

Time to take benefits of early child care seriously

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Photo by Leif Norman

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ChildCare 2020 was the first national child care policy conference in a decade and the fourth such conference in Canada's history.

The first was held in 1971 in conjunction with the growing women's rights movement. The second, in 1982, founded what is now the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada. The third, in 2004, was held amid a great deal of hope for a national child care program, a hope that was extinguished with the 2006 election of the Conservative government of Stephen Harper.

Organized by the Child Care Advocacy Association, the Canadian Child Care Federation and the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, ChildCare 2020 provided a renewed sense of possibility for participants like Terri Russell, a supported child development consultant from Kelowna. Russell attended the conference in Winnipeg as HSA's representative.

"There was a sense of hope and optimism that a national child care policy will be on the table in the upcoming federal election," she said. "So far the NDP has shown support for a national child care policy, and was the first party to present the beginning of a platform. According to a video message from Justin Trudeau, the Liberal party supports a national child care plan. At the time of the conference the Conservative Party had not responded."

The conference set out three specific priorities:

- Develop an inclusive vision of early childhood education and care that reflects the needs of today's families with young children. The majority of these families do not have access to affordable, quality child care.
- Generate new ideas and strategies to put child care back on the political agenda and kickstart progress on support for children and parents in Canada. Child care is a key component of social and economic equality. It's important to counter the austerity measures and poor government policy choices that have put child care on the back burner.
- Engage a new generation of advocates who will deliver a strong message that it's time for governments to give families access to quality early learning and child care programs. Child care is a right.

"It was exciting to be among so many advocates with a common vision for early childhood education and care," said Russell. "Change needs to happen and it is time for us to stand up and advocate for children."

There are many challenges facing providers of early childhood education and care, explained Russell. Wages are low, responsibility is high, hours are long and it's hard to come by the respect and recognition the work deserves. Few early learning programs offer benefits, and those that do provide only limited coverage.

"Child care costs more than university tuition, and in many places, more than a mortgage," said Russell. As a result of high costs and inflexible hours, many parents are turning to unregulated child care where guidelines are minimal and children are often at risk of harm or even death.

"The idea of a national child care policy is a reality in some countries," said Russell. Even in Canada, Quebec's child care plan, while not perfect, has not just helped children and parents, it's delivered economic benefits to the whole community. Since the program began, Quebec has seen an increase of 70,000 jobs thanks in part to the number of women able to return to the workplace. Costs for social assistance have also gone down - in 1988 there were 100,000 mothers drawing social assistance payments but today there are just 40,000.

To some, child care and education remains a gender issue, but a national policy would help reduce the effects of poverty, promote children's cognitive, social and emotional development, and strengthen the economy.

"It is time to stop investing in daycare and start investing in children," said Russell.

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