

Child care for all of us: Universal child care for Canadians by 2020

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Access to childcare/daycare should become the right of every child by virtue of Canadian citizenship, and not restricted by either income, class or whether both spouses are gainfully employed. —Tom Courchene, *A State of Minds*, 2001¹

Summary

“For Canadian families, high quality, affordable child care is more than a convenience — it’s a necessity.” These words in the 2016 federal budget, together with the Liberals’ election promise of “working with provinces, territories and Indigenous peoples to establish a National Framework on Early Learning and Child Care that meets...the needs of Canadian families wherever they live,” signal a new federal government commitment to child care that is available, affordable and of consistently high quality for all those who choose to use it.



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Renewed federal leadership on child care could not be more timely. In 2008, Canada ranked last on 10 child care (ECEC) benchmarks among peer nations. The Conservative government had just cancelled its predecessor's national child care program, with its substantial cash transfers to provinces and territories, and withdrawn the federal government from any role in improving child care provision across the country. It is disturbing but not surprising that, despite some initiatives in a number of provinces, child care across Canada remains unaffordable, unavailable and inconsistent in quality to this day. Indeed, the proverbial "patchwork" of early childhood services experienced by families who struggle to balance work and family is remarkably similar, structurally and systemically, across Canada.

A robust body of research and policy analysis confirms the importance and benefits of a universal approach to child care that is affordable to all (not necessarily free), non-compulsory, available, appropriate and diverse enough to meet the varied needs of families. Yet, notwithstanding the contemporary international consensus and consistent research evidence that affirms a universal approach is more effective than a more targeted one, concerns have arisen that Canada's new directions may not include a universal approach to ECEC. This would represent a shift in the long-standing Canadian understanding that future government child care policy would support services that would grow to accommodate "all families who choose to use them," that is, universal child care.

Given that the federal government has also committed to a "research, evidence-based policy, and best practices in the delivery of early learning and child care," the national framework needs to set the stage for a universal, broadly comprehensive approach that ensures accessible, affordable, inclusive and high-quality services will grow, over time, to serve all children and families everywhere in Canada.

A Shared Framework for Building an Early Childhood Education and Care System for All — developed by the cross-Canada child care community — offers a blueprint for building such a system. The document sets out "a shared vision anchored in an evidence-based framework for federal, provincial and territorial governments to use in building equitable early childhood education and care (ECEC) for all." The framework calls for federal leadership and funding while recognizing key roles for provinces, territories and Indigenous communities. It also affirms that, "while there are many points of commonality in our shared vision, we recognize that Indigenous communities may choose unique approaches and content." It proposes a long-term approach to building a child care system for Canada grounded in three overarching principles: universality, high quality, and comprehensiveness.

Underpinning these principles are three interrelated "understandings" essential to achieving an evidence-based national framework. First, Canada needs to move away from its current market-based approach to child care. Second, there needs to

be a recognition that building a comprehensive ECEC system is a journey, not an event, which requires a clear long-term vision matched by sustained, adequate public funding. Third, Canada needs to confirm the leadership role required of the federal government which, in collaboration with the provinces and territories, will be needed to achieve a universal, high quality, comprehensive system.

Introduction

“For Canadian families, high quality, affordable child care is more than a convenience — it’s a necessity.” These words in the 2016 federal budget follow up on the Trudeau Liberals’ election commitment to “work with provinces, territories and Indigenous peoples to establish a National Framework on Early Learning and Child Care that meets...the needs of Canadian families, wherever they live.” The budget states that federal funding associated with this commitment is “expected to flow in 2017-18.”

The Liberals also promised to meet with provincial and territorial governments “within 100 days” of the 2015 election to begin work on the national framework. Together with other statements, in the election platform and elsewhere, it appeared a national child care program was once again on the “to-do” list of the federal government. A year after the election, however, it is unclear how much actual progress has been achieved.

As fragments of the developing policy framework trickle out from behind the closed doors of federal-provincial-territorial negotiations, Canada’s child care movement is increasingly uneasy about the direction of the conversation. Chief among these concerns is the apparent shift in the long-standing Canadian understanding that future government policy would support child care services for “all families who choose to use them,” in other words, universal child care.

