The Well-Being of Canada's Children: Toward a Better Policy Mix

February 15, 2001 – Our thinking about the responsibilities of families and governments for the well-being of Canada's children is shifting.

A new publication from CPRN's Family Network documents and analyzes that shift as it is reflected in federal and provincial policies and programs.

Two Policy Paradigms: Family Responsibility and Investing in Children, by CPRN Researcher, Caroline Beauvais and Jane Jenson, Director of the Family Network, compares two policy perspectives, one, well-established by the 1960s, the other, more recent. Both approaches have strengths, but each leaves certain gaps. The paper proposes a better "policy mix" combining the strongest elements of each.

The analysis is based in part on inventories of current programs directed towards children, and families with dependent children. The report provides, for the first time anywhere, detailed and easy to compare information on a wide range of programs (including child care, income security and tax benefits) for all ten provinces and the federal government.

The authors call the older of the two policy perspectives the "Family Responsibility Paradigm". It defines parents as responsible for virtually all decisions about their children's well-being. It facilitates choice about *how* to balance work and family, but often leaves parents to cover the costs. Income transfers and other measures for income security are based on adults' relationship to the labour force.

Examples of programs within this paradigm are such things as maternity and parental leaves, tax breaks for families who choose parental childcare, tax exemptions to cover some of the costs of non-parental childcare, and social assistance rules that permit lone parents to care for their children.

"This paradigm dates from a time when families often had a single bread-winner and parental child care was seen as a desirable and realistic option for most Canadians," says Jenson. "Today, the context has changed."

Leaving things entirely to parents is no longer realistic. Most families need two incomes to provide for themselves and their children, making quality, affordable, non-parental childcare a must. What's more, many jobs don't pay a living wage to working parents, a fact reflected in the high number of poor children living in working families.

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Our understanding of poverty has also changed. We see how programs designed for another era have created a “welfare wall” between the poor and their participation in the economy. We also recognize the importance of early childhood initiatives in overcoming the effects of socio-economic disadvantage.

All these changes have given rise to a second policy paradigm the authors call “Investing in Children”. This paradigm’s goal is positive outcomes for children, and it envisions a responsibility for investing in children that is shared between parents and the community.

The National Child Benefit, created in 1998 by Ottawa and the provinces (except Quebec), is an example of the new approach. The NCB aims to reduce the depth of child poverty while ensuring that parents are always better off by working.

Jenson cautions, however, that the new paradigm does not of itself guarantee better outcomes for children. Its success is dependent on there being sufficient public and community funds devoted to services for families with children.

“Both paradigms co-exist today. Finding the best policy mix is a matter of keeping the best of each to build our model,” says Jenson. “We would maintain the emphasis on adults, the attention to gender equality, and facilitating a range of options for parents from the Family Responsibility Paradigm, for example, while incorporating the emphasis on high quality non-parental childcare and early childhood development from the Investing in Children Paradigm.”

According to CPRN’s President, Judith Maxwell, Jenson and Beauvais have made a valuable contribution to the continuing debate over family responsibilities, the role of the state, social policy and children’s needs.

“This paper provides useful tools for dissecting and analysing existing and future policies for families,” Maxwell says. “It is also a valuable reference for journalists, students and analysts because it documents the diverse ways in which the provinces are responding to the needs of families.”

You can access or download a copy of the document by clicking here.

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