Children Are the Sleeper at the FMM

September 8, 2000 – With the First Ministers' Meeting (FMM) in Ottawa early next week, both health care and children are on the agenda.

But there is a real risk that the continuing quarrel over funding and responsibility for health care will bump progress on new supports for Canadian families with children. The following commentary by CPRN's President, Judith Maxwell, and the Director of CPRN's Family Network, Jane Jenson, explains why this would be a very unfortunate thing.

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By Jane Jenson and Judith Maxwell

Health care is the headline about the First Ministers' Meeting next week. Children are the sleeper.

There is no question that health care needs an infusion of money to fill gaps, promote innovation and make the system more cost-effective. In doing so, let's not lose sight of two things, however. By and large, the system works, despite needing improvement. Second, a health care system exists. No one can say the same of a "system" to support families with children in this country.

Canada is one of the few OECD countries that does not assure families sufficient income, services, and community supports to give their children a good start in life. Yet, research by everyone from specialists in brain development to economists, psychologists, statisticians and many others working with Canada's own National Longitudinal Study on Children and Youth (NLSCY) confirms that the three enabling conditions for healthy child development are adequate income, effective parenting, and supportive communities.

We know the enormous costs of failing to give children a proper start in life, in terms of poor health, school failure, delinquency, low self-esteem, and so on. We already pay these costs, in child welfare, social services and correctional services to "fix problems."

Cost-benefit calculation must also include the costs to the health system and to civic engagement when children have little access to organized recreation, because parents cannot afford the user fees or the time to volunteer for coaching. Limited physical activity and community involvement in childhood and adolescence are worrying for the future.

We should also count the heavy toll for parents' health, productivity and civic engagement of "time crunch" and high stress levels, as they struggle to juggle work and family.

It is time to recognize that any family, even with a stay-at-home mother or high income, at some time needs outside support. No family can substitute for a healthy and safe community.

And when families need help, they need it quickly. It may be advice in handling temper tantrums or it may be affordable sports, music or other recreation programmes. It may be child care that will provide extra intellectual and social learning.

Yet many families have nowhere to go. Here are a few of the inconsistencies in Canada's policy patchwork:

Two-thirds of Canadian children under 12 have mothers in the labour force, but there are regulated child care spaces for less than 10 percent of them. The rest stay with untrained babysitters, older siblings or have a latchkey. Only a quarter of these preschool children have access to affordable, regulated and developmentally sound day care. Yet the early years are the most important learning experiences of their lives.

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Mothers who do choose to stay home have no assurance of access to parent resource centres, play schools, appropriate recreation facilities, or well-baby clinics where they can learn about meeting their children's needs.

Parents with children with mental or physical disabilities have even more trouble finding services appropriate for their child.

Beginning in January 2001, parents eligible for Employment Insurance can take a full year of paid parental leave. This important gain for some parents does not help the other half of new mothers who are not eligible for any paid leave (because they have not worked enough hours to qualify, they are self-employed, and so on.)

Federal, provincial and territorial social service ministers, along with five Aboriginal groups, have been working on a National Children's Agenda for several years. Their goal is to design a system to support families and children.

They started with the National Child Benefit (NCB) in 1998. For its share of the NCB, Ottawa pays the Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB), targeted to low-income families, but also available at reduced rates to middle-income earners. Happily, federal budgets have since announced increases in the amount of the CCTB. However, more is needed before it will lift working families with children out of poverty.

As part of the NCB, each provincial and territorial government (except Quebec) committed itself to invest in income support (several have their own child benefits) or services. Annual reports mandated by the NCB reveal that amounts invested are modest and there is a huge variety in where governments decided to put their dollars.

Provincial and territorial First Ministers, as recently as their Annual Conference in Winnipeg last month, affirmed a set of common goals, to ensure all Canadian children will be:

- Healthy – physically and emotionally
- Safe and secure
- Successful at learning
- Socially engaged and responsible.

The agenda for the coming First Ministers' Meeting includes a proposal to invest in the early childhood services that would follow through on these goals. Ottawa is expected to offer a block of funds to help provinces establish a more comprehensive set of services. The provinces have agreed to dedicate the new money and their own resources to three priority areas: prenatal and postnatal programs, resource centres for parents, and services such as day care.

At this stage, because their current services differ so much, it makes sense for each government to identify its priorities.

But governments cannot lose sight of the long-run goal. That is to reach a minimum set of assured services for all Canadian families with children, corresponding to their need for adequate income, effective parenting, and supportive communities.

Public opinion polls show that "investing in children" is a high priority for Canadians. It would be a tragedy if action at the FMM were derailed by disputes over health spending, constitutional powers, or any of the standard flash points of intergovernmental conflict.

It may take five years or more to build the whole system. We did it once before, for health care. Now it's time for families and children.

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