

Shifting Paradigms of Child Care: From Women-Focussed to Family-Centred

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▼ Abstract

The question of child care has been framed as a women's issue in Canada, largely because of the link made by the women's movement in the past between women's participation in the paid labour force and the availability of non-parental child care. Since then, employment conditions and expectations for women have changed significantly, as have gender roles in the home. Parents, both fathers and mothers, express a desire to spend more time with their young children, and they remain the principal influence in their children's lives. In addition, research has brought to light new information about the optimal conditions for children's development. It has been shown that high-quality experiences outside the home can have a great impact on children's future. Because of all these factors, it is time to see early learning and child care in a family-centred framework, one which focusses holistically on the needs and aspirations of fathers, mothers, their children and the family as a unit. Families need to have a variety of options and support available to them in the workplace, their neighbourhood and in society as a whole for them to foster their children's growth and development. High-quality non-parental child care is an essential part of this mix for parents of young children, one of a range of supports that families in Canada seek and deserve.

In February 2005 the Canadian government committed to spending \$5.5 billion on the creation of a national early learning and child care system. The paradigm we use to talk about "early learning and child care" will influence how this money is allocated. To be most effective, the paradigm needs to shift from being focussed

on the needs of women to being centred on the family. Such a shift brings the discussion of early learning and child care into line with both societal changes regarding gender roles and with scientific knowledge about optimal conditions for child development. It also broadens thinking about the options available to support parents as they raise their children.

Up to now, the provision of non-parental child care has been identified as a women's issue, for reasons largely rooted in the history of the women's movement in Canada, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, advocacy for child care was framed in the context of equal opportunity for women's participation in the paid workforce.

Since then, family contexts have changed, and so have women's expectations, both personal and professional. When decisions are being made about how the new infusion of federal money will be spent, these changes in the way work and family are structured must be taken into account. It is also essential to take into account the expressed preferences of Canadian parents, both women and men, who say that, without the pressures of money, they would prefer to spend more time with their children and less time working (Bibby, 2004).

Finally, research into child development has focussed attention on the early years as a time when the quality of children's experiences can have an enormous impact on the rest of their lives. Their first and most important experiences occur in the family; this is where "early learning and care" start and where their impact is the greatest. Public information campaigns have made parents aware of the potential effects of what happens during children's early years. Now, when they look for non-parental care, parents are not just looking for a place where their children will be kept physically safe and active while they work. They want to ensure that their young children experience settings that nurture their emotional growth, stimulate their intellectual capacities and provide opportunities to develop social skills.

Too often, the debate concerning "the child care issue" will focus on using the research to either speak for it or against it. We trust that we are beyond such simplistic arguments. These studies [about the long-term effects of non-parental child care] remind us that the development of a comprehensive early-learning and child care system must include family and employment policies. They do not speak against the development of the system—they assist us in developing a system based on the best available knowledge that supports the healthy development of children in Canada.

Sandra Griffin, [former] Executive Director of the Canadian Child Care Federation, and Richard E. Tremblay, CEECD Director in the *Bulletin of The Centre Of Excellence For Early Childhood Development*, Volume 3, no. 1, March 2004.

It is time to see early learning and child care in a family-centred framework, one which focusses holistically on the needs and aspirations of fathers, mothers, their children and the family as a unit. Parents remain the principal influence in their children's lives. Families need to have a variety of options and support available to them in the workplace, their neighbourhood and in society as a whole for them to foster their children's growth and development. High-quality non-parental child care is an essential part of this mix for parents of young children, one of a range of supports that families in Canada seek and deserve.

The background of child care as a women's issue

Child care in Canada was established as a service to engage women in the paid workforce (Doherty, Friendly, Beach, 2003). While there were some advocates (mostly women) for developing child care settings in the early part of the 20th century, it was in the 1960s and 1970s that activists in the women's movement advanced the fight for universally accessible child care in Canada. In 1970, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women identified child care

as essential for women's equality and recommended that the government develop a national, universal child care program. The 1984 Royal Commission on Equality in Employment pressed the point, noting that "child care is the ramp that provides equal access to the workforce for mothers." (Abella, 1984)

The feminist tenet that “the personal is political”¹ forced people to consider that if the lives of women were to be altered, the social structures constraining women’s choices would also have to change (Adamson, Briskin, McPhail, 1988). Child care was front and centre as an essential structural change that would facilitate the equalization of women’s participation in the workforce. Feminists were instrumental in challenging politicians and the public to acknowledge the impact of gender on family, work and social welfare. They also emphasized the importance of a dialogue on the conditions of women’s lives and the interplay between work and motherhood.

