

THE CHILD CARE CONUNDRUM:

THE RESPONSE FROM CANADIANS

by Stephanie Carroll & Anna Marie White

Earlier this year, Alberta MP Rona Ambrose created a brief firestorm of media commentary with her remark to Social Development Minister Ken Dryden in the House of Commons about “old white guys” telling young women what to do. Dryden was responding to a report which showed nearly 100 per cent of all young parents would choose to stay out of the workforce to care for their children if they could. Despite this, Dryden insisted that “The real choice is the opportunities [sic] for men and women across the country to have the choice of high quality early learning and child care.”

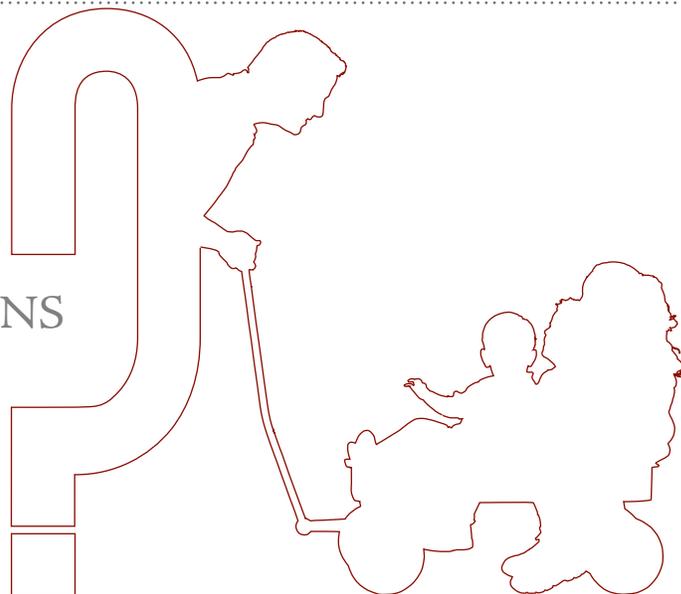
His response is typical of many in the child care field who refuse to acknowledge what parents know is in the best interests of their children: parental care. A public opinion survey conducted for IMFC in May 2005 shows that parents are firm in their desires to care for their children whenever possible, and to have care options available when they must be away from their children.^{1*}

Determining the best type of care for their children is a tumultuous decision for many parents as they weigh the advantages of two-incomes versus one, parental care versus care outside of the home, private child care versus public daycare. However, the only option for which there is any government support continues to be institutional daycare settings despite clear evidence that Canadians want more child care choice.

The work-family merge

With daycare as the main option, many find few ways to balance work and family. In a 2002 Strategic Counsel poll, 69 per cent of respondents reported feeling stressed trying to maintain work and family balance. In another poll, 62 per cent expressed that government has a role to play in achieving that balance² and responded that, as an alternative to a national child care system, the “government should provide funds to all parents to help them raise healthy children.”³ The role these Canadians envision is not one of a ‘nanny state’—with out-of-home child care provided by the government—instead respondents want real choice in child care.

*A report on the survey’s complete findings will be released by the IMFC later in 2005.

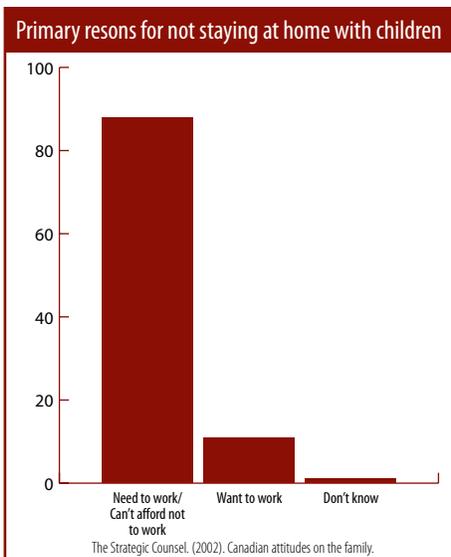


In 2003, public opinion showed the same concern. In a Compas poll, 54 per cent of Ontarians thought that government child care funding should be given directly to parents to use.⁴ Subsequently, parents could make the best child care choice that uniquely benefits their family situation.

