
Backgrounder

Comparative Family Policy: Six Provincial Stories

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Policies towards children and families are a loosely defined category, with a multitude of possible goals. Practically everything that governments do will have a substantial effect, positive or negative, on the well-being of children and their families. This study examines three policy realms in which six provincial governments (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick) and the federal government are currently and actively addressing the needs of families or children. These are income security, balancing work and family, and developmental programs.

Income security has always had a significant amount of "family" content. In recent years, governments have again undertaken major reforms of their income security programs. In doing so, most have changed the goals of the programs, actively encouraging labour force participation rather than defining some categories of the population as exempt from seeking paid work. As well, over the last decades the labour force participation rate of women, especially those with young children, has increased dramatically. Therefore, issues of how to balance employment and family, and who is responsible for doing so, have become central. The third policy realm has taken on new dimensions in recent years. Historically, provincial governments maintained institutional machinery for taking children "into care" when their parents were not capable of caring for them, as well for dealing with youngsters running afoul of the law. The policy challenge in recent years in several jurisdictions has become that of "preventing problems from arising, via early intervention."

In 1945, two universal programs recognized that families with dependent children faced higher costs than families without children, or single people. They were the tax deduction for dependent children (in place since 1919) and family allowances. There were also a number of social assistance programs designed to meet the needs of poor families or those without a male breadwinner. By 1966, these programs were consolidated into the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP).

This cost-shared program had a profound effect on policies towards children in subsequent years, particularly in the area of nonparental child care. The financing provisions set down by the federal

government fostered a public child care system that was more accessible to low income families. Middle and upper income families could claim a tax deduction that recognized the costs of employment (via the Child Care Expense Deduction, provided by Ottawa). However, the lack of adequate child care spaces and limited subsidies have meant that such families have had difficulty finding spaces for their children at a price they can afford.

A number of provinces are now addressing the issue of cost. In particular, Quebec reformed its Family Policy in 1997 and made the commitment to provide a space to any child whose parents wanted one, for a flat rate of \$5 per day (less for poorer families).

Other policies for balancing family and employment include maternity and parental leaves, as well as general family leaves. Paid leaves are available through the Employment Insurance regime, for those who meet the eligibility requirements. All provinces provide unpaid leaves, although in Alberta only maternity leaves are available. The overview of the situation provided here leads to the conclusion that, under current circumstances, parents are forced to make difficult choices, with potential long-term costs for their children and themselves. Better leave provisions would help them avoid such difficulties.

Income security is also moving away from its early designs, in two ways. Universal family allowances have been eliminated, as has the tax deduction for dependent children. In their place, by 1993, the federal government had created a Child Tax Benefit and Working Income Supplement. Then, following the cuts in transfer payments that the federal government brought in with the Canada Health and Social Transfer in 1995, a new set of programs began to take pride of place as a basis for income security. The federal government as well as the provinces have instituted the National Child Benefit, intended to provide direct income transfers to parents, as well as to foster reinvestment by the provinces in services. These programs mark the separation of income security regimes for families from those for children and other Canadians.

New measures to ensure that noncustodial parents assume their responsibility for supporting their children after separation and divorce have accompanied these reforms. All provinces have developed new machinery in this area, as has the federal government.

Limiting spending on social assistance was the goal of another set of programs, in the area of employability, which have consequences for children and families. Requirements that parents engage in employment or training (workfare) as well as programs to foster such involvement mean that provinces are called on to make supplemental investments in child care. Coordination of these programs has often been neglected, however, such that sufficient services that are of high quality are not available.

Finally, the provinces as well as Ottawa have begun to pay significant new attention to monitoring and evaluating development signposts so that children "at risk" of developmental difficulties, whether for physiological or social reasons, will be identified in time to take preventive and early remedial action. In many cases, these programs combine educationally appropriate preschool services with health monitoring.

This study documents the emergence across six provinces, as well as within the federal government, of new interest in directly providing for the needs of children. The greatest coherence,

if insufficient money, marks the field of income security, where child tax benefits, transfers and income supplements are providing new sources of income to families with children.

There is also growing attention to the developmental needs of young children, reflected in the concerns of health policy networks as well as those traditionally responsible for social services. They rely on current scientific literature and are cognizant of the contribution of early childhood education provided by high quality day care, community resource centres and kindergartens, as well as by parents.

Nonetheless, the study concludes that there is insufficient attention to coordination across these two policy domains. In addition, it identifies mounting pressures as families struggle to balance family and employment. With stress and poor health becoming a rising risk among parents, the study also concludes that all Canadian governments would do well to devote even more attention to the varied needs of all children and their families.

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