In the last 15 years or so, analyses by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2001, 2006), UNICEF (2008) and UNESCO (2010) have begun with the assumption that early childhood education and child care (ECEC)² should be “for all” children and families, i.e., “universal” in approach. For example, a policy priority adopted by both the European Commission (2011) and the European Parliament (2011) is to “ensure universal provision of ECEC.” A number of EU countries have been working for some time toward the goal of early childhood education and care for all. Several have achieved it — at least for children from between two or three years of age through to compulsory school entry — while a number of countries have made access to child care a legislated entitlement for all age groups.

Today, most families with young children in Canada need or want access to some kind of high-quality, affordable child care at some point in their children’s preschool

years and often into the elementary school years up to age 10 or 12. Unfortunately, high-quality, regulated child care is still restricted to the lucky few. The supply is too limited and unevenly distributed; overall, there are spaces to cover less than 25% of 0–5 year olds, while parent fees are out of the reach of most families.

To close this accessibility gap in Canada, the federal government’s national framework will need to set the stage for a broadly comprehensive approach to ECEC, ensuring that accessible, affordable, inclusive and high-quality services will grow — over time — to serve all children and families, everywhere in Canada.

What is universality?

Many Canadian services are described as universal: public education, health care, libraries, public parks, fire and recreation services, etc. While the policies that support these services share common elements, they also vary.

With the notable exception of public education (for certain ages), most universal services are not compulsory. Basic health care and public education are free “at the gate.” Some services, such as education, are primarily delivered through publicly operated services or, as in the case of health care, are quasi-publicly operated. Generally, fire and policing services are available to everyone with no user fees because they are fully supported through tax revenues, while libraries and community centres have both no-fee and low-fee (i.e., less than full cost-recovery) components. Finally, universal services are not necessarily one-size-fits-all, as many adapt hours of operation, programming content, locations and other factors to meet the varying needs and interests of local communities or communities of interest.

Kindergarten in Canada — considered to be part of the early childhood education and care system — is universal. Public kindergarten has no parent fees, is usually publicly operated and is available to all age-eligible children (five years of age in most provinces). It is not one-size-fits-all, however. While most provinces and territories have full-school-day programs, some do not. Only Ontario has kindergarten for all four-year-olds, while some locales have every-other-day schedules.

In addition to a range of universal services across the country, Canada also provides universal, or near universal, income support programs. Typically these programs provide a base level of income support for all or most people, with additional support for those with lower incomes. For example, all Canadians are entitled to old age security (OAS) at age 65, and some also receive the guaranteed income supplement (GIS). However, the universal “child care” benefit (UCCB) did not include additional support for lower-income families: all families with children under age six received the same (one-size-fits-all) monthly cheque. Most social policy experts

agreed that sending parents of varying incomes the same cheque each month was a poor policy (Battle, Torjman, and Mendelson, 2006).³

The UCCB has now been replaced by a geared-to-income Canada Child Benefit (CCB). Many would consider the CCB to be a universal-type program, as most families with young children receive a payment, albeit a larger payment if family income is lower, and there is not a cumbersome eligibility process.

Thus, both cash transfer programs to individuals and services can be universal or universal-type. Universal approaches to services are generally understood to share several characteristics:

- The service is equitably available to all members of a group. Entitlement to equitable access may be defined in legislation.
- Services are fully or substantially publicly funded. Where fees exist they are usually (not always) affordable for all.
- Services are usually publicly planned, with established processes for assessing demand and developing or permitting appropriate services to meet identified needs.

Universal services may very well be far from perfect. There may be underserved areas or populations, or services may be inadequate; even the quality of universal services may be less than exemplary. For example, public education — perhaps the “most universal” of universal programs — is stressed when budgets are cut, while wait lists for some medical treatments are evidence of the same phenomenon in Canada’s universal basic health care system. However, there is a general understanding that these universal programs are publicly funded public goods that will, by and large, be there for those who need and want them.

The case for universal child care

Some understand universal child care to mean “free” child care, while others assume it means “compulsory,” like elementary school. Some conflate universality with uniformity, thinking universal child care means only one type of child care would be offered, or that it assumes a “cookie-cutter” or one-size-fits-all approach. As well, some cannot let go of the idea that universal child care services are always “government-run” and “institutionalized,” and that they deny parents and local communities a say, role or options.

