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Everybody Has to Help Put the Right Tools in Families' Hands

Ottawa – Coordinated action plan involving policy initiatives from employers, the voluntary sector and governments is needed to improve the life chances and well-being of Canadian children, according to the report *A Policy Blueprint for Canada's Children*, released today by the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN). Canadians celebrate the high ranking this country receives in the United Nations Human Development Index, but Canada slips down if the measure taken is the best place to be a child. CPRN has looked at how that can be changed, and is proposing ways to create the three conditions that are essential for children to flourish and prosper: adequate family income, effective parenting practices, and supportive environments in communities.

Jane Jenson, Ph.D., Director of the Family Network of CPRN, says, "To create these three conditions we must provide a combination of tax measures, income support, services, more flexible workplaces, and communities that deliver education, health, social and recreational opportunities in an integrated way. A step in any direction will succeed only if it is taken in conjunction with others."

A Policy Blueprint for Canada's Children includes short-term and long-term actions that are intended to make Canada a top ranked nation to grow up in by 2010:

- **Tax Reform**
 - Reinstatement of a universal tax credit for dependent children
- **Income Support**
 - Raise the amount of the Canada Child Tax Benefit so as to take children off social assistance
- **Services**
 - Invest in child care and preschool programs that enhance early childhood development, including supports for parenting
 - Integrate service delivery so there is a single window open to all families with children in the community.
- **Working Conditions**
 - Extend paid maternity and parental leave, and ensure access for all employed women
 - Increase pressure on employers to provide family-friendly work environments since it

is in their interest to do so.

CPRN president Judith Maxwell says "This is a big agenda, and it will take time. We must move ahead on all fronts – income, services, and community supports. Phasing the measures in makes it possible to proceed while contending with other important claims on the public purse.

Everyone has a role to play – families, neighbourhoods, communities, employers, public institutions and governments," Maxwell says. "From a child's point of view the world is not divided by lines of authority and jurisdiction, so we have to work together to give them a whole package."

For example, the report concludes that children will benefit more from child care that goes beyond baby sitting arrangements and promotes early childhood development. New federal-provincial arrangements will be needed to make funds available, then communities and employers will have to act on the opportunities to create the services.

Every policy actor must take a lead role in some part of the strategy if children and their parents are to receive the support that CPRN's research shows they need and want:

- **Federal Government**
 - improve maternity and parental leave benefits
 - lower taxes for families with dependent children
 - extend the Canada Child Tax Benefit
- **Provinces**
 - extend the right to parental leave
 - foster and oversee development of a more consistent network of services to meet the needs of children and families for child care, parenting supports, health services and developmental aids
 - develop community resource centres by supporting cross-sectoral partnerships that provide integrated, community based service delivery for children and families
- **Employers**
 - provide flexible work time options
 - supplement parental leave benefits
 - provide support for child care
 - develop leaves and other supports for family responsibilities
- **Voluntary Sector**
 - provide access to reliable education, health, social and recreational opportunities

Jenson says, "Our dialogues with Canadians on this subject leave a clear message that they are anxious to see sustained investments made in young children and families." The research shows that while some families are less poor, poverty is not being eliminated by existing policies and Canada still has a high percentage of poor children. Beyond basic needs, adequate income is needed to promote the social development of children by including them in community life, nurturing their talents and ensuring they can participate with their peers in healthy and stimulating activities. "Employers and the voluntary sector, as well as governments have a role here."

The-report outlines actions that can be taken in the next ten years to create programs and services that are rich and varied enough to meet the needs of the different kinds of families in Canada today. Maxwell says, "If this Blueprint is implemented, parents will be able to make choices

about health and work and family life that are in the best interests of their children. Today, they often have to choose second or third best choices."

The Blueprint requires joint action by persons and institutions *outside* the family, as well as support *for* the family so it can do its best. Governments can help build consensus and provide funding to help make things happen. It is employers, voluntary agencies and public institutions, as well as parents in their many roles – as parents, volunteers, board members, and so forth – who will also make the strategy effective in improving the outcomes achieved by Canada's young children.

Project leader Sharon Stroick, Ph.D., says, "The report answers the question 'What is the Best Policy Mix for Canada's Children?' by consolidating the knowledge in several studies and discussion papers examining policy practices, policy thinking, public values and the outcomes achieved by children in Canada and a number of comparable countries." It makes use of a wide range of research materials, including the findings of the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth.

A Policy Blueprint for Canada's Children is the major policy report resulting from a three year, multi-stage project. Stroick and Jenson are also preparing a detailed synthesis report that will compile all the research conducted for this project.

The papers already released are:

- *Comparative Family Policy: Eight Countries' Stories*
- *An International Comparison of Policies and Outcomes for Young Children*
- *Values and Preferences for the 'Best Policy Mix' for Canadian Children*
- *Building Better Outcomes for Canada's Children*

Five more will be released in the next few months:

- *Comparative Family Policy: Six Provincial Stories*
- *Outcomes for Young Children in Canada: Are there Provincial Differences?*
- *Tax Fairness for One-Earner and Two-Earner Families: An Examination of the Issues*
- *Moving Forward on Child and Family Policy: Governance and Accountability Issues*
- *What is the Best Policy Mix for Canada's Young Children?*

The primary source of funding was a group of Canadian foundations, with additional support from 3 provinces and 2 federal agencies.

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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.

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