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## **Backgrounder**

### **Values and Preferences for the "Best Policy Mix " for Canadian Children**

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#### **Purpose**

What are Canadians' values and preferences with respect to policies in support of children? The current discussion paper details the main findings from the Canadian Policy Research Networks' (CPRN) study of community discussion groups, focus groups, roundtables, and public opinion polls. The results help to document areas of widespread agreement – and the persistent fault lines – that emerge among Canadians in thinking about the "best policy mix" for Canadian children. The analysis challenges governments, employers, communities, and families to think creatively about policy options that resonate with the deep-seated values and preferences expressed by the majority of Canadians.

#### **Methodology**

Much of the original data presented in the discussion paper stem from a series of choice deliberation exercises, including the results from community groups across Canada who participated in *The Society We Want* public dialogue initiative. Additionally, several roundtable meetings and focus group discussions afforded different groups an opportunity to examine more directly their preferences for specific policy mixes, often with some consideration of the costs involved. In each of these exercises, the participants engaged in discussions to assist them in their struggles to work through the complex differences and trade-offs among various policy mixes. The results from conventional public opinion polling are examined as a complement to the "choice work."

#### **Choice Deliberation Findings**

*The Society We Want* public dialogue initiative offered three choices for the groups to deliberate:

- "a society that invests in children first," meaning that children should have priority in social spending and that our social programs should put the well-being of children first;
- "a society that gives our children a debt-free future," suggesting that children must be saved from what is seen as a spiralling debt and deficit; and
- "a society that trusts families to raise their children," meaning that families are primarily responsible for children and whatever investments governments make should help strengthen the basic family unit.

Rarely did groups simply select one of these choices in their deliberations; the options were *not* considered mutually exclusive. Most groups struggled to achieve a more integrated framework. In the search for answers, groups typically used the available choices to develop complex new positions, reordering priorities in ways that captured a better equilibrium. The majority of groups therefore worked through their differing perspectives and resolved different value positions by striking a compromise that balanced the countervailing weight of children's needs, fiscal pressures, and the role of families.

The groups identified a number of possible benchmarks of progress toward enhancing children's lives. More than half of the participating groups identified the reduction of child poverty or securing children's basic needs as key benchmarks of progress. The second most common theme was that of balancing work and child care responsibilities. Woven throughout many of the discussions and subsequent commentaries were concerns about the tension between employment and family life. In most of these discussions, the participants focussed on supports for parents and caregivers and less directly on initiatives directed at children and youth.

More than one third of the groups discussed child care provision or "daycare" in the context of developing benchmarks, although the specific resolutions tended to split between two broad perspectives. On the one hand, the majority of those who discussed daycare issues focussed on the availability of and access to various paid or "formal" systems of care, including some who specifically advocated for national daycare programs. On the other hand, a smaller number of groups preferred increased supports for parents to raise their children without necessarily having to rely upon external child care services. A few groups wanted policies that would recognize the *economic* value of motherhood as an important dimension of the workforce. The preference was that there be more direct financial compensation for "private" childrearing, or at least tax breaks based on *household* rather than *individual* incomes.

Yet despite the consistent recognition that communities, governments, and even corporations should assist families or provide alternatives to support healthy child development, most groups consistently argued that parents and caregivers were the most important resource for children. The idea that most often emerged was that of *providing support to families to assist them in their efforts to raise their children*. Stated differently, parents and other primary caregivers should still have considerable latitude in their decision making with respect to most aspects of nurturing their children's healthy development. At the same time, there should be *adequate institutional supports* in place to facilitate that process, such as parent education programs. There was widespread recognition that "one-size-fits-all" solutions were not viable and that primary caregivers needed more choices at their disposal.

Indeed, a central theme that emerged was the importance of empowering parents to exercise choice in the context of their family situations. One key message was the need for the types of supports

that would enable parents to assume *more* responsibility for their children and engage in more effective childrearing practices. The discussion groups, through different language and examples, consistently acknowledged the primacy of parental responsibility for family life and viewed certain programs as helping to facilitate successful parenting.

