News Release

July 30, 1999

Canadians want a choice of child-care services

CPRN paper combines polling and consultation to dig deeper into issues

Ottawa – Three-quarters of Canadians agree there should be a child-care system in place for all families, but they have many different preferences for types of child care, a new discussion paper from Canadian Policy Research Networks reveals.

The report, *Values and Preferences for the "Best Policy Mix " for Canadian Children*, by Joseph Michalski, Ph.D., is the result of a research project that gathered data from focus groups and roundtable discussions, and information from public opinion polls over the past 20 years. The objective was to collect a wide range of data and use it to paint a detailed picture of Canadians' values and preferences for child-support policies.

The research indicates there is agreement among Canadians on the need for child-care supports, but no strong consensus on what forms those supports should take.

According to a 1998 Environics poll, 76% of Canadians agree with the statement: "A child-care system should be available for all families, with the costs shared by government and the families themselves." Participants in focus groups called for a flexible definition of the term "child-care system," expanding the debate beyond a simple choice of daycare versus home care. They called for a full range of options that would answer parents' needs at any given time in their child's development. Focus groups and roundtables, specially convened to discuss possible policy mixes, took the issue further, actually delving into the specifics. One called for a mix of policies that would include: "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 para-professionals; and violence-prevention programs such as kids' help lines."

"What makes this report particularly valuable is that it is a synthesis of several sources of data as opposed to just one data source," says Michalski. "That variety of data allows us to dig beneath the surface and look at issues pertaining to child policy in much greater depth."

Among focus groups and roundtable discussions, the most common best policy mix focused 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. Those sentiments were supported by polling 90% of respondents in the Environics poll "strongly agreed" and "agreed" with the statements:

- Jobs are the best answer to poverty.
- Employers should increase their efforts to provide a balance.
- Both parents in two-parent families need jobs to support their families.

When it comes to devising policy that would help parents support and raise their children, participants in the discussion groups agreed that solutions are unlikely to be found quickly or easily through technical fixes or social policy alone. So, participants called for a combination of efforts among government, communities, families and the private sector. A recurring theme was the importance of empowering parents to exercise choice in the context of their family situations, aided by supports that would enable parents to assume more responsibility for their children and engage in more effective childrearing practices. To this end, the groups identified a number of benchmarks that could be used to measure progress: reduction of child poverty or securing children's basic needs; balancing work and child care; supports for parents and caregivers.

Still, the research shows that, when you get beyond core values to implementation of policies, persistent fault lines appear. For example, the majority of discussion group participants approved of income supports for employed mothers, but felt unemployed mothers on social assistance should be compelled to get a job. And polls showed a 50/50 split over whether government should pay parents to stay at home with young children.

Polls also show that Canadians hold conflicting values about work and the family. They agree that even in two-parent families, most people need a job in order to support their families, but they also agree that a pre-school child is likely to suffer if both parents are employed.

A similar pattern of consensus on core values and division on the specifics shows up when results of a youth roundtable discussion are considered in comparison with those of their elders. The young people were often critical of conventional strategies, and typically assumed a more holistic approach. Many participants were eager to discuss subjects that had not been included in the background materials, such as the importance of such basic needs as clean air and water. And some young people voiced a disenchantment with programs that they felt view youth only as "future productive workers."

By combining a variety of poll results with findings from focus groups and roundtables, this discussion paper combines the visceral and timely reactions captured by polling to the more measured and deeper considerations of prolonged discussion. "One of the benefits of collecting and evaluating such a mass of data is that it allows us to interpret the fault lines by drawing inferences from polling and focus groups and by using focus groups to delve more deeply into issues raised by polling," Joe Michalski says.

"For example, there has always been a split over whether the government should make payments directly to parents," says Michalski, referring to one apparent contradiction in poll results that show 50% of Canadians favoring payments to parents, but three-quarters supporting the notion of a child-care system for all families. "People are mistrustful of money going directly into homes. If that's the only option under discussion, you find opinion becomes polarized. There will always be people who interpret this as a type of welfare. They question how much of the money will find its way to the children. But when the question is whether a child-care system *of some sort* should be available for all families, a consensus emerges." The research "triangulates" these diverse sources of public input analysing the differences and similarities of results from the two types of information gathering to map out a vast terrain of opinions and preferences.

"This paper makes an important contribution to our understanding of how Canadians feel about child support," president Judith Maxwell says. "What we learned is that there are, indeed, many core values shared by the majority of Canadians. But, at the same time, there are different preferences with respect to the best policy mix for children. The way to remain neutral and still provide support is to respect people's right to choose from a range of services."

Values and Preferences for the "Best Policy Mix" for Canadian Children is part of an ongoing research project, the *Best Policy Mix for Canada's Children*, which aims to lay the foundation for a coherent strategy for improving child outcomes in Canada. By gathering together such a large and varied amount of data, this discussion paper has lain the groundwork for a subsequent report from CPRN, which will use the information in conjunction with other *Best Mix* studies to formulate a set of policy recommendations for child care in Canada.

- 30 -

CPRN is a national not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to create knowledge and lead public debate on social and economic issues important to the well-being of Canadians, in order to help build a more just, prosperous and caring society.

For more information on the publication, please contact:

Peter Puxley, Director, Public Affairs, Tel: (613) 567-7500 ext. 2019 – E-mail: ppuxley@cprn.org

To download a free copy of the report visit our home page: http://www.cprn.org

A weekly e-mail service, *e-network*, provides short updates on research projects or corporate activities. Visit www.e-network.ca to subscribe.