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# FAST FACTS

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## The Real Child-Care Challenge

**A** newly released report from UNICEF provides important information for Manitobans and should prompt immediate action.

The study, *The Child Care Transition*, finds that children of the world's most affluent countries spend a large part of their early childhood in some form of child care - but the child care they are in does not always meet best practices. Nevertheless, child care is a fact of life for most children. "Preschool enrolments," says the U.S. National Research Council, "are large, growing, and here to stay".

Some commentators worry about this new reality, but for the wrong reasons. Rebecca Walberg recently argued against daycare, critiquing Quebec's generous innovations (*For the Sake of the Children*, Winnipeg Free Press Dec. 7). She and others who oppose universal child care and education are in the minority and are missing the real focus.

Social scientists, development psychologists, health researchers and educators embrace the idea that good-quality child care supports children's development. In their exhaustive report, From

Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development, eminent researchers at the American Academy of Science conclude that "the positive relation between child-care quality and virtually every facet of children's development that has been studied is one of the most consistent findings in developmental science."

High-quality care "is associated with outcomes that all parents want to see in their children, ranging from co-operation with adults to the agility to initiate and sustain positive exchanges with peers, to early competence in math and reading."

In addition, child care is essential for reducing family poverty because it permits parents to participate in training, education and employment. Dependable care is essential for mothers who need or want to take a paid job, develop job skills, or go back to school.

Without affordable, reliable childcare, women may be forced to stay out of the labour force, to work at poorly paid part-time employment, or be stuck in dead-end jobs. Some women -- especially single mothers -- are forced to depend on social assistance or may fall into poverty.



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## *FAST FACTS continued ...*

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Reliable child care helps all parents balance work and family responsibilities. Even affluent families struggle to balance jobs and families, and early-childhood education programs are one remedy for reducing family stress. In the 21st century, as families move across countries and around the globe, extended kin networks may no longer be available for caregiving. Child care is one way to build new family supports, a followup to paid parental leaves that allow new parents to spend time with very young children.

Economic realities also play a role in why Manitobans, like all Canadians, need highquality and universally accessible child care. In the immediate term, employers lose time and productivity to work-family conflict. The Conference Board of Canada estimates that such conflict costs Canadian businesses at least \$2.7 billion each year.

The Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce has identified labour issues as the biggest constraint to economic growth. It has cited retention, training and succession planning as key concerns for employers. Child care can help business meet these challenges.

Child care is a green and labour-intensive service, providing sustainable jobs. New Manitoba research estimates that every \$1 invested in child care generates \$1.58 of economic activity.

Economists like Nobel Prize winner James Heckman have shown that investment in early childhood brings proven benefits to children, families, governments and national economies.

The key to positive gains is the quality of children's experiences. The UNICEF report assesses the world's 25 most developed countries against 10 benchmarks for quality and excellence.

Sadly, Canada ties for last place, meeting just one of the 10 recommended standards.

Policy-makers must immediately re-examine the current policy architecture, which devotes too few resources and allocates them ineffectively. Manitoba can learn much from Quebec, which meets six of the 10 benchmarks. Quebec has expanded access, reduced parent fees (to \$7 a day) and increased staff training and remuneration.

The current economic recession provides compelling reasons to make improvements now, rather than wait. Heckman explains why: Investing in young children "is a rare public policy initiative that promotes fairness and social justice and at the same time promotes productivity in the economy and in society at large."

For the sake of our children and families, Manitoba urgently needs an excellent, high quality early-childhood care and education system.

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