### **Policy Preference Discussions**

In addition to *The Society We Want* public dialogue initiative, a series of roundtable discussions and focus group exercises permitted parents, adults without children, and youth to participate in discussions about their preferences or "best policy mixes" for children. The "best policy mixes" that emerged usually reflected attempts to balance the needs of children, family responsibilities, and the fiscal constraints associated with public policies. The resolutions at which individuals and groups arrived often required some level of compromise. The most common best mix focussed 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. The participants stressed the need for public policy supports to help families cope with employment. While respectful of the option that some families preferred (or were able) to exercise in having one parent remain at home, they did not consider stay at home supplements as the preferred use of public dollars. Participants favoured relatively generous income supports for unemployed parents or those at the low end of the income ladder to ensure that affected children did not grow up in poverty.

A second common "best policy mix" focussed on helping parents take time out of the labour market to be at home with their children. Those who supported such a policy mix were inclined to support stay at home supplements, especially for parents of young children. Participants wanted active and targeted income supports for those who were out of work, including single mothers, that would enable such individuals to enter the labour market. These participants occasionally added child care or enhanced income supports as potential avenues for addressing the needs of lone parents who were employed. The child care option was preferred typically if the costs could be shared by governments and, on a sliding scale basis, by parents themselves.

The youths who participated shared a broad vision of what would best serve their needs. They tended to identify new and innovative solutions, were often critical of what they saw as conventional approaches, and typically assumed a more holistic approach to the issue of the best policy mix. Before the selection of policy essentials had even started, the participants were eager to identify and discuss options that had *not* been included in the background materials, such as the omission of certain basic needs like clean air and water. Moreover, many youth participants focussed on alternative strategies for assessing their contributions; the labour market was not seen as the only route to success. Indeed, some participants voiced a disenchantment with programs that explicitly focussed on the labour market and school because these were perceived to view young people only as "future productive workers." Notably, these participants preferred education that served as a means to help them become better citizens and not simply as a means to get a job. Finally, the youth participants were clear that young people needed a voice and a role in decision making. They supported policies that empowered youths more, such as consideration of their preferences in custody proceedings, alternative sentencing for youth, parenting courses, drop-in/referral centres for youths, schools that were open and more accessible during off hours, and cooperative work-study programs.

Another important lesson learned from the focus groups and roundtable exercises in particular relates to the genuine struggle to resolve the tensions embedded in different views on the best policy mix for children. The discussions revealed at times some rather profound divisions about

policy, even where individuals might share common values around the importance of parents having primary responsibility for their children or jobs as the best mechanism to combat poverty and support families. There was widespread agreement with these general statements, but far less agreement about the specific strategies or policies that might address these issues.

The evidence from the choice deliberation exercises in general suggests that Canadians reject the notion that solutions will be found quickly or easily through technical fixes, or by means of social policy alone. Participants saw the issues at hand as systemic ones shaped by the broader issues of family transformation, a changing and often more insecure labour market, and social exclusion (particularly among the poor and disadvantaged). They expressed a sense of pervasive uncertainty on a number of fronts. They saw the capacities of individuals and families as threatened across income groups and labour market situations. Much of this sense of threat came from external sources, such as changes in their work situations, employment opportunities, and social policies.

The participants also noted that there were threats from within – family inadequacy, parental irresponsibility, conflicting expectations, and generational conflicts. Triggered by this assessment, some participants fell into a blaming mode that categorized families as either "good" or "bad." On balance, however, the dialogue process led most participants to move beyond blame in their attempts to evaluate the more holistic and challenging nature of the problems that families encounter.

## **Polling Results**

The discussion paper next presents the results from a brief historical analysis of public opinion polls conducted over the last two decades that have dealt with issues such as women's labour force participation, maternity leave, daycare, child care responsibilities and children's well-being. The evidence revealed that public opinion polls historically have addressed social policy issues related to balancing work and family responsibilities only in a limited fashion, while children's issues were only rarely the focus of polling questions. The issues typically have been framed as "women's issues," thereby both reflecting and reinforcing the societal bias that men should not be as concerned with family policy, nor asked to make the difficult trade-offs between employment and domestic responsibilities. For example, while the polls have inquired about the impact of mothers' labour force participation on the well-being of their children on several occasions, a parallel question about the impact of fathers' employment has never been asked.

