

**A Parent Perspective
on Early Childhood Education & Care in Canada**

**To: Clerk of the Standing Committee on Finance
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Parents for Child Care – “Kids are Everybody’s Future”

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Parents for Child Care – Who are we?

We are parents and grandparents. We work in offices and at home. We are employers and employees – business people and professionals. We are taxpayers. We believe in a childcare system that provides **all** Canadian children with access to affordable high quality child care spaces.

Parents for Child Care believes all levels of government must take action ***now*** to foster financial stability in the child care sector in order to:

- 1) eliminate current waiting lists and the critical shortage of quality child care spaces; and
- 2) keep up with increasing demand for quality child care spaces; and

We also believe it is time for public policy in Canada to catch up with the increasing demand for quality child care and a business community that increasingly recognizes the importance of family, child rearing and early childhood education. Government must take a leadership role in making child care a public policy priority.

What is business doing?

Leading Canadian businesses provide families with flexible work arrangements that accommodate their employees’ child rearing responsibilities and allow them to maintain an income to support their families. Businesses provide child care referral services to assist their employees in searching for and identifying quality child care. Some provide corporate donations to fund non-profit after school child care programs. [RBC Financial Group – After School Grant Programs] Others go even further and provide on site child care for their employees. [IBM \$50million US world wide for on site child care - \$5 million US allocated for Canada] Trade organizations have gone on record as supporting the need for a comprehensive child care system for all families in BC. [Vancouver Board of Trade 1999] Clearly business sees child care as a competitive advantage.

But all the flex time and job share arrangements and child care referral services are useless if parents cannot find or afford a high quality child care arrangement for their child. If parents are forced to choose between their jobs or careers and a poor child care arrangement for their children, those that can afford to, will leave the work force; those that can’t afford to leave their jobs, will be forced to make, sometimes unimaginable, child care choices. All of businesses efforts to keep their qualified employees working are for naught. The issue of employee retention will become increasingly critical for business as the work force ages and we face increasing labour shortages predicted by the Conference Board of Canada.

A Matter of Equality

A poor child care delivery system takes skilled workers out of the work force. Take a look at one professional group. In 1993, the National Canadian Bar Association in their Survey “Touchstones for Change” on Issues that Impact Women Lawyers found that 30% of BC women lawyers leaving the profession cited childrearing as the reason why. 93% of BC’s women lawyers went to part time practice to accommodate child rearing. While many of these lawyers may have made these choices willingly – how many made them because they could not find or afford quality childcare? [To add more salt to the wound women lawyers who are partners in law firms do not get paid maternity leave or get any tax write off for child care costs as a business expense. They will get, in certain circumstances, a usually minimal tax credit for any child care costs, assuming they can find a quality child care option.]

The most recent OECD report on Child Care notes that countries where child care is readily available and affordable have a much higher female participation rate in the work force. The Vancouver Board of Trade report notes the critical importance of such high rates of participation for our economy.

Stability of Child Care Spaces

Why are there not enough quality child care spaces to meet demand?

The private marketplace alone cannot meet families’ needs for high quality child care. If it could there would not be waiting lists at most of Vancouver’s child care centres recognized by parents as leaders in providing quality care and education (UBC Child care – 800 plus on waiting list / Vancouver Society of Children’s Centres (VSOCC) – 1100 plus on the waiting list).

There is only 1 licensed child care space available for every 9 BC children who need it.

VSOCC, like UBC, provides quality care to children from all socio economic backgrounds. VSOCC cannot provide that care without a strategic partnership between municipal governments, business (specifically the development community), provincial and federal government, parents and charitable benefactors. Partnership models like these recognize that government support is critical to providing financial sustainability for these centres. Why? Because it allows these centres to provide affordable early childhood education and care for children of a variety of economic backgrounds.

There are 2 problems with this fragile partnership:

- 1) It only provides child care barely affordable for some families, and completely out of reach for others [full time monthly fees \$900 for Infant/Toddler - \$620 for 3 to 5]; and
- 2) It cannot keep up with the demand for spaces because of a lack of commitment for funding from government to support these centres year after year.

Centres are left with no option but to increase parent fees to make up the financial deficit. The problem is that if centres increase fees they price themselves out of the market. Parents who can no longer afford the increased fees pull their children out of care and new parents don't enrol their children thus leaving spaces empty. VSOCC cannot afford to meet its financial obligations unless every space is full every month. Then the financial sustainability of the organization as a whole is put at risk. For example, take the case of Granny Y's, a YWCA child care centre that closed its doors in 1999, after the YWCA had poured over one million dollars into the centre to keep it running. The result? At present this fragile partnership not only fails to create enough child care spaces to meet demand, but the current spaces in existence are continually at risk of disappearing. For example BC has had a plethora of recent closures of child care centres (Kwantlen College, Kids At General, Terrace College to name a few) resulting from the Provincial Core Review and funding cuts to education and health funding.

This means that working parents are continually at risk of losing their jobs because their child care space may disappear at any moment. With 70% of both parents of children under 6 in the workforce, that is a lot of jobs at risk, a lot of tax dollars and income benefiting the Canadian economy at risk. This does not even account for the cost to business to replace and train workers leaving the economy because their employees cannot find quality child care. Some businesses aren't waiting for government action – like IBM, a company setting up its own on-site child care for its employees. But what about small businesses who can't afford to set up their own on-site child care as a solution and for whom retraining is more costly and difficult than it is for large companies? As Canada's businesses increasingly begin to feel the shortage of skilled labour – it doesn't make economic sense to maintain a system of child care that encourages skilled workers to leave the workforce for 5 years.

Quite simply - the system of child care delivery in this country is unfair, inequitable – and it's just bad business.