Women in Canada in the 1950s and 1960s lived a markedly different reality than women today. For most women, life as a working professional was discouraged. In 1960 only 19% of married women aged 25-54 were in the paid labour force (Bédard and Grignon, 2000). Those who did work were limited in their career choices. The leading occupations for women in 1961 were stenographer, typist and clerk-typist. In fact over 95% of clerical workers were women (Mandell, 2001). In addition, it was common for a woman to be paid less than a man for the same work. This was based on the assumption that the male was the breadwinner and the female was merely providing a supplementary income.

A typical life path for a woman was to work after leaving school, get married at a young age² and quit work after marriage or when the first child was born. In some positions, a pregnant woman automatically had to resign her job. Women could not expect that their job would be kept for the time when they wished to return to work. If a woman returned to paid work at all, she often waited till after the last child had begun school, or later. In this context, child care was seen as a way to give women the freedom to choose whether or not to take employment outside their homes, irrespective of whether they had children.

At this time, the dominant view of male and female gender roles placed responsibility squarely on the mother to resolve any conflicts between work and family commitments. Domestic tasks and child care were clearly something females

were supposed to take care of. If they weren’t at home to care for the children, it was up to them to figure out an alternative. For the women’s movement, it was evident that they would have to deconstruct women’s traditional connection to domestic work and child care if women were to take their place in the workforce. Hence the link between child care and women’s employment opportunities seemed natural.

The changed context for women (and men)

The women’s movement has arguably facilitated some of the most significant changes to Canada’s social and economic landscape. In less than half a century, it has radically altered public and private environments for women. Pressure exerted by the women’s movement drove changes to legislation, such as the equalization of minimum wage rates between women and men; amendments to the Unemployment Insurance Act to allow for maternity leave; and amendments to the Canada Labour Code to prohibit dismissal or layoff due to pregnancy. The fight for gender equity was recognized in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which guarantees everyone equal rights, protection and benefits under the law without discrimination based on sex.

Today, women born in the 1970s and 1980s live a very different reality than their foremothers. They have come of age at a time when “women’s rights” and the expectation of equality permeate all aspects of their lives. For example, today’s young women *expect* to work: 80% of women between the ages of 25 and 54 are in the Canadian paid labour force, a figure surpassed only by Scandinavian countries. They also *expect* to be educated. Women in their 20s and 30s today are the most highly educated in Canadian history. Women currently are enrolled in Canadian universities in numbers exceeding men and have made enormous inroads in the areas of science, politics and law (Mandell, 2001). They are also more likely to invest in their own educational and career development before having children. Women are marrying later and postponing childbirth; the average age for first time brides is 28.2 years, while the average age for first-time mothers is 27.7 years (Vanier Institute for the Family, 2004). Today’s young women also *expect* to divide parenting and working responsibilities equally between themselves and their partner. Men now

1 Feminism, which was the driving ideology behind the women’s movement, dared to uncover the political and public dimensions of “private” life. The particular direction that feminist analysis took was best articulated by Charlotte Bunch-Weeks when she said that “there is no private domain of a person’s life that is not political and there is no political issue that is not ultimately personal.” (Bunch-Weeks, 1970)

2 In the 1960s, the average age of first-time brides was 22.6 years old (Vanier Institute of the Family, 2004).

express interest in spending time with their children and willingness to do work around the house. However these changed attitudes are slower to translate into significant behavioural changes. National time studies show that women in Canada still do a larger share of the cooking, cleaning and caring for the children than men (Duxbury and Higgins, 2000 & Zuzanek, 2000). Lone mothers obviously accomplish all these tasks themselves.

