
Parents and "Society:" A Shared Responsibility

Speaking Notes to House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources Development Sub-Committee on Children and Youth at Risk

I would like to thank the Committee for this invitation to speak to you about our recent report, *What is the Best Policy Mix for Canada's Young Children?* This is a synthesis of research done by CPRN and others over the past three years. That research has covered:

- The values and preferences of Canadians, especially parents;
- Extensive literature reviews;
- Analysis of the outcomes we seek for children today and tomorrow (being children and becoming adults);
- Comparisons of policies in other countries;
- Analysis of the current policies in place in six provinces (with the other four now in progress); and
- A survey of the current state of governance and accountability in the federal government and six provinces.

Today, I want to speak to you about the interdependence between families and society, and illustrate ways in which society at large and public policy in particular are not carrying their share of the responsibility. To keep my remarks short, I will address four questions:

1. Why should society support families and children?
2. Why should we focus on all children?
3. What do other countries do?
4. How do Canadian policies compare?

1. Why Should Society Support Families and Children? Aren't the Parents Responsible?

- Parents do have the primary role, day by day, year by year.
- But we have also always recognised that the well-being of Canadian society begins in childhood. For example, we have always invested in public schools so that all children will

have an equal chance to prepare for adulthood and to become good citizens. Now the situation is different.

- First, there are new needs. About 70 % of women with young children work full time – mainly outside the home;

- Second, smaller family units, without extended family members, have no one at home to care for children, prepare meals, etc;

- Third, there is greater instability in family structure and work arrangements. Both can create abrupt discontinuities in family life.

- These changes mean that families are no longer autonomous, self-sufficient units. There is now a profound interdependence between parents, on the one hand, and their employers, public institutions, governments, and communities, on the other, if we are to provide for younger children and meet the needs of school-age children.
- In addition, new research of several kinds has shown that we can not wait until children are school age to begin to ensure that they will have their developmental needs met. Studies of the early years point to the importance of investment by community institutions as well as families. This includes:

- Evidence on brain development and on the efficacy of interventions

- Community experiments -- 123 GO, Success by Six, Better Beginnings, CAP-C, and many provincial programs.

2. The Focus of our Work is on Young Children – All Young Children. Why?

- Specific groups of children do need more, but all families have needs which can be met by appropriate policies -- not just *government* policies, but those of employers and communities as well.

- Indeed, our studies, along with others like the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), show that there are three enabling conditions for healthy child development:

1. Adequate income
2. Effective parenting, and
3. Supportive community environments

- In short, there is another level of interdependence in policy development. Families need a mix of supports across these three categories – income, parenting, and neighbourhood.

- In Canada, policy is going in the other direction, however. From a universal approach in several areas it has swung towards narrow targeting. However, excessive targeting does not serve the public interest, whether you target by income or by category.

- Of the 565,000 children aged 6 to 11 identified in the NLSCY as having functional or behavioural problems, 70 percent were not poor. Targeting by income would miss 70% of the children who need help.

- As for categorical targeting – programs targeted to autism, for example, would miss many other disorders; programs for families on social assistance would miss other families in need.

3. What Can we Learn from Other Countries about this Interdependence?

- Several European countries, each in their own way, have developed a very active role for the state.

- Whether they are motivated by gender equity, social democratic principles, or more traditional principles, the result is a variety of "child-centred" policies to support income, early childhood education, and so on. Between 70 and 100% children aged 3 to 6 in many European countries are in publicly provided child care, whether or not the mother works; (vs. 43% in Canada)

- Note that European countries also succeed at reducing child poverty through more generous social transfer programs.

- Note also that employers are full-fledged partners in these "child-centred" policies.
- The United States does not take this broad-based approach.

- The United States (which has the most unequal distribution of income and economic opportunity of all the countries discussed here) leaves families to sort out their own problems. The most important social programme in the US is one which simply tops up the low income of the working poor – the Earned Income Tax Credit.

4. How Does Canada Rank?

- Canada ranks high in its provision of health and education – they are universally accessible and of reasonable quality. But overall, Canada has not adapted its policy and program structures to respond to the 21st century needs of families and children.
- A survey of policies in six provinces and the federal government shows a patchwork of programs.

- Many provinces seem to be struggling to find the balance between income and services. No one is as yet happy with the mix, and experimentation continues.

- Quebec is in a league of its own. It has had a societal strategy for families and children since 1997, which is gradually being implemented. It is a mix of income support (Family Allowance) and services, especially its developmentally oriented child care at a cost to parents of \$5 a day.

- Jurisdictional boundaries have contributed to difficulties in policy development. The federal government holds mainly income levers, while the provinces have both the service and support levers. This creates a third level of interdependence – across governments. They have to work together to create the overall mix of programs and policies families need.

- The major breakthrough in the past few years has been the National Child Benefit, while work continues – slowly – on the National Children’s Agenda.
- The Canada Child Tax Benefit is moving very slowly to the level of support regarded as minimum by most analysts -- \$2,500;
- The NCB programming by the provinces is promising, but still very experimental with wide variations in coverage, level of service, and even type of service;

- The extension of parental leave to one year is a step forward, but constitutes less than half of what is needed in terms of coverage and wage replacement.

Nonetheless, thirty years after women went out to work for wages, there is no "established" framework of programs that help parents to balance work and family responsibilities while children are young.

Concluding Comments

- Our research shows that Canada’s goal should be to create a societal strategy for early childhood. Such a framework should embrace a mix of income security, support for parenting, child care, and healthy child development programs which are available in every community across Canada. That framework should be implemented by all the natural partners for families – employers, communities and governments at all levels.
- The recent debate about fiscal policy shows that governments are preoccupied with tax cuts and health care. Children’s issues are far less visible than they were even six months ago, and there is evidence that the federal-provincial dialogue on children has stalled.

Parents today face an entirely different set of challenges from the parents of 20 and 30 years ago. We know that the vast majority are doing heroic duty to love and nurture their children. But they cannot assure the best possible lives for their children if they try to function independently. Nor can they go on strike for better parenting and community supports. They are locked in a state of interdependence with partners who are not taking up their share of the responsibility.

Yet, we all claim to be in favour of investing in children.

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