer would cost the federal government \$2.9 billion a year in lost revenue!

What governments actually have to address with respect to child care is a market failure. Markets simply are not producing enough high quality child care to meet the needs of ordinary citizens. Governments do not have to pay the whole cost, but they do have a lot of tools that can make the market function better. They create incentives ? more grants to encourage community organizations, employers, school boards, and parents themselves to establish child care facilities which are both good quality and affordable And they can assure the quality is good by setting the curriculum and establishing high standards for care.

Parents have always demonstrated they are willing to invest in their children's care, both parental and non-parental. But they should not have to absorb the whole cost. We need to identify the appropriate balance between the price parents pay and the contributions of employers, governments and the community.

First of all, it is for the parents to decide whether care will be parental or non-parental. Currently, only parents living in Quebec have the right to choose a year of unpaid leave, with a guarantee their job will wait for them. Other provinces could extend their unpaid leaves, while all employers and unions could ensure that the return to work and other benefits are well protected by collective agreements or other benefit packages.

Governments can make that choice an easier one. Current maternity and parental leave benefits under Employment Insurance are far too limited ? eligibility is restricted, wage replacement is too low, and duration is too short. Creating a comprehensive system of parental insurance would enable all fathers and mothers to choose paid leave in the first year of their child's life ? a time when breast-feeding and parental bonding are known to be crucial for the health of the mother, the well-being of the child and the relationship with the father..

The needs for non-parental care vary with age. Studies of child development find that many preschoolers benefit from attending full-day junior and senior kindergarten . New Brunswick and Quebec have already made the calculation that the cost of extended kindergarten pays off in the long run

For infants and toddlers, we simply need more commitment from employers and community groups as well as governments to providing for low-cost spaces supplying developmental child care, whether centre-based, family day care, or in mixed use resource centres.

When parents have real choices multiple payoffs follow. Children develop their potential, employers have more productive employees, communities are stronger, and parents themselves are happier and healthier citizens.

But to give parents real choices, Canada will have to devote more resources to child care and parental insurance than we do today. The choice is ours.

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