Certainly, different definitions of universal child care have been used in Canada. For example, Candice Bergen, when she was Conservative minister of state for so-

cial development, branded a universal national child care program as a “big, huge government-run program” (Bergen, 2014). She also stated that “a one-size-fits-all model of institutionalized daycare does not provide support to the majority of Canadian parents” (Bergen, 2013). A spokesperson for the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, a right-wing think-tank that opposes child care for all families, argued that “the top priority in this area should be access to high quality child care for lower income families [because] positive lifelong developmental effects from child care participation is much stronger for low income families than it is for middle income families” (Eisen, 2014).

This neoliberal preference for targeting over universality is perhaps best exemplified in a paper published by the C.D. Howe Institute that argues against launching universal child care. Instead, the authors state that “governments should ensure access to child care for ‘at risk’ families who are likely to be disadvantaged in terms of preparing children for formal K-12 schooling” (Brzozowski and Richards, 2006).

Universal child care is occasionally defined as “free.” In a recent article, University of Alberta sociologist Tom Langford describes the universal program he calls for as “available to everyone.” Publicly funded “means no parental fees for any program, since even modest fees can discourage enrolment by lower-income families,” he writes (Langford, 2016).

Yet none of these characteristics define universal child care as the term is usually used. In Canada, the working definition is generally consistent with that put forward by international policy researcher John Bennett in a report for UNICEF:

A universal approach to access is often contrasted with a targeted approach to ECEC, whereby a government provides public funding primarily to programmes for chosen groups of children. Universal access does not necessarily entail achieving full coverage, as there are variations in demand for ECEC at different ages and in different family circumstances. Rather, it implies making access available to all children whose parents wish them to participate (Bennett, 2008: 70).

The Canadian child care movement defines universal child care as being available to all, affordable and inclusive, non-compulsory and not (necessarily) free.⁵ For example, the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada (CCAAC) describes universal child care as: “publicly-funded systems that entitle access for all. At a minimum, universal systems provide access for all without discrimination based on income or other criteria. Effective universal systems also work to eliminate a range of social, ability-based, cultural, geographic, and other barriers to equitable access and participation” (CCAAC, 2004).

Over the years, the Canadian child care community has recommended that child care services should be voluntary, i.e., that participation is at the parents’ discre-

tion. While calling for governments to play an important role in planning, policy and funding, ECEC is envisioned as a comprehensive variety of services delivered by public and non-profit providers, in various kinds of locations (centres, private homes, schools) over various time periods, such as part-day, full-day and extended/non-standard hours.⁴ When combined with broader family policy, such as enhanced parental leave and income support programs, universal child care can meet the diversity of families' and children's needs at the local level.

In short, the vision of a universal ECEC system is one that would be accessible and affordable for all families and inclusive of children regardless of ability, economic, cultural or linguistic circumstances, where they live in Canada or whether their parents are in or out of the workforce, studying or working non-standard hours.

The arguments in favour of a universal approach to early childhood education and care are based on the recognition that child care is a service with multiple goals. While it is a program with child development goals for children, it is also a program for parents — especially mothers — who rely on child care to go to work or prepare for work through training and education. From both these perspectives, a universal approach is shown to be the most effective way to meet multiple goals.

A 2008 UNICEF report card assessed ECEC programs in 25 countries. It summarizes, as follows, some of the key arguments in favour of designing early childhood services as universal programs rather than targeting them to particular groups of children (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2008: 17, 18):⁶

- “Universal early childhood services tend to bring together children from different backgrounds rather than reinforcing concentrations of disadvantage,” as does universally available education for older pupils. This is recognized as a significant benefit to all children and a means of preventing social exclusion.
- Universal services “usually command broader and more sustainable public support and engender greater public concern for quality. Too often, services for the poor have meant poor services.”
- Universal systems can still give priority to disadvantaged children by ensuring additional funds to child care centres that serve low-income children or children with special educational needs.⁷
- “Children at risk of developing behavioural or learning problems are to be found in all socio-economic groups rather than being confined to certain geographical areas. Programmes targeted only on the basis of income or geography may fail to reach the smaller proportion — but often larger absolute number — of vulnerable children who fall outside the target.”

Flanagan and Beach, citing data from Statistics Canada's *National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth*, consider this last point in the Canadian context, stating:

Typically, provinces and territories have defined income status as an indicator that specific supports (e.g., subsidies) should be available for children and families. However...we know that although the percentage of children in low income families who demonstrate one or more types of difficulties is higher than the percentage for children in families with middle or high incomes, the actual number of children in [the much more populous] middle income families who demonstrate difficulty is actually higher. Income testing misses these children (Government of Manitoba, 2016: 8).

