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# Beyond Child's Play



Caring for  
and educating  
young children  
in Canada



## Caring for and Educating Children: From the Personal to What's Possible

BY ERIKA SHAKER

**F**rom the age of 13 months, my daughter — now almost four — has been happily enrolled in a fantastic daycare in Ottawa: a purpose-built, co-operatively-run facility filled with windows and surrounded by playgrounds and green space; 15 minutes (walking) from our house; an experienced, unionized staff that at times doubles for us as a surrogate family; an on-site cook (and meals that I'm often tempted to stick around for after drop-off); and links with and busing to neighbourhood schools. So established is this facility with the community that several of the employees and co-op students who work there (and in fact some of the parents who now drop off their kids each morning) once were enrolled there as children.

I can still remember our panic that we wouldn't be able to find a space for our daughter before our family leave ran out. So when I was four months pregnant I called every daycare in Ottawa to put us on their waiting list (at that point there were over 300 names on the list. Two years later there were over 10,000). My partner and I will never take for granted how lucky we are to be part of this unique and multifaceted community.

Over the past three-and-a-half years we've watched our daughter grow into a happy, caring, empathetic, articulate and curious child, with a goofy sense of humour and a passion for art and music. I know many of these qualities were always there (I confess I take credit for as many

of them as I can), but I also know that they have been nurtured and celebrated by the staff and other kids at her daycare. I watch her make sure all kids are included in the fun because she doesn't like it when people are left out, but also because she sees every day why it's important that we all care for each other. That's a pretty powerful lesson for a little kid — but one she's clearly able to handle. And when I go to her classroom and I see how the other kids interact with each other, how they encourage and look out for each other, I know that it's a lesson that resonates throughout each program in that building.

It wasn't always easy. I remember the adjustment period (somewhere between the infant program and the toddler room) when for about a month straight I would literally peel my child off me, hand her over to a pair of experienced arms, force a cheery "goodbye, honey, I love you — Daddy will pick you up and I'll see you soon" and leave. And then, immediately after the door closed behind me, I would root in my bag for my phone to call and make sure she was okay — which she was. I knew she was, of course — I could hear her stop crying before I was even completely around the corner, and every evening she would arrive home covered in paint or sand or clutching a new masterpiece, babbling about her day. But I will be forever grateful to those morn-

ing conversations with every one of her caregivers who assured me the tears had already stopped and she was more than fine: she was having a blast.

As a parent, I've benefited from the collective wisdom and experience of my daughter's daycare providers more than I can say — like when one of her providers would casually mention they thought she might be getting a cold because her mood (or her breath?) seemed a little "off." Or that she was getting along particularly well with one of the kids in her class and that perhaps they might both enjoy getting together one weekend for a play-date. Or when she would cry from time to time, one of them would remind me that "it's okay — doesn't she cry at home, too?" And one day when my daughter had done something particularly hilarious, a caregiver reminded me: "don't press her about it — she's entitled to her privacy." That one comment summed up what I know but sometimes need to be reminded of: that yes, she's my daughter —but she's her own person too, who can only learn to respect others' privacy if we respect hers. And as she's grown and as I've watched her change, it's a lesson that's stuck with me.

I'm fascinated by how and what she learns: one day she was half-heartedly poking at paper with her crayons, the next could draw a perfect circle, and the next a (recognizable) person. She's constantly coming home with

new songs; she's developed a love of puzzles and puppet shows, and will paint or tell (and listen to) stories for hours. She tells us about dress-up and the antics of her friends and recently has become very maternal as she cares for her puppy: soothing the stuffed animal when she "cries" or — when puppy misbehaves — explaining "that's not how we act: let's have a talk to figure this out."

I am incredibly appreciative that she will accept comfort from, and have confidence in, people other than her parents — although I know that no one will love her as much as her father and I do. But I also know that her caregivers love her too, and know her well, and celebrate her successes, and work with us every day to make sure that we can support each other in this collective goal of raising future generations. It would never occur to me that she wasn't being cared for in the best possible way; that she wasn't learning from every single activity and from every single person in that room; that she didn't understand this fundamental lesson — we must look after and learn from each other for all of us to succeed.

I won't lie — the monthly cost is significant. There is a subsidy for which some families — not ours — qualify, although the number of subsidized spaces is regularly either under attack or up for debate every time the city budget is discussed. But in case

there's any confusion, the Universal Child Care Allowance — \$100 each month (taxable) — does not come close to helping alleviate the expense of child care, which in our household is the second largest monthly expense (after the mortgage but before student loans) and the factor that most influences our most important family decisions, including when we plan to have another child.

