

Parents for Child Care – “Kids are Everybody’s Future”

A Parent Perspective on Canadian Child Care - October 23, 2001 – Vancouver BC

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.

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 service to assist their employees in searching for and identifying quality child care. Some provide corporate donations on an annual basis to fund non – profit after school child care 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 I just described 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.

What is Government is not Doing?

Why are there not enough quality child care spaces to meet demand? Quite simply - government has dropped the ball. Here are the options for parents when looking for child care:

Licensed high quality child care spaces in centres with highly trained staff and little staff turnover – waiting lists approaching 1000 and growing

Babysitting

Relatives – usually aging grandparents

Nanny care – either prohibitively expensive at \$2000 a month for a well trained caregiver or \$800 a month for a housekeeper who will look after your child

No care at all – children are left at home alone or to be cared for by an older sibling

Pre-schools that offer programming 2 hours a day every other day from 9 to 11am.

Each of these options can provide excellent care. However, parents know that their the chances of getting excellent care for their children increase when highly trained and well paid child care workers nurture their children in a safe environment that must meet licensing standards designed to enhance child care quality. As a result parents increasingly prefer a licensed childcare environment. However, the chances of getting such care, are, as one Vancouver Sun Columnist recently noted, about as good as winning the lottery. Lengthy waiting lists at centres recognized for providing quality care in Vancouver demonstrate this. [The popular Non–Profit Vancouver Society of Child Care Centres – 940]

In addition to providing quality care to children from all socio economic backgrounds, child care costs at VSOCC are barely affordable for most families, and for those low income families who receive a subsidy. [monthly fees \$875 for Infant/Toddler - \$575 for 3 to 5] The only way VSOCC can afford to charge the fees it does is through tax dollar funded grants, operating and capital funds and low wage redress programs that keep the cost of child care affordable. These commitments, at present, come from the municipal and provincial governments. Some federal dollars are available for child care too but with no accountability as to how these funds are spent by the province – there is too great a chance that, like Ontario, none of those federal dollars will be spent on creating or maintaining child care space availability. In BC right now all 73,000 licensed child care spaces are risk of disappearing as the provincial government performs a core review of government service and delivery. Strangely enough – child care and

early child hood education – did not merit the protection of a funding freeze like the public education system did. Parents are strongly opposed to the federal government putting child care dollars at risk by allowing provinces complete discretion to use this money for something that will not advance the Children’s Agenda and maintain and increase quality child care spaces for all BC kids. The future for parents at child care centers like VSOCC – an increase in fees for infant toddler care from \$875 a month to over \$1300 a month – clearly unaffordable for the average Canadian family of 4 earning an income of \$40,000 a year. Keep in mind that many parents with young children are still paying off student loans and have no room in their family budgets for such an increase.

Another point of frustration for parents - as it stands right now there are just under 1000, many working parents, on the VSOCC childcare waiting list wondering why their hard earned tax dollars buy them nothing more than a spot on a waiting list for their child - a waiting list spot that will likely never turn into a child care space.

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

Parents for Child Care is currently running a campaign to gather 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 Center 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 – 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 since she was suddenly notified that there would be no after school care at her daughter’s North Vancouver school – 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 parents 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 my last story and the most important story. Its about the first time parents of a very young child at a child care center 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 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.

What Government Must Do

My query to government – we accept collective responsibility for our children's well being and education once they turn 5 by providing them with public education? Why 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?

It simply defies common sense. Parents and taxpayers demand leadership from the federal government and urge you to give early childhood education and care the priority it deserves on the public policy agenda.

Thank you.

Parents for Child Care