

REPORT

Published by the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada

No. 3
May 3, 2007

Presentation Before Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities Committee Bill C-303 - Early Learning and Child Care Act

Dave Quist
Executive Director.....

Thank you Mr. Chair and to all Members of the Committee for the opportunity to present information for your consideration on Bill C-303.

The Institute of Marriage and Family Canada is a research think tank, designed to draw together the social science on issues such as the raising of our children. We believe that you, the decision makers, should consider all the factors involved. To this end, I am pleased to present a cross section of some of our work for your consideration.

Much of this research comes out of the documents before you and is also available in full on our website: imfcanada.org.

One of the crucial pieces of the childcare debate is to best determine what it is that parents actually want. There has been much rhetoric and a variety of polls of varying levels of quality done on this very question.

Of primary importance is for officials to not presume what parents of young children want, but to actually ask them. To this end, one year ago we published the results of a survey that delved directly into this question.

Copies of this poll have been included in your package and the Clerk's office was forwarded a copy for translation.

Although there is a lot of information in the survey, please allow me to highlight a couple of the key pieces that are pertinent to your debate today.

Of the parents that have young children, that may actually be accessing childcare, 78% indicated that they would prefer if a parent was able to stay home to raise their children. This did not change significantly when we factored in the gender of the parents, the geographic region that they came from or their respective level of education.

Of course we know that having one parent stay at home is not always feasible, whether this is due to single parent families, fiscal constraints or other logistical considerations. To this end, we then asked the respondents what their preference for childcare would be. The results that we found were quite dramatic. A majority of 53% indicated that they would prefer a relative to care for their child, followed by 20% preferring a family childcare setting. Trailing were non-profit childcare at less than 17% and for-profit childcare at a low of 7%.

Again, these results did not change across different breakouts based upon geography, income or education levels, marital status, urban or rural settings or gender. The one notable exception is that the Quebec respondents had almost an even split between a relative or a family childcare, caring for their child. If we adjust the survey results for those parents that have children under 6 years of age, the results remain very similar.

It is clear to me from these empirical findings that the intent of C-303 is not in keeping with what Canadian parents desire. We believe that each family has its own unique challenges and a one-size fits all program is not in Canadian parents best interest.

We believe that the government needs to honour the choices of parents, who are best positioned to nurture and raise their children. Parents who need childcare for their children should be allowed to do so in the manner they

deem appropriate for their circumstances. Section 4 of C-303 notes that the province of Quebec may exempt themselves from the provisions of this bill. My assumption is that this is because Quebec has a form of province wide childcare already in place. In listening to previous witnesses, the Quebec model has been held up as how a national childcare program should be structured.

With all due respect to those that are involved with the Quebec childcare program, the latest evaluations clearly show some substantial failings. According to Pierre Lefebvre, a professor of economics at the Universite du Quebec a Montreal, the Quebec policy "... favours higher income families, is unfair to families who choose to care for their children themselves or do not use non-parental child care, and is not well suited to parents working part time or non-standard hours."

Professor Lefebvre concludes that, "Children from low-income or less-educated families may be triply disadvantaged by being less likely to receive stimulating care at home, less likely to be enrolled in educationally oriented care outside the home and more likely to be receiving low-quality service when they are in child care."

The economics of the system have left parents worse off. "By its very nature, the \$7-dollar-a-day child care model favours a specific type of child care setting that is subsidized and state-regulated. It benefits certain parents to the detriment of others," writes Norma Kozhaya of the Montreal Economic Institute

in an October 2006 briefing note on Quebec's child care system.

One of the main problems with child care in Quebec, using data from the Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development is that children, while in a safe environment, are not learning. "The majority of child care settings attended by the children in the QLSCD had a global rating of minimal quality, which means that they provided safety and security for the children but offered a minimal educational component," reads an Institute for Research on Public Policy report.

It is also important to note that the CBC reports a waiting list in Quebec of 35,000 children and that Quebec Immigration tells new immigrants that there may be a 1 to 2 year wait.

We would also surmise that much of the impetus for Bill C-303 comes from the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, an entity that also compliments the Quebec system.

We note although the OECD refers to Quebec in their report Country Note for Canada, held in September/October of 2003, in fact they did not visit Quebec during this time and did not include research into the failings of this system.

In light of this comparison and the other research that is readily available to you today, the IMFC is opposed to a national system of early learning and child care as

proposed in Bill C-303 because it allots money preferentially to only one type of care: centre-based or institutional care. It therefore does not help parents make choices: it offers one solution alone, at great cost, and to the great detriment of those who do not make that choice. We believe that this is therefore discriminatory.

We would point this Committee to research from the U.S.-based NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) , the largest, most expensive childcare study ever undertaken, which is examining the long-term effects of all types of child care on kids.

The researchers have found that high quality non-maternal care -- this includes fathers and grandparents -- improves cognitive outcomes, things like a child's vocabulary and memory; but that too much time in centre-based care -- even high quality centre-based care -- was related to poor behaviours, including "hitting others" and "arguing a lot." In their latest release this Spring, the research has shown that this negative behaviour is measurable up to the sixth grade.

In short, while there are benefits to high quality care, those benefits are not limited to centre-based care, such as the care proposed by Bill C-303, but rather, the benefits are seen in many different types of care in more informal settings. The drawbacks like increased aggression in children are seen in poor-quality centre-based care. Currently,

care in Quebec is described as mediocre. High quality care under a state-run, state financed system is difficult to create.

There are many other issues that I believe are relevant to this debate – provincial/federal jurisdiction, the full cost of such a program, parental rights and choices, as well as others. Unfortunately, time does not permit me to address these now; however I hope that Committee members will request the research on these issues as well during your deliberations.

In conclusion, we believe that you cannot measure this issue in strictly economic calculations. These are our children, our future and they must be measured

accordingly. We must hold ourselves to higher standards.

While we recognize that there is a need for high quality childcare within society, this one size fits all approach does not meet the needs of many families and cannot be supported. This bill does not address the needs of the majority of Canadians that do not wish to use institutionalized child care.

I would like to thank the Committee for this opportunity to present this research to you and look forward to your questions and further discussion.

Thank you.