It's no exaggeration to say that our child's care touches every aspect of our lives both as individuals and as a family. Clearly there are financial ramifications, but it goes far beyond that. Drop-off and pick-up are two pivotal, immovable events every day. We are both lucky enough to have workplaces that have given us a significant degree of flexibility as to when and where we work in case of sickness or sudden emergencies. Even before our daughter began attending her daycare one of us was with her every day for the first year of her life — I took the first six months and my partner took the second six — because our workplaces are unionized and have negotiated top-up pay for maternity and family benefits. We are in constant communication with our daughter's child care providers to find out what we can do at home to help reinforce what she's doing during the day, and to let them know what we'd like them to address with her. We've brought extra clothes

for other kids and room decorations and art supplies (and leaves and icicles and flowers we pick up on the walk there) and go to the pancake breakfasts, barbecues and book sales. We've volunteered to shovel snow and help replenish the sandbox and sit in on hiring interviews as the parent representative. And then there are, of course, the nightly dinner table conversations that revolve around finger painting, field trips, friends and new songs or books.

But, less quantifiably — and this is something I didn't expect — we've become part of an entire network, one that only grows as the kids get older, that extends to caregivers, parents and siblings, and that strengthens and enriches our connection as individuals and as a family with our local community. I understand things better and I know people more — in fact, I think I'm a better parent, a better partner, a better friend and a better person — because of what I've learned from my daughter and from the people who help me care for her.

So when I began thinking about this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves*, it came out of something very close to home — of course, child care is extremely personal — but also out of my growing realization that how we care for our children says everything about the communities we create and the kind of society in which we live, and how we can collectively make them even better

This issue takes a broad, comprehensive view of child care and early childhood education and examines it through a variety of different lenses to offer readers a number of points of entry into this nuanced, complex and multifaceted issue. Lynell Anderson and Jody Dallaire provide us with an overview that consists of three parts: the current status of child care in Canada, the barriers to progress, and the solution — a publicly funded system. The themes discussed in their article are explored in greater detail throughout this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* by a number of talented and dedicated authors, researchers and activists who provide readers with a variety of perspectives about and within the ongoing debates about how we care for and educate our children.

Martha Friendly examines current child care policy in Canada, and provides an overview of how Canada measures up internationally. Christa Japel and Carole Welp explore the state of the \$7/day child care in Québec, how it's working and what else needs to be done to ensure that all kids and communities — particularly low-income and at-risk — and served by this system. We have also included a fascinating overview of the structure of child care in the Nordic countries which serves as both an interesting point of reference for and means of comparison to child care in Canada. Margot Young has written an overview of role of organized

labour in the child care movement, and the benefits of unionization for child care workers in a profession that has traditionally been underpaid, underappreciated and underrepresented in spite of the enormous importance of the work it undertakes.

Clearly, though, there are a number of barriers to progress. The child care debates have become inextricably tangled with a number of other value-based discussions: the role of the family (Lynell Anderson and Paul Kershaw); how “wanting what’s best” for children and for child development increasingly means reinforcing competition rather than collaboration (Erika Shaker); neo-liberalism, the commodification of child care and the implications of international trade deals (Steven Shrybman); the ideology of market-based “choice” in child care services as epitomized by the disastrous Australia example (Deborah Brennan and Mab Oloman); and the ongoing quagmire of federal/provincial relations in developing a Canadian system (Barbara Cameron).

But this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* goes further and explores how a universal system of high quality, publicly-funded child care and early childhood education would offer a broad and profound range of benefits: healthy child development (Dr. Fraser Mustard and Pippa Rowcliffe); the inclusion of children with differing abilities and from a range of backgrounds (Debra Mayer, Stephanie O'Brien);

support for parents (Richard Girard and Lisa Greaves); poverty reduction (Laurel Rothman, Bernie Froese-Germain); women’s equality (Nancy Peckford); protection of children’s rights (Kim Wilson); the development of vibrant communities, including in rural and remote areas (Mira Hall, Sherri Torjman); healthy families (Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay, the Vanier Institute); and strong economies (Susan Prentice).

And finally, Rita Chudnovsky, a lifelong activist, gives a very personal account of the multi-decade struggle for a publicly-funded child care system in this country and, while acknowledging that the goal has not been achieved, reminds us of what we have gained.

We have also included two other pieces that attempt to address some of the ways in which the struggle for universal child care has been sidelined or marginalized: “What’s in a Name?” illustrates how obsessing about the different names affixed to how we care for our children (child care, daycare, early childhood education etc.) is in part a diversionary tactic has served to divide rather than unite the public; and a myth-busting piece that attempts to address, confront and rebut some of the more prevalent misunderstandings and misinformation about child care.

Just as my daughter’s daycare and her child care providers have brought so much to my life and to our family, working on this issue

of *Our Schools/Our Selves* has enriched my work life — and my personal understanding of how we care for children and how we build our communities — immeasurably. I would like to express my admiration and gratitude for the ongoing work performed by

these authors and their organizations in the collective goal of establishing a publicly-funded, high quality system of universal child care. I am also indebted to Lynell Anderson for her tireless work on this issue, her advice, her support, and her enthusiasm.