
Parents, Starting From Zero, Could Use a Public Boost

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The science is unambiguous. Infants and young children flourish when they are cared for by adults who have the time and energy to cuddle and tickle, to talk to them when they are infants and with them as they grow, and to read to them, even when it is the same story that is asked for over and over.

While parents provide the bulk of such loving care, other adults, including trained child care providers, also offer environments in which toddlers – the most violent people on earth – learn the difference between grabbing and taking turns, between bullying and playing, between tantrums and please & thank you.

The *Globe and Mail's* recent series, *Starting from Zero*, confirmed many home truths parents have known for generations, but the articles also pulled together the research findings of Canada's top experts in child development. They teach us again that there are three conditions needed for children to thrive: adequate family income, good parenting, and supportive communities. As Canadian Policy Research Networks reported in its 1999 study, *The Best Policy Mix for Canada's Young Children*, each is necessary, but none is sufficient.

Income is important for obvious reasons; a life of poverty is the absence of many things, including health, time and relaxation. However, and this is the key lesson from the scientific data, developmental difficulties are not confined to low-income families, lone-parent families, or any other category. Indeed, because most Canadian children are - by definition – living in “middle” income families, most of the children with developmental delays are, in fact, not poor.

There are challenges for parents in this important finding. It means that they are constantly confronted with choices about how to balance work and family life. Numerous studies of income

patterns in Canada show that two earners are needed for families to keep their heads above water. Two-thirds of mothers with children under six are employed, and three out of four women heading lone-parent families are earning income.

Happily, however, there is little evidence – in *Starting from Zero* or elsewhere – that young children suffer when both their parents (or the one parent with whom they live) are employed.

There is no need, then, for working parents to fear they are depriving their children and that they must cram their precious quality time full of formal learning with flash cards and other methods for precocious rote teaching. The scientific evidence is that school readiness and later school success depend much more on social and language skills than on knowing the alphabet. Children who have gone to the zoo with their play group and been allowed to see that the lion is a big kitty cat are likely more prepared for school than one who recognizes C is for Cat.

The science teaches that parenting is more effective when parents do not suffer from depression or other illnesses and when they are well connected to a social network, whether of friendship, work or kinship. Therefore, there are clear advantages, beyond the income earned, to having parents who are happily employed.

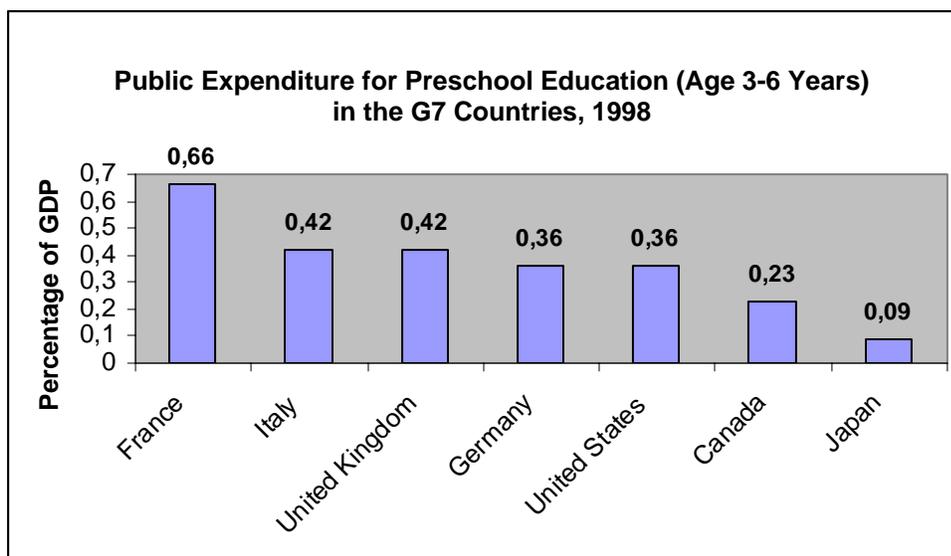
But parents of pre-school children can go to work with their minds at ease only when they know that their children are well-cared for, in a loving and developmentally appropriate environment. This means, in many cases, a formal non-parental early childhood education and care setting, that is, ECEC.

Pioneering work on the “early years” by the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIAR), and by its former President, Dr. Fraser Mustard and his colleague the Honourable Margaret McCain, repeatedly makes the case that all children benefit from the stimulation and learning environment of developmentally appropriate ECEC.

Parents who have the luck to find a space or to be able to afford the cost of quality ECEC are a small minority in Canada, however.

Canadian parents are left to fend for themselves far more than families in other countries. On-going studies by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report that other member countries are investing heavily in ECEC. They do this for both economic and social reasons. About the public provision of child care and pre-school education, the OECD writes: “The trend in all countries is toward full coverage of the 3- to 6-year old age group, aiming to give all children at least two years of free publicly-funded provision before beginning compulsory schooling.”

Canada (with the exception of Quebec) has resisted this trend; a recent report by the Governments of Canada and Manitoba documents this.



Parents have, of course, the primary responsibility for providing a home environment of loving intimacy, play and careful attention. The message from the research is that they can, indeed, relax a bit. There is no need to worry so much about “getting it right.”

On the other hand, the research has another message for Canadian communities and their governments. In the contemporary world, parents rarely have the kinship networks and dense community ties that characterize less mobile communities, so there’s a lack of experienced parents to whom to turn for assistance. And generations of shrinking family size mean they may not even have siblings who are parenting at the same time. Not surprisingly, in *Starting from Zero* parents report that raising their children is the most challenging job they have ever had and they want and need guidance.

Why do we leave them so much on their own? Why do we not provide sufficient community-anchored early childhood education centres with trained educators who know their children well? These professionals can help parents sort through, for their own child, everything from the often commercially motivated messages about educational toys to the normal level of aggression in a two-year old boy. Why don’t we relieve the tension between home and work, by providing affordable access to the story times and sandbox play that any good ECEC program automatically provides? Why do we leave them alone to worry about whether their child is on a normal development path? A system of affordable and accessible early childhood education in Canada would provide such supports to all parents.

Today’s parents, who are working so hard for all of our futures, deserve no less.

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