The notion of “family” has changed too. Society now accepts many definitions of who is a parent and what constitutes a family. Even the situation of the “traditional” family, headed by a married couple, has changed; in the majority of cases, both members of the couple are now in the paid workforce. Current research suggests that women and men increasingly see themselves not only as co-parents but as co-providers for their children. The division of labour in parenting has become a more complex process, complete with role ambiguity, an emphasis on the negotiation of roles, and fluidity in the way that parents respond to the demands of everyday life. The *family adaptation* model is often used to describe this process. This is a model that focusses on the way both women and men of all statuses, orientations and cultural backgrounds “navigate the pressures of paid and unpaid work and seek a fair distribution of effort.” (Daly, 2004) Research in this area points to a need for greater flexibility in workplace schedules to accommodate the needs of both single-parent and two-income families.

An unchanging women-focussed framework

In spite of this changed family context, the issue of child care continues to be framed as a women’s issue. For example, the Ontario Federation of Labour, in response to the 2005 federal budget, stated: “Building a child care system right—right from the start is a top priority for women.” Similarly, in October 2005, the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC (CCCABC) submitted a written brief to the BC Select Standing Committee on Finance regarding child care in which it framed its key arguments in terms of women. Finally, the prevalence of a women-centred paradigm is evident from the title the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada chose for its fact sheet: “Child care is a women’s issue.” This document stresses child care as essential for women (no mention of men) to meet their children’s needs and participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life.³

As we have shown, the women-centred approach taken by child care advocates can be explained by the links made in the past between employment options and motherhood. There are other factors which also perpetuate this point of view, particularly the preponderance of women employed in the child care sector and a continuing adherence to gender roles at home and at work.

It would be natural for a casual observer visiting a child care centre to assume that child care concerns mainly women. Child care *looks like* a women’s issue. The vast majority of both staff members and volunteers in the field are female, as are most participants and advocates. Recent estimates for the child care field in Canada set male employment at less than 5% (Becker, 2001, & Vanier Institute for the Family 2003). Social programs in general have long been delivered primarily by women. Women tend to come together to identify family and community needs and to organize both informal mutual help and formal programs and services. Most child care centres were founded by women, either by mothers’ groups or through the leadership of individual women. Just as the influx of women into traditionally male professions has influenced fields like law and medicine, more males working in the sector of early learning and child care could make a significant difference to children’s experience.

Feminist scholarship points to another factor which preserves a women-centred framework for child care, namely the stubbornness of “gendered territories” at home and at work. Men’s activities are held out as the standard for “real” wage work and women’s activities are held out as the standard for “real” parenting (Nippert-Eng, 1996 & Daly, 2004).

A women-centered framework for child care makes mothers the primary consumers of non-parental child care and isolates them from the context of their whole family. It tends to perpetuate gender inequity by placing ownership of the issue and all responsibility for it on the shoulders of women. In fact, this framework undermines the role men should and often do take in strengthening their family and supporting their children’s healthy development.

Families’ hopes and dreams

If child care is framed from a family-centred perspective, one of the first things that we need to ask is, “What do Canadian

3 Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, Child care is a women’s issue. www.childcareadvocacy.ca/resources/pdf/ccaac_womensmarch.pdf, consulted November 20, 2005.

parents want for their children?" The Vanier Institute of the Family included questions on this topic in its Future Families Project whose results were published in 2004 under the title *A Survey of Canadian Hopes and Dreams*.⁴ One striking finding is that 90% of mothers and 84% of fathers who are married and employed say that they would work part-time and raise their children, if they could afford to. Almost all employed mothers who are divorced, separated or cohabiting say the same thing.

When respondents are asked, "Ideally, do you think it is preferable for one parent to stay home and take primary responsibility for raising children when they are preschoolers?" they give full rein to their "hopes and dreams": nine in ten of them respond either "yes, definitely" or "yes, probably." They appear to feel that the benefits of parental care are especially important to young children, since preference for this option declines considerably when the question is asked about children in elementary school or beyond. As to which parent would stay home in this "ideal" situation, the answer is "either the mother or the father" for 85% of respondents aged 18-34 and 73% of respondents aged 35-54. Traditional gender stereotypes are reflected in the 51% of respondents over 55 who say that the mother should stay home (Bibby, 2004).

