

NATIONAL POST

Support parents, not the daycare industry

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If Liberal politicians and early-learning experts are to be believed, Canada is short-changing its children. Rather than encourage -- nay, empower -- parents to toss their tots into institutional daycare and run back to work, the Conservative government (and Human Resources Minister Diane Finley in particular) have the temerity to suggest that parents should -- gasp! -- raise their children themselves. Cue the outrage -- as well as the claims that children are actually better served by the ministrations of early-childhood educators than by their well-meaning, but perhaps less enlightened, parents.

Not so fast. A study published in October 2010 by the Montreal-based think-tank CIRANO has found that in the province with the most extensive child-care subsidies in the country -- Quebec -- the emphasis on daycare has actually led to worse learning outcomes:

"More pre-school children are in non-parental child care at a younger age and the intensity of child care has increased over the years ... The evidence presented shows that the policy has not enhanced school readiness or child early literacy skills in general, with negative significant effects on the [picture and vocabulary test] scores of children aged five and possibly negative for children of age four."

The study also found that daycare is not the optimal environment for very young children. It appears that children under the age of one, in particular, may benefit from being at home with a parent more than by "interacting" with educators or peers.

At the same time, as a society, we have to acknowledge that there are reasons why 69% of mothers with children under two are in the labour force. One parent's income often is not enough to support a family. Mothers fear becoming unemployable if they are out of the labour force for too long, or don't want to lose their skills.

Others enjoy their career and want to combine work with kids. Some are single parents, who have no

choice but to work. But for all these groups, there are other ways to address their concerns rather than by expanding the daycare industry. Research by the Vanier Institute on the Family, corroborated by work done at the Institute for Marriage and Family, reveals that institutional daycare ranks last on the list of parents' preferred childcare options. Care by a parent or relative ranks first. So why not empower parents to make that choice?

Government could do this in several ways:

1. Lower the tax burden on families, so that one income is sufficient for middle-class or lower-middle-class families. This could be done through income splitting, not only between spouses, but between parents and children. For single parents, income splitting with a child would lower their tax burden as well -- allowing them to afford better-quality care if that is the option they choose.
2. Legally safeguard a mother's job not for one year, but for three. If she knows that she has a job to go back to, she will feel more secure about raising her kids at home for a longer period, even if she is not earning income during that time. In an age where fathers are contributing more to child-rearing, make it flexible after baby's first year, and allow either parent to take the additional leave.
3. Offer tax breaks to incentivize companies to offer family-friendly policies. At the top of the list would be allowing employees to work from home. As a single WAHM (Work-at-Home-Mother), and friend to several others, I can testify that the number-one reason we chose -- and love -- our current jobs is because we can spend that extra time with our children, in the morning, at lunch, at breaks, and when the workday is done, and work flexible hours.
4. Empower parents to provide "early learning" themselves: Offer public parenting classes that teach the importance of certain practices -- reading, singing, playing simple games -- and discourage others -- notably, television. For low-income families in particular, provide places where parents can go to have access to quality toys. In Ontario, Early Years Centres provide excellent environments where parents can interact with their kids, for example.

The key here is that we should be supporting parents, not the daycare industry. It follows that parents who are involved in their child's life from day one are more likely to stay involved once they hit grade school and beyond. And studies reveal that parental involvement -- not "early learning" per se -- is the number one predictor of a child's success in school.

While these solutions aren't free, they aren't likely to be as expensive as a national daycare program. The Quebec experience shows us that the cost of such programs will balloon (from \$230-million in 1997 to over \$2-billion today) not simply because of uptake by parents, but chiefly because unionized child-care workers demand higher wages (and go on strike to get them).

Rather than out-sourcing childcare, let's find ways to bring it back home. Daycare should not be the default option for our kids. It should be the last resort.