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Child Care Services: A Major Missing Piece of the Family Support Puzzle

When it comes to public support for families, the debate across much of Canada is polarized between two choices: should we provide direct financial support to families who care personally for their children full-time, or should we fund education and care services for children of families in the paid labour force? These divisive, simplistic choices ignore evidence that confirms what we know about families, while reinforcing several myths that too many of us — including policymakers — rely on. Families deserve a more thoughtful and balanced public policy analysis that asks instead: how can we equitably support families while achieving our broader social and economic goals?

We know that there are immeasurable benefits to raising children, as well as very measurable costs. While families are unique in many ways, they have three overarching needs that public policy influences significantly: time, resources, and a range of supports to help them educate and care for their children. So, how are Canadian governments doing at supporting the needs of families? That's where the myths come in. Let's talk about two of them.

The first myth holds that governments in Canada are doing as much as they can reasonably afford to do for Canadian families. Building on international work, in a study published by the

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Institute for Research on Public Policy, Professor Kershaw investigated a wide range of family policy measures, including tax expenditures, income-targeted benefits, parental leave benefits, public investment in child care services, health care and welfare.

The results shatter any illusions we might hold about the limitations of affordability on our public policy choices and priorities. Despite their relatively favourable economic circumstances, the combination of federal and provincial family policies packaged together in Alberta and BC rank below packages in 11 other countries, including the UK where the package is 70% more generous; Australia, where the package is over 50% higher; and Austria which provides a benefit package that is three times that available to Canadian families in BC and Alberta. Were other provinces (with one exception) substituted for Alberta and BC in the mix with federal programs, we could expect similarly poor rankings because key elements of family policy are weak across most of the country.

While international comparisons paint a stark picture, solutions can be found much closer to home. Federal, Alberta and BC governments take note: Québec's family policy supports families' overarching needs through complementary public investment in expanded parental leave, providing parents with more affordable time to care personally for their families, as well as child care services. Results to date show that child poverty is decreasing and female labour force participation is rising, and that both of these improvements are happening more quickly in Québec than anywhere else in Canada.

The creation of a universally accessible system of quality child care services could launch both Alberta and BC out of their bottom-dwelling positions by supporting families to educate and care for their children. A child care system will also promote various social and economic goals by addressing labour shortage concerns, supporting equality, and reducing employment barriers for lower-income families.

In order to adopt child care services as part of the solution, however, it seems that first we need to dispel our second myth, one which is grounded in conflicted societal values about the role of women. For the purposes of this discussion, let's condense this concern to the belief that families with an at-home parent would be unfairly burdened with the costs of creating a child care sys-

tem that is seen to primarily benefit families with parent(s) working outside the home.

To examine this belief, consider the example of a family with an at-home parent (i.e. a one-earner couple) and a toddler. If this family doesn't purchase child care services in their community they will enjoy a monthly benefit of at least \$78 in both Alberta and BC, compared to childless couples with the same income. By contrast, two-earner couples that pay for child care services struggle with monthly deficits in disposable income that range from \$350 to \$500 compared to childless couples with the same earnings. The "family benefit" for one-earner couples moves to a "family penalty" for two-earner couples because, outside of Québec, child care services are not publicly funded and high user fees are the norm.

Given this discrepancy, we conclude that public funding for child care services represents the major missing piece of the family benefit puzzle, since families that supplement their personal caregiving with these high cost services are generally incurring significant inequities. This finding remains the case despite the introduction of the federal Universal Child Care Benefit in 2006, which widens the gap between benefit packages available to one-earner couples and families that rely on child care services.

Moreover, whether they are in the work force or not, many parents want their children to have the social and educational benefits of quality child care programs. When these programs are available and free or at least affordable, families use them. That's why most parents choose to enrol their children in kindergarten, and that's why a universally accessible child care system will have both part-time and full-time options that meet a broad range of family needs.

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