The reality is that most families who have young children cannot afford the option they prefer. According to estimates produced by the Home Economics section of the Manitoba Department of Agriculture and Food, it costs an average \$166,971 to raise a boy to the age of 18 and \$400 less for a girl.⁵ These figures represent out-of-pocket expenses and do not take into account lost income. For most families, one income can no longer cover the costs of raising children. In the mid-1970s, real wages began to stagnate and it became less possible to live well on the wages of a single breadwinner (Wilson, 1996). Over the last three decades, studies have continued to emphasize to policy-makers that "work remains an economic imperative for Canadian families as the number of two-parent families below the poverty line would increase by 78% if only one person earned income. Families with typical expenses and wages need to work 76.8 weeks per year to support themselves, including 16.1 weeks of employment to pay their income taxes and 9.6 weeks to pay for food." (Mandell, 2001)

While economic factors are driving parents to the workforce, they are by no means the only reason for the increase in two-income households in Canada. For many parents work enriches their lives. Younger Canadian women (83%) and men (91%) are more inclined to feel that being able to work for pay is important or very important to their personal happiness (Mandell, 2001). (Among those over 65, 75% of men, but only 37% of women thought this.) In the Future Families Project, 70% of mothers at home with their children said that they would prefer to work part-time while raising their children (Bibby, 2004). In this regard, there is evidence that the parent-child relationship can benefit when parents, male or female, have satisfying work outside the home. (Daly, 2004)

Given that most families cannot afford their preferred option, what do employed parents say about their preference for care of their preschool children? Overwhelmingly, they would choose for their child to be cared for by a family member: a parent, a grandparent or another relative (Bibby, 2004). Apparently, parents perceive the family unit, extended if necessary, as the best place to raise young children. Of the other two most frequently mentioned options, home-based child care ranked higher than centre-based care for most respondents.

Development during a child's early years

At the same time as the family has been changing, new ideas have arisen about the importance given to the environment in which a child spends his or her early years. Research results from the fields of neurobiology, developmental psychology and longitudinal studies on children have all driven increased public investment in services for young children and an increased concern that child care be of high quality.

Unfortunately, field studies have shown that the expansion of non-parental care, which has allowed both parents to join the labour force, has not yet provided consistently optimum settings for children's development. For instance, the *You Bet I Care!* project looked at quality in centres and family child care homes respectively in six provinces and one territory. Its second report finds that non-parental child care environments in Canada generally protect children's health and safety and surround them with warm, supportive adults. The authors

4 See also the tables reproduced in the article by Reginald Bibby on pages 5-6 of this journal.

5 www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/homeec/coc2004/cba28s02.html, consulted November 20, 2005.

lament, however, that “only about a third of centres and a third of family child care homes provide experiences that support and encourage children’s social, language and cognitive development.” (Goelman, H., Doherty, G., Lero, D., LaGrange, A. and Tougas, J., 2001) Similarly, a study carried out between 2000 and 2003 in Quebec found that only 27 % of non-parental child care settings could be rated as giving children good, very good or excellent care. Most were classed as minimal, meaning that children’s health and safety needs were met, but the educational component was minimal. One in eight non-parental child care settings were rated inadequate (Japel, C., Tremblay, R. E. and Côté, S., 2005) To remedy this situation, the authors of the Quebec study recommend improving staff-child ratios, staff education and training, staff salaries, and facilities and equipment, both indoors and outdoors.

Perhaps even more troubling was the finding by the Quebec study that children from disadvantaged families were more likely to use child care services whose quality was judged inadequate than were children from other families. While Quebec’s policy of universal access to affordable child care has increased women’s participation in the labour force, these results show that the program has not met its objectives in the areas of child development and social equity—to give all children an equal chance.

Based on results mostly from programs for children two and older, studies show that all children can benefit from participation in an early learning program in a group setting outside the home before beginning formal schooling (McCain, N. and Mustard, F., 1999). Intermediate and long-term outcomes measures usually include quantifiable data such as success in school, work record, economic independence and absence of criminal involvement. While these outcomes are obviously important, both to individuals and to society, they cannot represent the whole picture from a family-centred perspective. As economists Gordon Cleveland and Michael Krashinsky point out, “It is important to recognize that children’s development is an extraordinarily complex phenomenon.... By focusing on those types of development which can be assessed using a quantitative measure and also which have a direct perceptible economic effect on the child’s future, we distort somewhat the intentions of child care

advocates. Good child care aims to develop and educate the whole child, not just the ‘economically productive’ side of her.” (p. 21. 1998) Even in economic terms, these authors conclude: “For children younger than two years, the net benefits are less certain and appear to depend upon the child and the family to a considerable extent.” For the care of very young children, they strongly favour the extension of parental leave.