Parent Stories

Parents for Child Care has gathered child care stories from the "Front Lines". Here are some illustrative examples of what all of the statistics you have heard today may not convey:

- waiting list for one Aboriginal Child Care Centre is 2 years – few children get in before kindergarten
- one parent writes of how her child of 30 months has been through no less than 5 different child care providers – why? 2 moved away, 2 went back to school and one became ill
- what was offered to one parent who used a private unlicensed child care referral service – a babysitter with a one bedroom apartment with no toys a TV and a VCR
- one parent commutes 4 hours a day from Kitsilano to Coquitlam and back twice at rush hour to keep her child in a high quality child care environment

- one parent – a woman lawyer running her own firm in downtown Vancouver faced with only option for her kindergarten age daughter for child care was to enrol her daughter in kindergarten in her parents home town of Abbotsford (a 2 hour drive from Vancouver) so her 70 plus year old parents could watch her daughter when she was suddenly notified that there would be no after school care at her daughter's North Vancouver school – fortunately a week before school started a spot came up in her North Vancouver neighbourhood so she didn't have to take this last resort

The stress these families go through is unimaginable.

Parents & Caregivers – the Critical Partnership

These are but a few stories that have come in from parents around BC. But here is our last story and perhaps the most important story. Its about parents of a very young child at a child care centre in Vancouver and their child's caregivers. Thanks to the caregiver's training she spotted early signs of autism in the child's behaviour. The parents were able to get appropriate treatment and care for their child at an early stage – critical for the treatment of autism. The parents had no inkling that their child's behaviour and development showed such signs and without their caregivers intervention their child would have gone undiagnosed until much later.

Parents and child care professionals work together in a partnership to meet a child's early development and educational needs. In this day and age where more and more families are living far away from extended families, young parents are learning critical parenting skills from early childhood education professionals. This is another significant benefit of quality child care. Unfortunately it is a benefit available only to those few who find quality care and win the child care lottery.

The Research is in (or Why Working and Stay at Home Parents want access to Quality Child Care)

There is a plethora of information regarding the impact of child care on children's development, the well being of the family and on society as a whole. The following a few interesting facts pulled from The Vancouver Board of Trade Task Force on Early Child Development and Child Care "Investing In Our Children Is Good Public Policy" July, 1999.

- Most of the critical periods for brain development are over or waning by age six.
- Brain development linked to vision, emotional control, language and symbol cognition is complete by age three.
- Brain development depends on good early attachments and stimulation.
- Ability to fix social and developmental problems significantly reduces after age six.
- Average current government investment in children aged 0-6 is \$2,500 per year.

- Average current government investment in children aged 6-12 is \$7,500 per year.
- 2 to 1 economic payback for investment in children aged 0-6 years.
- Poor early childhood experiences impact long-term physical and mental health.
- 7 to 1 economic payback for at-risk children.
- Perry Preschool Project had an 11 per cent Return on Investment (ROI) over the years from 1963-1993. Stock Market ROI was 6.8 per cent over the same thirty-year period.
- Brain development depends on genes and experiences.
- Early experiences have a decisive impact on brain architecture and on the nature and extent of adult capacities.
- Early interactions don't just create context—they directly affect the way the brain is "wired."
- Brain development is non-linear and there are prime times for acquiring different kinds of knowledge and skills.
- By age three our brain is twice as active as an adult's and activity levels drop during adolescence.
- 37 per cent of two-parent working families earn less than \$40,000 year.
- Family real take home pay has declined over the past five years.
- 16 per cent of children live with single parents.
- 54 per cent of single parents work.
- 80 per cent of female-led single-parent families live in poverty.
- 90 per cent of children with problems live in families who are not poor.
- 71 per cent of mothers with children age six and under are in the workplace.
- 73 per cent of two-parent families with children age six and under have both parents working.
- 10.5 per cent of two-parent families live in poverty—without two incomes; this would be 21.4 per cent.
- 1.4 million children under age six and 1.9 million children aged 6-12 with working parents need child care.
- Only 8.4 per cent of children have access to regulated child care spaces.
- 47.6 per cent of families with one or more children earn less than \$50,000 per year.
- Cost of a universal child care system \$5.3 billion per annum.
- Benefits based on research is \$10.5 billion annually.
- Net Savings of a child care system \$5.2 billion per annum.
- Largest private poll on family life in Canada – Angus Reid 1999 – 78% of the Canadian population support inexpensive quality child care who **ALL** who want it (65% are willing to pay more taxes for this)

What Government Must Do

Our query to government – Why do we accept collective responsibility for our children's well being and education once they turn 5 by providing them with public education? Why then do we abandon them before then at a time in their lives where early years academic research indicates that these years are critical for children's development?

Parents for Child Care would like government to plan their budget strategies like families do. The child care bill gets paid before many other items in the household. One Parents For Child Care member estimates that his family will be \$25,000 deeper in debt when his child care bill is paid. That is more than the student loan debt accumulated by most university students. The same parent is still paying off student loans too! Children are like RRSP's, to maximize our investment we must invest early. Parents cannot do it alone and they are not asking government to do it all for them either. They are willing to pay fees. What parents want is for government to provide the stability needed for quality child care centres modeled on strategic partnerships – with contribution from all stakeholders in the community that benefit from quality child care – business – municipal, provincial and federal governments, and families. The goal being the elimination of waiting lists and access to quality child care for all families and children.

Summary

In summary, Canada's current approach to child care simply defies common sense. That our children should fall victim to partisan politics is unacceptable; especially in light of the growing body of research demonstrating the incredible benefit of early childhood education and care. Child care keeps Canada working. We hope that Canada can demonstrate the visionary leadership to provide all of our future taxpayers and leading citizens with the best possible start in life.

Parents for Child Care looks forward to the opportunity to discuss Child Care in further depth with the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance.

Thank you,

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