In general, the polling results showed that Canadians continue to value public spending on behalf of children, including spending achieved through tax increases for services targeted specifically to support children. There were high levels of agreement around several issues. Most Canadians agreed, for example, that health care and education should continue to be universal systems; that jobs are critical to fighting poverty and supporting families; that government funding cuts in recent years have hurt those living in poverty; that there should be some combination of child care and parental leave policies available to working parents, with the costs shared across sectors; and that employers should be doing more to help families achieve a better balance between work and family life.

At the same time, there were some areas of uncertainty, such as in the sphere of income supports and gender roles. Women tended to agree more often and more strongly on most options that created flexibility in the choices at their disposal and those that supported children. The public over the years has expressed strong, consistent support for the availability of daycare services. To the extent that divisions exist, the public generally divides on whether such services should be

available universally, or targetted to those in poverty. Moreover, differences of opinion abound with respect to the question of who should be primarily responsible for paying and providing daycare services. On the other hand, the most recent polling data pointed to several broad areas of agreement regarding certain assumptions about family life and policies intended to assist families with children. At least 70 percent (and often much higher percentages) of the general public endorsed the following notions:

- jobs are critical to fighting poverty and supporting families
- government funding cuts in recent years have hurt those living in poverty
- the loss of job security has meant raising children has become more of a challenge
- a child care system needs to be in place for everyone who needs such services, with the costs to be shared across sectors
- employers should be doing more to help families achieve a better balance between work and family responsibilities
- increased funding, including higher taxes, is endorsed if the money is targetted at supportive services for children
- an enhanced combination of child care and parental leave is needed to help balance work and domestic responsibilities.

The public, however, divides on other issues. For example, widespread disagreement exists on the issue of whether or not parents should be subsidized more directly to remain at home to raise their children. More generally, the polling data confirm that there have been longstanding tensions between paid employment for women and child care responsibilities. In terms of children's well-being, a majority of Canadians believe that women ideally should *not* work outside of the home while their children are young. On the other hand, for a variety of other social and economic reasons, most women with children prefer either part-time or full-time employment. Finally, a consensus has *not* been reached regarding which level of government (federal, provincial, municipal) should assume more of a leadership role in developing child-focussed policies and programs.

## **Summary Conclusions**

In general, the combination of different data sources points to a number of components that should inform whatever policy mix emerges. As general principles, Canadians have reiterated on a consistent basis in both polls and discussion groups that children are a high spending priority, that healthy child development in the early years requires continued high investments, and that health care and education are essentials that should continue to be the backbone of universal programs.

In addition, while the tensions surrounding the work-family nexus cannot be resolved easily, there are some fairly clear messages. Most Canadians view increased employment opportunities as a priority in helping families to successfully raise children. At the same time, families require help to balance some of the contradictory demands between employment and domestic responsibilities. The best policy mix should include, therefore, a combination of "programs like child care or parental leaves," with both the private and public sectors assuming some responsibility. For example, discussion groups tended to view workplace measures as potentially effective options – 89 percent of those surveyed in polls wanted employers to increase their efforts to provide a better balance between work and family responsibilities. At the same time, many participants in the deliberative discussion groups had reservations about the ability of the private sector to provide systemic solutions. They worried that small employers would find them too expensive while large employers would not reach out to a large enough number and range of families. Thus, while they

want the private sector to act, Canadians see governments as playing an important role in stimulating jobs, ensuring job security, and offering options that help families cope with the early childhood years.

Another key component of the best policy mix involves child care. While the public opinion polling results indicated widespread support of child care, the discussion groups generally viewed publicly funded child care as a more controversial issue. The differences of opinion appeared to reflect current labour market status, the degree of past experience with child care, and interpretations of funding mechanisms. Discussion groups often quickly included child care in their best mixes. Participants who were more favourably disposed to this option included employed parents (either couples or lone parents) who already depended on some type of formal child care arrangement. Others supporting such policy mixes were employed parents who had to patch together paid and unpaid care, often because they were not able to afford formal child care. In addition, while there seemed to be less support for a tax-funded universal program of child care, participants were much more likely to support shared cost systems or proposals that included sliding scale payment systems.

