

# The Only Answer for Child Care

By Jane Beach

*Cet article discute la nécessité de la mise en place d'un système de garde d'enfants au Canada. Il nous donne un aperçu des arrangements budgétaires et juridiques actuels à cet effet et de leurs limites. Il explique pourquoi des solutions de type individuel, comme par exemple les garderies sur les lieux de travail, ne résolvent pas le problème, et pourquoi la seule solution se trouve dans une politique publique.*

During the past twenty years, there have been significant changes to the structure and function of Canadian families. Women have been entering and staying in the paid labour force in unprecedented numbers. No longer is the "traditional" family, represented by one male wage earner and a full-time stay-at-home spouse, the norm. In 1961, sixty-five percent of Canadian families fit this mould; by 1981 it had been reduced to sixteen percent. During the same period, the percentage of dual-income families had grown from fourteen to forty-nine percent, and lone-parent families from six to eleven percent (Cooke, K. 1986).

One of the most dramatic changes in labour force participation rates has been in the increase of mothers with young children. From 1976 to 1990, the percentage of women with children under the age of three grew from 31.7 to 63 (Statistics Canada).

Central to the discussion of women's ability to participate more fully in the workplace is access to high quality, affordable child care. Since the early seventies, women's groups, labour groups, professional organizations and child care advocates have been calling for a comprehensive system of affordable, high quality child care. Numerous royal commissions, studies and government reports have also recommended the implementation of such a system for all Canadian families.

In 1979, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which was ratified by Canada in 1981 stated that countries should "... encourage the provision of the necessary supporting social services to enable parents to combine family obligations with work responsibilities and participation in public life, in particular through promoting the establishment and development of a network of childcare facilities."

In 1984, The Royal Commission on Equality in Employment noted that "For women who are mothers, a major barrier to equality in the workplace is the absence of affordable childcare of adequate quality."

The 1986 Report of the Task Force on Child Care recommended that "... the federal, provincial and territorial governments jointly develop complementary systems of child care and parental leave that are as comprehensive, accessible and competent as our systems of health care and education.

As recently as December 1991, in its report: *Canada's Children: Investing in Our Future*, the Report of the Standing Committee on Health and Welfare, Social Affairs, Seniors and the Status of Women, suggested that "The Federal, Provincial and Territorial Governments establish a national child care system that is (a) universally accessible, regardless of income level, region or work status; (b) comprehensive, providing a range of child care options to recognize the different needs of families, children and communities; and (c) high quality, meeting the standards advocated by child development experts."

In 1992, Canada still does not have a system of child care; indeed it falls behind most countries in the industrialized western world in its provision of child care services and public policies that help families balance their work and family responsibilities. Child care in Canada is

largely a series of patchwork services, established in an ad hoc manner by non-profit organizations, parent groups, commercial operators, employers, and to a very limited degree, local municipalities. This has resulted in a fragmented delivery system, which is unaffordable and unavailable to the majority of working families.

One solution to the child care crisis that has been suggested by various levels of governments and some businesses and employee groups is work-related, or employer sponsored child care. On the surface, this may seem like a logical response by business to the needs of its workforce. However, on closer examination, it is evident that while work-related child care has a place in a comprehensive child care system, it cannot possibly provide equitable access to childcare to all who need it, and is no substitute for public policy.

Before examining the limitations of work-related child care, it is important to look at the overall need and demand for child care, the provision and funding of services, and the problems with the current situation. "In Canada today, the term child care is commonly used to include a range of care arrangements and education for children and education for children under the age of 12 outside their immediate and extended family and regular schooling" (Friendly, 1991).

Provincial and territorial governments have jurisdictional authority for child care. They are responsible for setting licensing standards and operational regulations, and for controlling the supply of and funding to these programs. Regulated child care programs include full and part-day programs in day care centres and nursery schools, supervised home-based programs, and before and after school programs for school aged children.

While standards vary from province to province, most include requirements for staff training, physical space, group size,

child/staff ratios and, in some instances, developmentally appropriate programming.

Some provinces provide capital and start-up grants, most provide some type of operating or maintenance grants, and all provide some form of fee subsidies for low income families. Unlike education or health care, child care is not a mandatory service to which families have a right. It is also not a service that receives adequate base funding to make it affordable to most families. Parent fees still provide the bulk of revenues on which programs must operate. Monthly fees for an infant space in Toronto, Ottawa or Vancouver are now topping the \$1,000 mark. The true cost of care is substantially higher. Staff and caregivers have traditionally subsidized the cost of regulated child care through their low wages. As pay equity in the broader public sector begins to be discussed, the need for adequate public funding for child care becomes essential.

The federal government has not introduced national child care legislation or policies that would ensure reasonable access to regulated child care. It has largely limited its involvement in child care to a number of funding mechanisms, the two main ones being the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) and the Income Tax Act. The Child Care Expense Deduction allows parents to deduct a portion of the cost of child care from their taxable income. This measure is primarily of benefit to higher income earners, and is available only to those who can produce receipts for their child care expenses. Many parents who use unregulated care are unable to produce these receipts as their providers do not claim this income.

The Canada Assistance Plan was introduced in 1966 to provide funding for social welfare programs. The federal government shares with the provinces the cost of child care for families deemed to be "in need." Each province negotiates with the federal government as to how fees will be determined and what type of child care will be cost-shared. CAP's eligibility guidelines include moderate as well as low income families, but no province uses the allowable maximums.

Until 1990, CAP was an open-ended program, driven by the provinces' expenditures eligible for cost sharing: whatever the province spent, the federal govern-

ment would cost-share on a 50-50 basis. In 1990, the federal government placed limits on annual increases in CAP cost-sharing to the three "have" provinces — Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta. CAP also pays for cost-shared welfare programs, which are mandatory and have doubled in cost in some parts of the country. In Ontario, the result of "capping" CAP means that the federal government does not share the cost of child care subsidies at all.

