

OP ED - Child Care Crisis – or Early Childhood Workforce Crisis?

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Most Canadians well understand there is a child care crisis in Canada. Locating and accessing a quality child care space is a nightmare for most parents, as is paying the child care bills that cost significantly more per year in most regions of Canada than college or university tuition (keeping in mind that families have 18 years to save, tax free, for their children's post-secondary education). It's no wonder that household debt in Canada is at record highs. But the other child care crisis, perhaps the underlying crisis in Canada, lies with those who educate and care for our children.

Canada's child care workforce, over 253,000 strong and predominantly women -- about 98% according to recent Canadian data, often have the same education and credentials as a public-school teacher, but earn a fraction of what they do. Ironically, many of these same women cannot earn enough to even dream of having their own children or affording the very same care they provide, as it would be unaffordable. With little option, many leave the child care workforce, unless they have a partner who earns enough to subsidize their family income.

For a couple of million moms and dads dropping their children off to child care centres or home/family child care programs each morning nation-wide, this underlying workforce crisis is invisible, yet they are primary players in it. The inability to retain qualified Early Childhood Educators due to poor wages (often minimum wage) and working conditions leads to critically high staff turnover -- and this ends up hurting our children and ultimately society the most.

Research speaks very clearly on the need for high quality early learning and child care for children. But at the heart of quality are the people who work with the children each and every day. Consistency in care, specific education in pedagogy for healthy child development, and ongoing professional development are just a few of the key characteristics of retaining a professional, capable and competent workforce -- one which impacts directly on children's early development and well-being.

Some provinces or municipalities offer some wage subsidies, but it doesn't go far and these incentives come and go based on the whims of the current provincial and territorial governments. Sporadic funding and wage enhancements leave a workforce apprehensive at best, and looking at other career options when governments and policies change as they most surely do. What we have then is a systemic de-valuing of the child care profession, and consequently, a de-valuing of the women who work so conscientiously to impact the lives of children in care for the better.

These unsustainable pay approaches also avoid the heart of the matter -- a comprehensive and fulsome workforce strategy that not only attracts people to this very important career, but also retains them to ensure that higher quality of care. Of course, this includes living wages, but even more specifically, market competitive salaries and benefits for the predominantly female sector.

It may seem counter intuitive to families (and policy makers who are setting the stage) who are paying sky-high fees for their children's care, that the people providing the care are struggling.

Much of Canada's child care sector is based on a market approach whereby parent fees are the primary source of funding. This is a problem that will only perpetuate itself as long as this is the policy direction of the day. Without proper supply side funding, child care programs will continue to offset operating costs to families and further, to inadvertently claw back a family's provincial or federal income subsidies, of whatever form, in order to stay viable. It is a vicious cycle that both Canada's families and the child care providers are caught in. A true crisis for both parties that needs breaking.

By tripling our federal investment, we would make child care more affordable and improve the quality of programs through supporting the education and training of Early Childhood Educators. It would improve pay and benefits to the child care workforce – those women who care lovingly and professionally for children and who are so instrumental in their development.

Research tells us that the people who work in Canada's child care sector like their jobs and find a lot of importance and value in educating and caring for children ([You Bet We Still Care Report - Child Care Human Resources Sector Council](#)). They are also looking for ways to further their education, professional practice and knowledge of children and families. They want career longevity, predictably and growth. They want excellent outcomes for children and care deeply about the work they do. They want wages and benefits that reflect the importance of their work, something that every Canadian aspires to.

Canada's children have the right to expect nothing less than the very best for their care and education, but as long as public policies and practises that impact on the early learning and child care workforce continue down the same path, the cycle will not be broken and children, families and society will have lost out.

If Canada's federal government in partnership with provincial, territorial and Indigenous governments want to take the correct next step, they will prioritize better pay, benefits and solutions to retain and recruit Canada's early learning and child care workforce as the key to quality.

Don Giesbrecht
CEO
Canadian Child Care Federation
613-729-5289 (220)

and

Marni Flaherty
Chair
Canadian Child Care Federation
905-906-0030