An area where Canadians were clearly and profoundly divided pertained to income supports, whether in the form of supplements for stay-at-home parents or with respect to providing basic security for families lacking adequate income. Some polling results, for example, found a fifty-fifty split on the question of whether the government should pay parents to remain at home when their children are young. A deeper exploration of the issue reveals a fault line pertaining to different concepts of "choice" and differences in the perceived gender roles of men and women. The best mix option focussed on the "spouse in the house" option almost always defined a traditional role for women in families and the economy by assuming that mothers would be the ones who would "choose" to stay home while their children were young. Many who supported the stay-at-home supplement reasoned that women were often *forced* to work out of economic necessity and that women should have the option to focus on childrearing, particularly during the early childhood years. These Canadians wanted governments to respect women's preferences by supporting an avenue that would permit them to remain at home without having to sacrifice income.

The evidence further reveals that Canadians are at a loss to figure out how best to provide income security for families with children that lack adequate income. Sixty-two percent of Canadians surveyed agreed that "just as senior citizens receive old age benefits, government should provide funds to all parents to help them raise healthy children." Those who were unemployed, or who were at the bottom of the income and education ladders, were more likely to support such a policy (more than 70 percent within each of those demographic categories). Although the split was less dramatic than it was for the stay-at-home income supplements, it nevertheless demonstrates a certain ambivalence among Canadians in general about the provision of income supplements that might be more readily or universally available.

The discussion group participants showed the same ambivalence in considering how to address child poverty without encouraging what they feared as dependency. Although many groups included an income supplement for needy families in their "best mix," they were adamant that there should be strict criteria in place. Groups debated which families should receive income support, under what circumstances, and how supports should be delivered. Often participants supporting "time out with kids" revealed a curious double standard with regard to those "deserving" of income supports. While they wanted income supplements such that employed mothers might be able to stay at home without earnings losses, they often believed that unemployed mothers or those on social assistance should be compelled to work. Single parents were often targetted in terms of their need

to "get a job." Thus these participants expressed doubts that social assistance recipients exercised sufficient effort and self-reliance, but they were more sympathetic to the difficulties of employed parents.

At the other end of the spectrum, those selecting the best mix option that emphasized continuing employment saw income supports as a question of social justice or equitable redistribution. They were more likely to want enriched income supplements for those unable to work, pointing to failures of the economy rather than personal failings as the roots of poverty. They were also more inclined to feel that income supports should be in the hands of parents, and that trust and dignity were also at issue in decisions about how to eradicate child poverty.

As a final policy component, Canadians preferred programs or others supports aimed at improving parents' knowledge and skills and argued that these should be widely available free of charge. Each of the different types of discussion groups identified the need for universally accessible programs to improve parenting. Isolation and vulnerability were seen as widespread across families. The participants viewed relatively few parents as having adequate preparation or resources for parenting. Concerns about job insecurity and struggles to balance time had created new and widespread risks, not only for children in poverty and extreme circumstances, but for families in general. Indeed, the preference seemed to be much more in the direction of universal services rather than for those designed to encompass targeted, high-risk families. Groups also wanted community services to be widely available, or to act as community anchors.

The evidence suggests that when Canadians are asked to deliberate on choices to create a "best policy mix" for children, a rough consensus emerges around two or three popular mixes. Canadians not only value children as a spending priority, but most are willing to consider a targeted tax increase for them. They view job insecurity as a systemic problem for families and, consequently, endorse action at many levels: by governments, employers, communities, and families. Universal parenting supports are favoured for families free of charge, while an accessible child care system receives strong support as long as governments recover part of the costs from families that can afford to pay. The more profound divisions arise in considering the best means to deliver income support to poor families. Moreover, there appears to be an important divide around the issue of income supplements for parents who might prefer time out of the labour force while their children are young.

The optimal strategy to developing social and economic policies that adequately represent the values and preferences of Canadians appears to be through a combination of public opinion polling and choice deliberation techniques. The polling captures the breadth of public attitudes on specific issues of immediate interest in a timely and representative fashion. Deliberative discussion permits a deeper probing of core values and the manner in which individuals arrive at their preferences and stated opinions. Hence a focus on broad citizen engagement may be a useful starting point for formulating a societal strategy for children in Canada, supplemented with ongoing public opinion polls on the issues of the day. Where these two strategies can be integrated, meaning where both are constructed and implemented in a complementary fashion with the same substantive focus, the learnings from each can be enriched considerably.

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