In 1990, there were approximately 298,085 licensed child care spaces for the estimated 2,985,547 children under the age of 13 whose parents were in the labour force (Health and Welfare Canada). In all parts of the country, the majority of children are still cared for in unregulated settings which fall completely outside the authority of government. This includes care by relatives, babysitters and nannies, and care takes place in the child's own home, the home of another child, or in the home of the provider. There are no standards for this type of care, and the quality of care is often questionable.

Child care is important for a number of reasons. It allows women to work. Women still bear the primary responsibility for children, whether or not they are in the paid labour force; child care is a major vehicle for enabling them to participate. As the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment states "Childcare is the ramp that provides equal access to the workforce for mothers." Access to child care also helps keep lone parent families less dependent on social assistance.

A number of research studies show that high quality child care programs promote healthy child development for all children, regardless of their parents' socio-economic or employment status. Poor quality programs, however, can have detrimental effects on children which may last for years.

Employers benefit from good child care programs when employees have confidence in the type of arrangement their children are in. Absenteeism, turnover and tardiness can all be reduced when parents do not have to deal with the stress of all too often having to place their children in unsatisfactory situations, which often have to be changed at an alarming frequent rate.

Society as a whole can also benefit

from child care, by helping ensure that parents are able to stay employed after they have children, by reducing dependency on social assistance, and by reducing the long term consequences of poor quality child care on children and helping build a healthy future workforce.

It is evident that all forms of child care are not equal. What exactly do we mean by high quality child care? High quality child care takes into account the needs of both children and parents.

There is a considerable body of research which has identified a number of predictors of quality child care that supports healthy child development. The key components include staff training, staff wages and working conditions, child/staff ratios, limits on group sizes which vary according to the children's ages, developmentally appropriate curriculum, physical environment, parental involvement and non-profit status (Cooke, 1986; Lero and Kyle, 1986; Phillips and Howes, 1986; Doherty, 1991).

In order to meet the needs of parents, programs should also: be affordable, available and conveniently located, either near a parent's place of work or study, or a residential community; provide a range of flexible service which are available on the days and times they are needed, in a variety of settings; provide integrated services for all children regardless of socio-economic situation or ability; be responsive to local community and cultural needs; and have a non-profit orientation.

In the absence of national child care policy and availability of services, some employers have started to address the child care needs of their employees in a concrete way, by assisting with the establishment of child care programs.

The term work-related child care is somewhat of a misnomer. While a few children are referred to child care programs by social agencies for prevention purposes, the vast majority need child care so that their parents can work or attend school. Work-related child care, however, has come to mean: "a program established by and/or having some ongoing involvement with a sponsoring employer or employee group for the purpose of the child care needs of parents in the employ of the sponsor" (Status of Women Canada, 1986, p.65).

In 1964, Riverdale Hospital, a chronic care facility in Toronto, became the first employer in Canada to establish a child care centre specifically for its employees. By 1976, 10 work-related centres were in existence, 79 by 1984, and approximately 195 by the end of 1991 (Beach, Rothman, 1986; Beach, Friendly, in preparation).

The study of work-related child care in Canada currently underway shows that the vast majority of these programs serve employees in the public sector, largely in health care facilities and government buildings. Fewer than 35 centres have been identified that were started by private sector corporations. Work-related child care spaces have grown at the same rate as other types of child care, and still represent a very small percentage of the total child care spaces. There are now approximately 7800 spaces, which is 2.6 percent of the total number of licensed child care spaces. This represents about the same proportion of care as it did in 1984, when it was 2.5 percent.

Most work-related child care centres are set up as separate, non-profit corporations and face many of the same problems as community based programs. Most employers limit their support to provision of space and little or no occupancy costs. This does little to lower the cost of care, as many community based non-profit programs also receive this benefit. Staff salaries still represent about 85 percent of centres' total operating budgets, which is comparable to other non-profit programs.

Early indications from this recent study suggest that a typical work-related child care centre serves an average of forty children, is open regular day-time hours and has fees comparable to others in the surrounding community. A significantly larger proportion on work-related child care centres serve infants than do other, community based centres.

Even though work-related child care programs add desperately needed spaces to the scanty supply, they can create situations of inequity within a workplace and between types of employers. In general, they can only provide a relatively small number of spaces compared to the needs of the workforce. Some programs have priorities for certain categories of employees. The programs are still unaffordable to many families, and subsi-

dies may be limited. Very few employees in small companies, or those who are self-employed would ever have access to a work-related child care centre. Many families with older preschoolers or school-age children prefer care in their neighbourhood. Some parents have to commute a considerable distance, making it impractical to bring a small child into work with them. Regardless of any benefits or disadvantages associated with work-related child care, it is a discretionary, individual response to a societal problem, and is not public policy.

In April, 1991, a public opinion poll on child care conducted for the federal government, showed that only eleven percent of respondents believed business should have the primary responsibility for paying for and providing child care. Even so, various levels of government continue to promote it as a solution to the child care crisis.

There is too much evidence which shows that Canada needs a comprehensive system of high quality, non-profit, affordable child care now for the situation to be ignored any longer. Child care needs to be as accessible as health care and education; the costs to society for inaction are too great. In the past, employers have played an important role in helping build other social policies, leading to the development of public education, health care and unemployment insurance. Now is the time for employers to join with the many other groups calling on public policy for child care (Bertrand, in press).

As noted child development expert Ed Zigler states, "The first principle is that all children must have access to stable, good quality child care when and if they need it. Good care is the right of every child and should not depend on family income, ethnicity, or the neighbourhood where they happen to live."

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