For the majority of Canadian families, the current situation involves two working parents. However, there is a dissonance between the actual situation parents face versus their ideal reality. A Strategic Counsel poll reported that 76 per cent of working married or common-law parents with children in child care would prefer to have a parent provide in-home care.⁵ The same poll found that 88 per cent of parents were not in the financial position to be able to leave work to provide in-home child care.⁶

Daycare door wide open

Statistically, an increasing amount of Canadians are using the current daycare



system.⁷ But are these numbers merely reflective of parents taking advantage of the only financially subsidized child care option available? In the report, *Values and Preferences for the “Best Policy Mix” for Canadian Children*, 92 per cent of Canadians wanted a combination of child care and parental leave programs “to help families balance work and family responsibilities.”⁸ With additional child care options, parents could choose alternatives to the daycare system alternatives that would better suit their specific family and work circumstances.

Flex parenting

There is an increasing amount of mothers and fathers who are joining together to share the demands of child rearing. However, 87 per cent of husbands maintain employment regardless of their children’s age.⁹ Meanwhile, mothers’ employment rates are significantly affected by the age of their children, as 60 per cent of mothers maintain employment when their children are under two years old, while 75 per cent are working when their children are between the ages of 15 and 24.¹⁰ As opposed to fathers, many of these working mothers are likely to choose non-standard employment options—part-time, self-employment, second jobs—while their children are in the home.¹¹

Working mothers choose non-standard jobs in order to help meet the demands of both work and family life. Forty-five per cent of part-time working wives say they do so to accommodate child care needs.¹² Unfortunately these alternative situations are accompanied by different family-life challenges. For example, a part-time or self-employed mother usually does not have the same benefits as a full-time employee. This is a further financial burden to the family, which is compounded by the fact that part-time and self-employed workers tend to earn less than full-time employees.¹³

The less time-consuming, and sometimes

more flexible, work schedule is a benefit for part-time and self-employed parents. However, the time restrictions of the current daycare system—with one child per ‘space’—do not easily adapt to work patterns that are different from the typical nine to five, Monday through Friday workweek. It is not financially feasible for daycares to reserve a space for a child who only uses it for half the time available.

One way parents avoid the frustration of daycare scheduling is to stay out of the workforce and provide in-home child care.

92% of Canadians want a combination of child care and parental leave programs.

Michalski, J.H. (1999). Values and preferences for the “best policy mix” for Canadian children. Ottawa Canadian Policy Research Networks, Inc.

In fact, 42 per cent of wives left their jobs altogether, citing “personal and family reasons.”¹⁴ However, the stay-at-home parent relinquishes both career and income in order to meet child care needs, and, in the current taxation structure, receives no financial recognition for such sacrifice.

Mothers choosing to maintain standard full-time employment would prefer options other than the daycare system. A Pollara study of working women in Canada provides evidence that, rather than having child care or daycare facilities in their workplace, they would prefer options such as working from home several days a week, having a four-day workweek, having paid dependent care days, and job mentoring.¹⁵ This suggests that, rather than a daycare system, these women would favour options that enable them to spend more time caring for their children themselves.

Parents want to provide care

IMFC’s recent survey found that Canadians recognize the pivotal role of parents in the child care forum. Seventy-nine per cent of respondents with a child under six years old would like to have one parent stay at home to care for their child.¹⁶ Respondents who did not have a child under six years old in the home were asked the same question and 83 per cent thought that a parent providing child care would be the most preferable option.¹⁷ When both polled groups were asked if the government should compensate parents providing in-home care for the first three years of their child’s life, regardless of previous employment history, 69 per cent of respondents favoured this.¹⁸

Three years ago, a Strategic Counsel survey

discovered similar results. Seven out of ten respondents (71 per cent) agreed that “The best child-care is a parent who does not work and stays home to raise the children.”¹⁹ It is important to note that this response rate was equal among those who had children in the home and those who did not. Thus, there is an overall perception across the population that in-home parental care is the “best” child care option. Specifically, a majority of Canadians believe that, ideally, one parent should not work outside of the home while their children are young.²⁰

What about grandma?

