Investing in all children to help them thrive; helping all families meet their needs

February 9, 2000 – Implementation of the children's agenda set out in the federal Speech from the Throne should focus on all children, not only on low-income or "at-risk" children, according to a comprehensive new report by the Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc. *What Is the Best Policy Mix for Canada's Young Children?* highlights a variety of investments Canadians will have to make over time to provide adequate supports and services if families are to meet the needs of their children.

CPRN President Judith Maxwell says, "The federal government is not the only important actor in helping families, but this federal budget should play a significant leadership role in three areas:

- extending rights to maternity and parental leave
- working with the provinces to build a more comprehensive and accessible network of services and supports for healthy child development, and
- financing the federal share of key programs that support all children, while strengthening programs directed primarily to low-income children, such as the Canada Child Tax Benefit and its supplements."

CPRN's Family Network Director Jane Jenson, co-author of the report, adds, "Compensating all parents for some of the costs considered necessary to satisfy the essential needs of a child is one way to recognize the contribution parents make to society as a whole. While parents always have responsibility for decisions about how to raise their children, all families require services and supports from governments and in their communities that can help them meet the needs of their children."

In support of all children, the study recommends re-introducing a universal credit for all taxpayers with dependent children, in order to make a real contribution to the costs of raising children. In 1993, the federal government's Family Allowances were eliminated and rolled together with refundable and nonrefundable tax credits to form the single, income-tested Child Tax Benefit. As governments adopted the approach of targeting benefits to parents at the lowest end of the income scale, "we stopped recognizing the contribution that all parents make to Canada by raising their children well," says Jenson.

Writing with Family Network Manager Sharon M. Stroick, Jenson notes that the Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB) is a refundable tax credit focussed to a considerable extent on low-income families with children. The CCTB will only be an effective anti-poverty measure if the basic benefit and the low-income supplement are significantly increased to meet its goal of removing all children from social assistance.

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Stroick and Jenson demonstrate, however, that more than income support is required if all of Canada's children are to be given the opportunities they need to thrive in the 21st century. The other fundamental conditions are effective parenting and supportive community environments. As Stroick says, "These enabling conditions come together in the need to change the handling of maternity and parental benefits under Employment Insurance. Canada is near the bottom of the list in helping parents with the challenge of balancing family and work life."

The CPRN Family Network study proposes re-assigning enough money into a separate stream within the Employment Insurance fund to allow for increased eligibility, longer leaves, and higher benefit levels. The study also calls for investment in developmental child care and preschool education for all children, and sufficient support for child care so that parents can find the services they require.
The authors note that employers have a major role to play in supporting families by enhancing parental and family leave programs and increasing flexibility for employees to negotiate working hours and schedules. Indeed, the study shows that employers gain a great deal from doing so.

"An enormous range of programs and services that support children and families are delivered by diverse government ministries and departments, the private sector and voluntary agencies," says Jenson. "All these actors must come to terms with the need for a societal strategy for children, and begin to take up their share of the challenge."

CPRN's Family Network first published its recommendations in *A Policy Blueprint for Canada's Children* in October 1999. The ideas were greeted with enthusiasm by policy advisors, governments, corporate leaders and community activists across Canada. This final report provides a synthesis of the entire research program, covering the work commissioned for the project as well as other relevant research completed in recent years. The other papers already released by CPRN's Family Network for this project 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
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
A Policy Blueprint for Canada's Children

The primary source of funding for the project was a group of Canadian foundations, with additional support from three provinces and two federal agencies.

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