A family-centered paradigm

When child care is looked at through the lens of family, we take into account the needs of father, mother, children and the family as a unit. The starting point becomes the search for balance among the needs and aspirations of all members of the family:

- both parents’ need to earn money and get satisfaction from their work
- both parents’ desire that their young children be nurtured by someone whom they trust
- children’s need to develop in an environment that fosters their physical, cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual growth
- the family’s need to create an identity as a unit

Such a perspective broadens the options of how to respond to families’ needs for support in raising their children. One can no longer frame the issue only in terms of providing high-quality, affordable child care outside the home so that *mothers* can join the labour force. Parents, both men and women, consider such services essential, but it is clear that they do not consider child care services as the full answer. A vast majority of parents express their desire to spend more time with their children; more child care centres will not diminish this desire.

Parents’ behaviours and their answers to surveys point to how families’ needs could be better met by changes in public policy and the structure of employment. Such measures could, for instance, include:

- encouraging men to take advantage of parental leave (after the introduction of new federal benefits under EI in 2001, the number of fathers taking advantage of parental leave increased almost five-fold by 2003⁶)
- extending access to parental benefits to more people (Quebec’s new regime, which comes into effect January 1, 2006, eliminates the two-week waiting period for

6 Canadian Press, More Dads Staying Home with Newborns: StatsCan, at www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20030321/parental_leave_statscan_030321?s_name=&no_ads=z consulted November 21, 2005.

maternity leave and extends benefits to self-employed mothers)

- making it easier to work part-time (the option that a great majority of parents with preschoolers say they would prefer, if it were financially possible)
- facilitating flexible work schedules (parents in two-earner families might be able to organize their work schedules to share care of their children; care by a parent was the preferred option for looking after children)

The family-centred paradigm also points to the necessity of ensuring that children's developmental needs are met by high-quality services. While the quality of non-parental care certainly makes a difference in outcomes for children, longitudinal research clearly demonstrates that parents have the greatest and most long-lasting impact. High-quality services must therefore be directed both to children and to their families. Among other measures, attention must be paid to:

- strengthening family-centred early learning options (for example, neighbourhood parent-child/caregiver-child programs, such as Ontario Early Years Centres, Alberta Parent-Link Centres, family resource programs found in all provinces; toy libraries; neighbourhood play groups; parent cooperative nursery schools)
- providing adequate funding for child care centres, notably to improve staff-child ratios, staff qualifications and wages (some of the main factors linked to quality care)
- reinforcing the family support potential of early learning and care programs and offering family support in other settings, to strengthen parents' responsive care in the home (still the most important influence on children's future)
- providing training and support for care by relatives and home-based child care (the options for non-parental care that parents prefer)

Conclusion

Thanks in part to the efforts of activists in the women's movement and child care advocates, many changes have taken place

[Early childhood development and parenting] centres would allow families to become part of a support system for their child's development and help parents learn about parenting by doing.

Dr. Fraser Mustard, in the *Bulletin of The Centre Of Excellence For Early Childhood Development*, Volume 3, no. 1, March 2004.

in women's participation in the labour force and in the ways families are organized. However, it is no longer sufficient to act as if women are the only stakeholders when it comes to child care arrangements. Both fathers and mothers want to participate in the work force *and* spend more time with their children when they are young. Fathers are and want to be more involved in the process of raising their children. An important part of raising children is exposing them to a wide variety of learning environments, well before they begin kindergarten. Finally, communities and society as a whole benefit when the family unit is strengthened. A responsive dialogue would be one that includes the perspectives of the whole family—mothers, fathers and children—in all its modern permutations. It is clear that parents need a variety of supports *including* non-parental

child care; the Canadian government needs to take this opportunity to frame the future for Canadian families. Fundamentally we need to ask ourselves: How can we best support parents to raise Canada's children? The answer lies not in compartmentalizing our interests but in pooling our passion and supporting parents in the most important job they will ever do.

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