Canadians also see the benefit of non-parental family members providing child care. The recent IMFC survey found that 51 per cent of parents with children under six years old in the home would like a relative to provide child care if parental care was unfeasible.²¹ Also, of parents without a child under six years old in the home, 55 per cent thought a family relative providing care would be the next best solution to parental care.²²

Likewise, a 2003 Compas poll found that 62 per cent of Ontarians believe that family or relative child care is preferable to care by a non-relative in a daycare, and feel that the government should “assign daycare money directly to parents instead of to daycare institutions.”²³

Many Canadians have been putting this preference for relative child care into practice. More than a decade ago, in the 1988 National Child Care Survey, approximately two in five children in child care were looked after by a relative, which was frequently a grandparent.²⁴

Empowering parents with choice

What do parents want in child care? They want to be able to choose the best care for their children. Whether a mother, father, grandparent, extended relative, or daycare employee, Canadian parents seek the freedom to decide who or what system works best for their family. Loving parents are far better positioned than the government to choose what is in the best interests of their children.

A one-size-fits-all daycare paradigm does not meet the individual needs of families of all shapes and sizes. Canadians have clearly indicated that increased care options are necessary. When Canadians acknowledge the importance of parental care, government resources and tax incentives should reflect this by optimizing child care choice instead of channeling parents into a single stream. Providing such child care alternatives would open necessary doors in the narrow hallway of a national daycare system. 🍁

ENDNOTES

¹Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. (2005). National survey on child care policy. Telephone survey of 2012 Canadians on May 6-8 by GPC Public Affairs.

A report of the complete findings will be released by the IMFC later in 2005.

²The Strategic Counsel. (2002). Canadian attitudes on the family. Retrieved from <http://www.fotf.ca/familyfacts/attitudes/report.pdf>

³Michalski, J.H. (1999). Values and preferences for the “best policy mix” for Canadian children. Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks, Inc. Retrieved from <http://www.cprn.com/en/doc.cfm?doc=437>

⁴Compas Inc. (2003, May). Ontario provincial election report for Global TV, National Post, Ottawa Citizen and Windsor Star. Retrieved from <http://www.compas.ca/data/030521-GlobalOnProvElection-E.pdf>

⁵The Strategic Counsel. (2002). Canadian attitudes on the family. Retrieved from <http://www.fotf.ca/familyfacts/attitudes/report.pdf>

⁶Ibid.

⁷Statistics Canada. (2005, 7 February). *The Daily*. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/050207/d050207b.htm>

⁸Michalski, J.H. (1999). Values and preferences for the “best policy mix” for Canadian children. Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks, Inc. Retrieved from <http://www.cprn.com/en/doc.cfm?doc=437>

⁹Sauvé, R. (2002). Connections: Tracking the links between jobs and family. Retrieved from <http://www.vifamily.ca/library/cft/connections.html>

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Pollara. (2001, July). Moving forward 2001: The experiences and attitudes of executive women in Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.pollara.ca/new/Library/SURVEYS/movfrwdprt.pdf>

Preferential analysis: 69% would like a 4-day work week, 69% prefer being able to work from home, 67% would like paid dependant care days, and 74% would participate in mentoring programs.

¹⁶Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. (2005). National survey on child care policy, telephone survey of 2012 Canadians on May 6-8 by GPC Public Affairs. *A report of the complete findings will be released by the IMFC later in 2005.*

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹The Strategic Counsel. (2002). Canadian attitudes on the family. Retrieved from <http://www.fotf.ca/familyfacts/attitudes/report.pdf>

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. (2005). National survey on child care policy, telephone survey of 2012 Canadians on May 6-8 by GPC Public Affairs.

A report of the complete findings will be released by the IMFC later in 2005.

²²Ibid.

²³Compas Inc. (2003, May). Ontario provincial election report for Global TV, National Post, Ottawa Citizen and Windsor Star. <http://www.compas.ca/data/030521-GlobalOnProvElection-E.pdf>

²⁴Statistics Canada. (1988). National child care survey.