Although research from the U.S. and other countries does show that high-quality child care may benefit vulnerable children more, there is strong evidence that it is good for all children, and that poor quality may be negative for all children.⁸ One large U.S. study found that:

Although in some cases the positive effects of higher quality care were even stronger and longer lasting for children at greater risk, higher quality child care was still associated with better outcomes for all groups of children. From a policy perspective, these findings indicate that the need for high-quality child care is of universal importance, and that policies promoting better quality child care have benefits that last into the early school years (Peisner-Feinberg, Burchinal, Clifford, Culkin, Howes, Kagan, and Yazejian, 2001: 1552).

A Rand Europe study of the short- and long-term effects of ECEC on educational and labour market outcomes found that “for all children, the provision of high quality ECEC is beneficial in terms of cognitive and social development” (VanBelle, 2016). Finally, Barnett, a renowned American researcher of ECEC, cites multiple studies to support this same perspective. “Generally,” he writes, “studies in the United States and abroad (where universal programs have a longer history) find that preschool education has larger benefits for disadvantaged children but that high-quality programs still have substantive benefits for other children” (Barnett, 2013).

Further, it is noteworthy that a number of studies in multiple countries have found that universal ECEC is more beneficial for disadvantaged children who attend socioeconomically “mixed” programs than it is for those attending targeted programs. The most prominent of these is the British longitudinal EPPE study by Sylva, Melhuish, Simmons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart (2004).

The need for child care is universal

But access to child care is at least as much about parents' labour force participation and women's equality as it is about child development. This means the need and desire for quality child care is not confined to low-income families or even to those with vulnerable children, but that it is part of "economic security for the middle class" (Liberal Party of Canada, 2015). Indeed, even wealthier parents who use (or choose) child care in their own home (with a nanny or babysitter, for example) frequently seek early childhood experiences such as a nursery school for their toddler, or a family resource program, if these options are available.

Compared to a generation or two ago, young families today are increasingly "squeezed." As the work of Generation Squeeze⁹ describes, they are squeezed for time, because most mothers are now in the paid labour force. Their income is squeezed, because the impact of high housing and post-secondary education costs are exacerbated by stagnant wages and reliance on precarious work. And they are squeezed for supportive services, like affordable child care, that help them balance their caring and earning responsibilities (Anderson, 2012). While the squeeze is particularly acute for families who face additional physical, social, economic or cultural barriers, it applies to young families across the socioeconomic spectrum.

The 2016 federal budget acknowledged these realities, noting that "even though Canadian families have worked hard and are working longer, with flat real wage income, families that face rapidly rising costs [like child care] are seeing their family budget strained" (Department of Finance, 2016: 101).

From the perspective of women's equality, child care for all is a mother's right as well as a child's right. Economist Iglia Ivanova notes:

Comparative studies of industrialized countries find that in countries where child care is publicly funded (making it affordable and widely available), women are more likely to participate in the workforce, to work closer to full-time hours and to hold better jobs. Publicly funded child care has also been found to reduce the wage gap between women with and without children, sometimes referred to as the "motherhood wage penalty" (Ivanova, 2015).

Considerable economic evidence shows that accessible, affordable child care benefits the economy by allowing parents of young children (primarily mothers) to participate in the workforce or by creating jobs (e.g., Fortin, 2015; Fairholm, 2009). But studies of affordability and parent fees show that only a minority of people can afford regulated child care even if they can find a space, which they often cannot. A modelling study by Cleveland et al. found that 75% of all families earning low to mid-range incomes cannot afford to use regulated child care in Toronto (2016). The

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives' analysis of fees and affordability in major cities across Canada shows that average (median) parent fees for infants may be as high as \$1,700/month; that even low-income parents who qualify for and secure a fee subsidy may be asked to pay as much as \$450/month; and that Quebec fees are by far the lowest, as child care is much more publicly funded with a set fee (now determined by a sliding scale at the upper income levels) (Macdonald and Friendly, 2014).

As the UNICEF report card on ECEC notes:

Overall there would seem to be strong arguments for focusing public policy and public funding on diversely delivered but universally available early childhood services funded and supervised by governmental agencies. This is the broad strategy that has been adopted by almost all OECD governments in response to the educational needs of older children, and there is no reason in principle to pursue a different strategy for early childhood services (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2008: 10).

Can a universal approach to child care work given Canada's variation?

