

The **eReview** provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find an assessment of Bill C-303, a private members bill to create a national system of child care.

Bill C-303: A child care fairy tale. Fact or fiction?

By IMFC staff

Bill C-303, "[a]n Act to establish criteria and conditions in respect of funding for early learning and child care programs" is now with the Standing Committee on Human Resources and Social Development for discussion, having passed second reading in the House of Commons in November 2006.

As with every policy, there are benefits and drawbacks. In short, Bill C-303 is not a fairy tale: it's very much a part of the nitty gritty push and pull of public policy in Canada. But due to the successful lobbying of vociferous daycare activists, the benefits of a national daycare plan have been touted over possible negatives.

This piece does not say all benefits are fictitious, but rather highlights that there are two sides to every child care debate. The facts and fictions behind child outcomes, waiting lists, the example of Quebec, and what parents want are discussed below.

Fact or fiction?

Kids do better in school the result of professional early learning and child care

Studies have shown that children from low income families experience cognitive benefits as a result of time spent in child care or preschool. [1] Exposure to preschool also helps children from low-income families in terms of school readiness. [2] That said, studies have also shown that children who spend more time in centre-based care exhibit lasting problem behaviours [3] and that negative behaviours are worse in children who enter centre-based care at earlier ages. [4] In general, the positive and negative effects of early child care vary depending on background and the amount of time children spend in care.

For example, a study of preschool children in the United States found that children from low-income families experienced "significant gains" in their pre-reading skills but only when they



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attended daycare for over 30 hours a week.[5] “At the other extreme,” the study says, “children from higher-income families do not show any significant gains from attending centers for more than 30 hours per week and, in sharp contrast to the low-income children, those from higher-income families display increasingly negative behaviour the longer they attend a center program each week.” [6]

A “one-size-fits-all” approach to daycare won’t offer benefits for every child.

Fact or fiction?

Canadian parents are facing long waiting lists because of critical child care shortages

Most parents seeking licensed child care for their children feel the tension between a finite timeline and the uncertainty of a waiting list. This pressure is perpetuated by studies like one released last year that declared Winnipeg had more children on waiting lists than the overall total capacity of licensed daycares in the city. [7]. It sounds hopeless.

What the Winnipeg study could not accurately account for was how many parents signed up on multiple lists and how many of the children had already been enrolled but remained on multiple lists. [8] The common practice of signing up at multiple centres invalidates the study’s findings. The Winnipeg study demonstrates the difficulty of verifying how urgent waiting lists are.

Waiting lists are not static because children leave and enter care continually. The waiting list debate also tends to ignore that some parents who utilize waiting lists also find other forms and options for care.

Fact or fiction?

Quebec has a universal, high quality daycare system

When the OECD came to Canada to assess child care they did not visit Quebec. [9]

This didn’t stop the OECD from holding up Quebec up as an example. “In particular, the team regretted not having the opportunity to review the new policies in Quebec, which seem to have progressed far beyond a “child care” perspective,” they write. [10] Quebec is, they go on, a significant strength within Canada, for launching “[t]he most ambitious early education and care policies in North America.” [11]

Yet various under-publicized reports show some weaknesses in Quebec’s system. [12]

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ONE OF THE PROBLEMS WITH CHILD CARE IN QUEBEC IS THAT CHILDREN, WHILE IN A SAFE ENVIRONMENT, ARE NOT LEARNING.

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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. [13]

And further, in Quebec, the system is not working for the economically disadvantaged—those who stand to benefit the most. "There is strong evidence from various large data sets...that a very large majority of children in subsidized child-care services are from families in the upper income categories. [14]

Before Canada imitates this system, it would be worthwhile to adopt a wait-and-see attitude: is Quebec able to improve the quality of care? (This is currently a focus of the provincial government). And will access become more equitable? Or will disadvantaged families continue to be further disadvantaged?

Fact or fiction?

Parents are asking for a national daycare system

78 per cent of Canadian parents with children under the age of six would like one parent to stay at home to look after their children, says a poll conducted by Fleishman-Hillard Canada for the IMFC in May 2005.[15] Because this set-up is not always financially feasible, the poll also asked parents what type of non-parental care they would prefer. While daycare lobbyists sometimes fail to differentiate between the different types of non-parental care or "daycare," such as care provided by relatives, friends, and neighbours in addition to centre-based care, not all types of non-parental care can be lumped together, according to Canadian parents.

The same poll showed that when parents are not able to stay home with their children, almost fifty percent prefer care offered by a relative compared to roughly 26 percent who prefer non-profit or for-profit daycare centres.[16] A study by the Vanier Institute of the Family also showed that if parents are unable to look after their own children, "their strong preference is to have a partner or another family member look after their children, rather than placing them in formal daycare centres." [17]

[1] Loeb, S., Bridges, M., Bassok, D., Fuller, B. & Rumberger, R.W. (February 1, 2007). How much is too much? The influence of preschool centers on children's social and cognitive development. *Economics of Education Review* 26(1), 52.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Belsky, J. et al. (March/April 2007). Are There Long-Term Effects of Early Child Care? *Child Development*, 17(2), 697.

[4] Loeb, S., Bridges, M., Bassok, D., Fuller, B. & Rumberger, R.W. (February 1, 2007). How much is too much? The influence of preschool centers on children's social and cognitive development. *Economics of Education Review* 26(1), 52.

- [5] Ibid., 64.
- [6] Ibid., 64.
- [7] Winnipeg Child Care Centre Waiting Lists Top 14,758 (2006, March 3) News Release Child Care Coalition of Manitoba Retrieved from http://action.web.ca/home/cccanitoba/alerts.shtml?sh_itm=a2d3f24f7aff368109729b9f12c5cd4&AA_EX_Session=dfa9d70137ac708d8675d83c9e7afe8c
- [8] See "Waiting for child-care; serious shortage, lobby group claims." (2006, March 5) *The Winnipeg Sun*. A6
- Brodbeck, Tom. (2006, April 12) "Phoney-baloney child –care stats; prof's 'research' is fatally flawed." *The Winnipeg Sun*. A6.
- [9] OECD Directorate for Education, Early Childhood Education and Care Policy. (2004). Canada Country Note. pg. 92 Retrieved online April 24 at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/42/34/33850725.pdf>
- [10] Ibid pg. 84
- [11] Ibid. pg. 5
- [12] For three examples, see:
- Japel, C. Tremblay, R. Côté, S. (December 2005). Quality Counts! Assessing the Quality of Daycare Services Based on the Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development. Institute for Research on Public Policy. Vol. 11, No. 5
 - Lefebvre, P. (March 2004). Quebec's Innovative Early Childhood Education and Care Policy and its Weaknesses. Policy Options.
 - Kozhaya, N. (October 2006) \$7-a-day childcare: Are parents getting what they need? Montreal Economic Institute, Economic Note.
- [13] Japel, C. Tremblay, R. Côté, S. (December 2005). Quality Counts! Assessing the Quality of Daycare Services Based on the Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development. Institute for Research on Public Policy. Vol. 11, No. 5
- [14] Lefebvre, pg. 56
- [15] Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. (April 1, 2006). *Canadians Make Choices on Childcare*. Canadian Family Views 1, 3. Retrieved from http://www.imfcanada.org/article_files/CanadiansMakeChoicesAboutChildcare.pdf
- [16] Ibid.
- [17] Bibby, R. (February 10, 2005). Press Release: Child Care Aspirations. University of Lethbridge. Retrieved from http://www.vifamily.ca/newsroom/press_feb_10_05_c.html

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