



Research and Policy Highlights

Early Learning and Child Care Research Unit

August 2006

When Walking Hasn't Worked, It's Time to Run: *Evidence-based and Community-driven Advice on Child Care*

The C.D. Howe Institute recently published a report that does a disservice to child development research, to children and families across Canada and, potentially, to the public interest overall. As public policy advice goes, this report fails the litmus test: it's not evidence-based, nor does it address the realities of Canadian families and communities today.

For starters, the report "Let's Walk before We Run: Cautionary Advice on Childcare" ignores nearly an entire generation of robust and consistent findings that demonstrate the positive effects of quality child care for all young children, irrespective of family income or other vulnerability factors. Next, this report makes the dangerous and unfounded assertion that it is only children from economically disadvantaged home environments who are at risk for lack of school readiness and subsequent school failure and therefore only these children are in need of quality child care programs. The Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) is involved in an ongoing study of school readiness in British Columbia which shows that, overall, 24% of ALL children in BC are at risk for school failure. Even higher percentages of vulnerability exist in some middle and upper middle class neighborhoods.

School failure knows no economic boundaries and the benefits of high quality, preschool-aged child care programs know no economic limits.

Adding insult to injury, the report concludes by recommending limited public investment in child care only for "at risk" families. But where is the evidence in support of this public policy advice? For over twenty years, most of Canada has provided limited public funding for child care and tried to target fee subsidies to 'those who need it most'. Yet, as the report authors themselves acknowledge "targeting is hard to do well" (p.12). And targeted fee subsidies don't cover the full cost of child care, so under-resourced programs can't maintain both quality and affordability. As a result, Canada's "targeted approach" fails to reach even the "targeted" population the C.D. Howe report expresses concern about.

Finally, the authors of this report completely sidestep the fundamental problem: the majority of families in Canada - "at-risk" or not - do not have access to high quality child care services. Canada's miserly public support for child care means that we only have enough regulated spaces for about 15% of children under 6 (outside of Quebec), in spite of our historically high labour force participation rates among mothers of young children.

When it comes to child care and support for families, Canada's historic walk down the targeted path hasn't worked. It's time we started running to catch up to other developed countries like Sweden and France which have long benefited from universal quality child care programs.

One example of Canada's lagging international status is evident from HELP's research on the child benefit package, which estimates the monthly value of public policies and funds that help (some) parents with the costs of raising children. A 2004 international comparison of this measure ranks Canada 14th out of 16 developed countries. The average value of our child benefit package was slightly lower than the US, and less than half the value available to families in the UK. Worse still, our research confirms that when Canadian families pay full fees for regulated child care, their child benefit package generally disappears and they incur a substantial financial penalty.

While both the previous federal government's increased child care funding and the new federal government's universal family allowance payments are positive steps on Canada's path to catching up with other countries, there's a rub – the family allowance is replacing the child care funds, when Canada needs both.

Unlike our European counterparts, some people in Canada – including our current federal government – insist on seeing quality child care programs as being the opposite of care by parents or relatives at home. All children are reared at home by their families. Quality child care programs serve as family support programs that give children opportunities to grow, learn and play and that give parents information, support and social networking with other parents in their neighborhoods and communities.

The research support for public investment in quality child care also highlights benefits in areas such as population health, women's equality, work-life balance, community-building and children's rights. And the economic benefits are heralded by world-class economists including David Dodge, Governor of the Bank of Canada and Nobel Prize winner James Heckman. Yet the issue that may be forcing Canada's hand is our skilled labour shortage. Employers need the skills that both mothers and fathers have to offer and families need work/life balance; access to quality child care is essential to both.

At HELP, our work with community organizations and roundtables across BC underscores the fact that collaboration from all stakeholders – families, communities, business, research and government – is key to supporting all families and all children's healthy development.

Nonetheless, public policy advice that's grounded in evidence and today's reality confirms that federal and provincial governments need to work together to invest more public funds in nurturing neighbourhoods everywhere. With adequate resources, neighbourhood-based hubs can support all families by providing high quality, affordable child care in licensed family homes and centres, along with parenting and literacy programs and early intervention services.

That's why the one-size-fits-all approach recommended in the CD Howe report won't work. Neither the evidence nor the community recommends government intervention just to drop "At Risk Child Care Centres" into low income neighbourhoods. A targeted approach to public investment in child care has been a flawed public policy strategy in Canada, and it is seriously out of step with the demonstrated successes of universal approaches around the world. This is one piece of research whose "Cautionary Advice" is best left on the shelf.

To learn more about HELP and the Early Learning and Child Care Research Unit, and the research, policy analysis, and work in communities that supports this commentary, please visit our web site at www.earlylearning.ubc.ca