Early childhood education and care in Canada is frequently called a “patchwork,” meaning there are significant differences in policy and provision among the thirteen provinces and territories. While this idea has become almost axiomatic, it should not replace a full analysis. ECEC certainly is a “patchwork” from the perspective of any family trying to make sense of it, and make their work and family arrangements function, but upon closer examination there are many more similarities than differences across Canada's regions.

From a structural or systemic perspective, ECEC is strikingly similar across provinces/territories. All jurisdictions, under their own child care legislation, provide a combination of centre-based and home-based services, with both full-time and part-time options, and all provide family resource programs. Almost all rely almost entirely on market-driven, for-profit and non-profit services. All provide some public base funding to child care and all provide publicly delivered kindergarten. All child care services except those in Quebec rely heavily on parent fees as the main source of revenue. All child care services across Canada rely on a poorly remunerated, almost entirely female workforce and have education and training requirements that are generally lower than international benchmarks.

These and other structural similarities mean that, in practice, the gaps and issues experienced by families on a daily basis are remarkably similar whether they live in

Harbour Breton, Newfoundland and Labrador, Toronto, Ontario, Montreal, Quebec, or Prince George, B.C., although the pedagogy, language and culture may be different.

Since the 1970s, multiple federal governments have worked in a variety of ways with the provinces and territories to advance child care, and the provinces and territories themselves have initiated steps forward to varying degrees. Despite these efforts, a comprehensive national plan has never become a reality. Without a cross-Canada, national approach, each provinces and territories have developed relatively similar but generally less-than-effective approaches to ECEC (although some effective, even exemplary elements or examples of child care can be found in local communities). No jurisdiction has developed a coherent, long-term, evidence-based plan or anything that can reliably meet parents' demand for services designed to support their own needs and their children's development at one and the same time.

The problems are universal

Reliance on a market model rather than a planned approach to child care is a key limitation to the development of high-quality child care for all families in Canada. Maintenance of child care services in all provinces/territories (with the exception of Quebec and to some extent Manitoba and Prince Edward Island) depends heavily on parent fees supplemented by ineffective fee subsidy systems. Thus, in most of Canada the "right" child care — that is, child care for the right age group or special need, or to match the parents' work schedules — is most often not available where and when it is needed, and is affordable only for a minority. Quality is too often too weak to be considered "developmental," and is therefore not a reliably effective instrument for "giving children the best start in life." And in all regions of Canada some groups are routinely left out, including infants, children with disabilities, newcomers, rural communities, parents working nonstandard or part-time hours and, perhaps most of all, Indigenous families.

Thus, although there are regional variations with respect to child care the gaps and chronic difficulties are not specific to one region or another. There is much greater variation by individual family need, local community or neighbourhood than there is by province or territory with respect to coverage and funding. Overall, just about everywhere there are not enough real options for many or most parents.

ECEC services and access to other family policies such as maternity/parental leave are particularly limited for Indigenous Canadians. Culturally appropriate early childhood services for Indigenous children on and off reserve are woefully underfunded and underdeveloped across Canada. It is thus not surprising that the Truth

and Reconciliation Commission has called for culturally appropriate Indigenous early childhood education as part of healing and reconciliation.

On the federal agenda for 40 years

Many analysts have considered why and how a national child care policy has failed to emerge in Canada. It has been on the agenda since the report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women called for a child care act in 1970. In the intervening years, federal governments have revisited child care multiple times, but it has truly been, as Foster and Broad put it, a case of “the child care policy that wasn’t” (Foster and Broad, 2002). Many suggest the reasons for this are primarily ideological (e.g., Foster and Broad, 2002; Bach and Phillips; 1997; McGrane, 2014; White and Friendly, 2012) or that ambivalence about working mothers still lingers (Pasolli, 2015).

Regardless, for more than 30 years successive federal governments have taken the initiative on child care, often showing considerable leadership. They have not, as some right-wing commentators claim, set out to have Ottawa “operating childcare centres” (Harper, 2006). Rather, there has been a longstanding recognition that early childhood education and care is an issue under provincial jurisdiction, much like health care, and needs to be developed through federal-provincial-territorial collaboration. Historically, development of a national child care program was interlocked with social policy debate about federalism, the use of the federal spending power and, eventually, the implications of fiscal federalism and conventions such as the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA).

The first modern federal child care initiative was the Task Force on Child Care, set up by Pierre Elliot Trudeau in 1984 and headed by Katie Cooke. The task force’s final report recommended that the federal government set up a national, universal, accessible, provincially designed and managed child care program, “as comprehensive and universally accessible as medicare and education” (Status of Women Canada, 1986: 234). However, the incoming Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney shelved the report to make way for a Special Parliamentary Committee on Child Care. This group also set out to study child care and make recommendations. Following cross-Canada public hearings, a report was tabled and the government introduced Bill C-144, The Canada Child Care Act. Following another Conservative victory in the 1988 federal election, national child care was again shelved.

Child care then re-emerged in Jean Chretien’s 1993 election platform. The Liberals’ “Red Book” included a commitment to substantially increase child care spaces (through transfers to the provinces) in line with economic growth. But in the post-Quebec referendum and deficit-slaying environment of the mid-1990s, child care

again took a back seat, despite revival efforts by Liberal human resources ministers Lloyd Axworthy and Jane Stewart (who secured cross-Canada provincial/territorial co-operation in 2003 on what she called the first step to a national child care program).

The closest Canada came to a national child care program was after the 2004 federal election. Paul Martin's "Foundations" election commitment set out four principles to guide such a program: quality, universality, affordability and developmental[ness] (QUAD). After winning the election, Prime Minister Martin and his social development minister, Ken Dryden, signed agreements with all provinces and territories to operationalize the QUAD principles, leveraged with a commitment of \$5 billion over five years. The Liberal loss in the 2006 federal election put an end to Canada's first, embryonic national child care program.¹⁰

The Harper Conservatives also (in a sense) addressed a national child care program by cancelling the child care agreements immediately upon taking office in January 2006. Quality child care was reframed by the Conservative government as "institutional day care" and federal funding was redirected to the Universal Child Care Benefit — a taxable monthly payment to parents of \$100 for every child up to age six. The payment was billed as providing "choice in child care," even though it did nothing to make child care more accessible. Further, the UCCB was designed to be of greatest financial benefit to two-parent families with one employed parent.

In this era, federal-provincial-territorial work on child care came to an end. The Conservative human resources minister's first meeting with her provincial/territorial counterparts was also her last. In a social policy environment that White and Friendly have termed "no-lateralism" (2012), the provinces/territories not only lost the anticipated billions in child care dollars committed under the agreements they signed with the previous government (after receiving only the first year of federal funding), but they were entirely on their own vis-a-vis policy development.

In the decade that followed, there were provincial and territorial ECEC developments, such as introduction of full-day kindergarten and the shifting of child care to ministries of education, but Canadian child care was left further and further behind. International comparative research showed Canada at the bottom of OECD countries on public spending and other elements of public policy designed to support families (UNICEF, 2008).

2015: Commitments from a new federal government

With the federal Liberals winning a majority federal government in October 2015, it seemed that Canada's antiquated approach to child care could change. In contrast to the "Foundations" program of Paul Martin, Michael Ignatieff's 2009 election plat-

form or the New Democrats' 2015 commitment, child care was not one of Justin Trudeau's leading election issues. Nevertheless, the Liberals made a renewed commitment to a federal role and a cross-Canada approach to child care services. Under the theme of "greater economic security for middle class families," the Liberals committed to developing a national early learning and child care framework in collaboration with the provinces, territories and Indigenous communities (Liberal Party of Canada, 2015).

The Liberals promised they: "will not impose pre-determined costs or models on other orders of government but work collaboratively with each of them on funding agreements... [Our] framework will build on the progress that provinces and territories are making and allow them to move further in providing more affordable, accessible, inclusive, high-quality child care and early learning, which considers the diverse needs of all children in Canada." At the same time, the platform commitment to a national framework "based on research, evidence-based policy, and best practices in the delivery of early learning and child care" sets different expectations because child care has — for the most part — demonstrably not become affordable, accessible, inclusive or high-quality.

So far, despite the positive new tone, the federal government's funding commitments for child care are quite limited going forward. The government's 2016 fall economic update sets federal child care funding as an undifferentiated part of an 11-year, \$21.9-billion (roughly \$2 billion annually) social infrastructure fund that includes housing, seniors' facilities and cultural resources.

Building a universal ECEC system in Canada

Beginning in 2011, in an environment defined by a national child care policy vacuum, limited federal funding and intermittent attempts by provinces/territories to forge their own way, leading national child care groups came together to collaborate on common strategies. One concrete outcome of this was ChildCare2020, a national policy conference held in November 2014. A background paper, *Childcare in Canada by 2020: A vision and a way forward*, set out the conference's starting points, describing a long-term vision of a high quality, comprehensive ECEC system for all families (ChildCare2020, 2014). At the conference there was high consensus about what child care *could* become given the right circumstances and the recognition that, despite the many provincial and community initiatives, in the absence of overarching federal leadership and funding ECEC would remain far from where it needed to be to support families and children.

Following the 2015 election of a Liberal government, about 40 representatives of the cross-Canada child care movement reconvened to discuss next steps. A key outcome of this meeting was a proposed shared framework for building an early childhood education and care system for all addressed to all levels of governments across Canada.¹¹ The document set out “a shared vision anchored in an evidence-based framework for federal, provincial and territorial governments to use in building equitable early childhood education and care (ECEC) for all” (CCAAC, CCCF, CRRU and Campaign 2000, 2015).

The shared framework calls for federal leadership and funding while recognizing the key roles of provinces, territories and Indigenous communities.¹² It proposes a long-term approach to building a child care system for Canada grounded on the three overarching principles of universality, high-quality and comprehensiveness, and three components for moving the system forward: a common federal-provincial-territorial policy framework; a plan for long-term sustained funding; and system-building tasks shared among levels of government and community.

The shared framework also affirms that, “while there are many points of commonality in our shared vision, we recognize that Indigenous communities may choose unique approaches and content.” Finally, it observes that “putting this kind of framework in place is a journey, not an event.... Our vision is aspirational and ambitious and will, therefore, take time.”

The shared framework includes a number of characteristics and assumptions that evidence and research show to be linked to the three overarching principles of universality, quality and comprehensiveness. These include “expanding the supply of programs through a variety of regulated services delivered by public and not-for-profit providers [and] employing a well-compensated, well-supported, well-educated early childhood workforce which is recognized and appreciated for the importance of its work.”

In addition, there are three main essential “understandings” if Canada is to build an accessible, affordable, inclusive, high-quality ECEC system. These will need to be recognized and supported in an ambitious, collaborative, evidence-based national framework.

The first of these is the recognition that a market approach is not effective from either a policy or financial perspective in ensuring and delivering ECEC. There is good evidence to show that reliance on a child care market — in which governments take limited responsibility, with limited public management, planning or funding, and in which available public funding is primarily provided to parents through fee subsidies and/or tax breaks — is the main explanation for Canada’s weak ECEC situation (Lloyd and Penn, 2012; Beach and Ferns, 2015; Adamson and Brennan, 2014). The evidence shows — and the shared framework argues — Canada needs to develop a more effective publicly managed system, with public funding provided directly to

services that are accountable for delivering the high-quality, affordable and inclusive child care that families and children need.

Second, it is understood that if the vision of the national framework is an ambitious one, it will take time to build. Putting this kind of framework in place is a journey, not an event, thus requiring a clear long-term vision matched by adequate public funding. What a clear long-term vision makes possible is charting a path or, as Yogi Berra said, “If you don’t know where you’re going, you might end up someplace else.” A clear vision, supported by the public funding required to achieve it, will not only facilitate ongoing assessment of results and allow for adjusting the route when necessary, but will also support public accountability vis-a-vis monitoring results.

Principles such as universality should therefore be understood as long-term and aspirational rather than a reflection of the current situation, or as what can be accomplished immediately. For example, building a supply of high-quality child care spaces will require many well-educated early childhood educators to staff them and a stock of first-rate facilities in which to house them.

It cannot be overstated how important it is to align the words “high-quality affordable child care for all” with sufficient public funding. Too often, including in the 2015 federal election and 2016 budget, goals of accessibility, affordability, inclusivity and high quality are stated without a long-term commitment to the sustained long-term public funding required to support them. The international minimum benchmark commonly used as a long-term goal for countries striving to establish affordable, high-quality ECEC systems is *at least* 1% of GDP for children aged 0–5 years (UNICEF, 2008; OECD, 2001, 2006). Canada, which is at the bottom of OECD countries on public spending for ECEC, would need to ramp up its public spending throughout the long-term process of building a quality ECEC system to achieve even this minimum.

A third understanding necessary for developing a national ELCC framework concerns the respective roles of the federal government and the provinces/territories. As mentioned, the Liberals’ ELCC election platform committed them to work collaboratively with provinces, territories and Indigenous communities without imposing “pre-determined costs or models.” Likewise, the shared framework takes the position that “meeting the [federal] government’s key objectives for families in all regions (accessibility, affordability, quality, inclusiveness) will require an overarching national approach” that recognizes provinces/territories have primary jurisdiction over ECEC.

However, just as the federal government took leadership in creating medicare, which has evolved into similar (but not identical) provincial/territorial programs under the overarching Canada Health Act and through the leverage of the federal spending power, the federal government needs to steer child care programs to better help all our children get the best start in life, improve work-family balance, strengthen economic security for all families, and concretely advance women’s equality Canada-wide.

This point of view was recently reinforced by a United Nations review of Canada’s progress on women’s equality. The expert committee called on Canada to “adopt a rights-based national child care framework in order to provide sufficient and adequate child care facilities” (2016: 39). It also outlined the federal government’s “legal responsibility and leadership role in the implementation of the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW),” noting its concern that “the federal Government may not sufficiently use the available accountability mechanisms to ensure that the provincial and territorial governments establish legal and policy measures that are fully compliant with the Convention.” The UN report recommended:

that the State Party [should] consistently start using conditional and targeted federal funding in order to make sure that transfer of payments to provinces and territories take into due account compliance with the provisions of the Convention, as already is the case for some of Canada’s development assistance programmes (2016: 10, 11).

For half a century, Canadian families have been coping with early childhood situations developed in provincial/territorial “laboratories of innovation.” But the evidence does not support the view that subnational units alone will produce the high-quality, accessible, affordable, inclusive child care service systems that families need in 2016. As it has been noted, “the record of provincial policy innovation with regard to child care has not been outstanding...without a federal role to provide the glue and substantial funding to scale-up provincial efforts” (Beach, Friendly, Prentice and White, 2013). It may be that the post-2015 era needs a new approach to the development of national programs in areas of provincial jurisdiction than the one that ushered in medicare across the country. But the “laboratories of innovation” approach is not working for child care.

If it were, there would be no problem today.

Getting it right from the start

Federal leadership, together with provincial/territorial collaboration in working toward a long-term vision of a universal, high-quality, comprehensive ECEC system, is demonstrably the best way to ensure real early learning and child care options for families. Getting there will require an overarching national policy framework that includes shared principles, an accountability framework, robust service systems designed and administered by each province/territory, local management and planning, and a voice for parents. Such a program would fit with Canadian federalism and provide a real range of options for families. Although building an excellent ECEC system is a complex task, it will be worth it if we are able to get it right from the start.

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Notes

- 1 Tom Courchene has been an economics professor and social policy expert at Queen's University for many years. Early childhood education and care was not a topic on which he commented frequently.
- 2 Early childhood education and care (ECEC) includes centre-based child care, regulated home child care, preschools/nursery schools and kindergarten. It has the same meaning as early learning and child care (ELCC). Here we use the terms child care, early learning and child care, ELCC and ECEC interchangeably, although we tend to describe our system-building aspirations as ECEC.
- 3 Many also agreed that a cash payment to parents did little to help them access child care spaces.
- 4 The prevailing position of the child care movement, based on the best available evidence, is that existing for-profit operators could continue to operate alongside a universal program, but that this sector should not continue to expand.
- 5 In early childhood programs, the term “inclusion” usually means a program is fully welcoming and supports children with disabilities together with all children. However, the term “social inclusion” is sometimes used more generally to mean “the process of improving the terms for individuals and groups to take part in society” (World Bank, 2013).
- 6 Similar points can be found in Vandebroek, 2015.
- 7 This is known as “progressive” or “proportionate” universalism, defined as “universal provision for all, and within these services, special attention is devoted to children and families with additional needs” (Vandebroek, 2015: 177). The OECD's Starting Strong II (2006) also promoted this approach.
- 8 A good summary of this evidence is found in Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000: 303)
- 9 Information about Generation Squeeze is available online at gensqueeze.ca.
- 10 Some argue the War-time Dominion Day-Care Agreement, initiated by the federal government but cancelled at the end of the Second World War, was the first national child care program.
- 11 The *shared framework* can be found online at ccaacacpsge.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/sharedframework_jan2016.pdf.
- 12 The perspective articulated in the shared framework is not really new. The report of the task force on child care takes essentially the same position in its almost 400 pages published in 1986.



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