

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Early Childhood Care and Education

Q Why is early childhood care and education an equality issue?

A One can argue for better access to early childhood care and education from a variety of perspectives.

Child advocates think about children's developmental needs and the rights of children to receive quality care in order to meet those needs. Economists argue for early childhood service as a vital piece of societal infrastructure that invites people to work and helps the economy grow.

A women's equality perspective acknowledges that women are the primary caregivers of children and emphasizes the need for quality, regulated service as a means to support women in that role and in their other roles as employees, students, managers, business owners - whatever an individual woman may choose.

As long as women are not as free as men to pursue work/study goals along with parenting, then they cannot be called "equal."

At the same time, children will not get the kind of service that will nurture them and stimulate their learning and the economy will not benefit from a fully engaged, productive workforce.

This is also an equality issue when we consider the plight of early childhood educators, mostly women, who care for children and help them learn - all within a shaky set of working conditions that cannot be tolerated much longer.

While governments have moved to adopt a children's agenda - championing children's rights to healthy development - they have not been as quick to champion the rights of the women who

support that development.

Early childhood educators working in both regulated and unregulated settings are the working poor, even though they do what is often called the most important job in society.

Q Why are early childhood educators so under-paid and under-valued?

A This situation likely grew out of a tradition that named child care as "women's work," something that came naturally to women, did not require significant skill or energy, and was not paid.

It is true that for most of history, women worked at home and cared for children and never got paid. When women started joining the paid workforce in greater numbers about thirty years ago, they added their paid responsibilities to their caregiving tradition without any significant shift in society's perceptions of the nature and value of caregiving.

As regulated child care systems developed, workers never gained much in terms of status because of the perception that any woman could do their work. After all, someone had once done it for free. How valuable could it be?

One also has to wonder whether there is still resistance to the idea of women taking equal roles in all spheres of society. Otherwise, wouldn't society support them as fully as possible in a basic and crucial need like child care? And, wouldn't society demand that women who meet the need for care receive fair compensation?

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Early Childhood Care and Education

Q What's the difference between regulated and unregulated child care?

A Regulated care refers to child care programs that are licensed by the Province of PEI. As licensed programs, they are required to meet certain standards. For example, they have particular staff:child ratios and certain education requirements for staff. These regulations are enforced by the Child Care Facilities Board.

Regulated programs receive ongoing support from the Department of Health and Social Services in developing and maintaining the quality of their learning environments and learning approaches. As well, low income parents who access regulated programs may be eligible for fee subsidies to help with child care costs and certain regulated programs receive operating grants.

Unregulated caregivers offer a private service negotiated with the parent. These caregivers do not have access to ongoing program support, fee subsidy payments, or operating grants. Unregulated care is usually offered in a private home, often while a woman cares for her own children in the home.

Q Is unregulated care bad care? Unsafe for children? Wrong for caregivers?

A Not necessarily. The only thing that can accurately be said about unregulated care is that the public doesn't know whether it's good care or bad care. Many parents and children may be very satisfied with the service they receive.

Others may feel that it is the only option that they can afford and access, given the money they earn and where they live.

Some caregivers have reported that providing care in their own homes is the only way that they can afford to care for their own children. Some say that the income is very unstable.

Keeping care hidden makes it difficult to address access issues for parents and employment issues for caregivers.

Regulated care doesn't mean institutionalized care. Home child care programs can also be regulated and, thus, receive public support and become more visible.

Q Isn't caregiving a parental responsibility? Why should government be involved?

A Yes, parents have primary responsibility for their children but, increasingly, it is becoming obvious that children's optimal development depends on the entire community.

For example, in a study sponsored by Human Resources Development Canada called *Understanding the Early Years - Early Childhood Development on PEI*, results showed that PEI children were doing well and that the support within PEI communities played a big part in their development.

It is the combination of parents, community, and public investment that helps children grow and learn.

Looking at the issue from a purely economic

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Early Childhood Care and Education

perspective, it is true that governments make significant investments in the economy in many ways. For example, they maintain transportation systems, provide financial incentives to businesses, and invest in training and education. Providing quality child care services is just as much a public responsibility as any of those other activities.

Q **Aren't governments already doing work in this area? I keep hearing announcements about early childhood services and programs.**

A That's right. There has been some action lately, both provincially and federally.

Child care is a provincial responsibility and, over the past thirty years, a lot of work has been done to develop appropriate programs. Here on PEI, the provincial government and the early childhood sector developed policy and regulatory frameworks throughout the 1970s and 1980s and, by the 1990s, a system - underfunded and incomplete as it might be - was in place and ready for fine-tuning and expansion.

Unfortunately, at the same time, budget cutting began and there were no opportunities for new investment in the sector. For the past decade, women in the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors have worked to maintain quality service, despite that lack of investment.

Back in 1970, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women recommended that the federal government create a national child care program to be offered in all provinces and territories.

Since then, every federal government has

promised to implement such a program and, to date, every government failed to deliver on that promise.

In the late 1990s, children's issues became part of government agendas. In 2000, Prince Edward Island signed the *National Children's Agenda* and the *Early Childhood Development Initiative* and launched its own *Healthy Child Development Strategy* that included delivering a universal kindergarten program.

The *Early Childhood Development Initiative* was a disappointment to many child care advocates. Dollars allocated to the provinces through this agreement did not necessarily have to go to child care and education. And, in fact, here on PEI, 37.6% of those funds were directed towards that purpose compared to between 43% and 66% in other Atlantic provinces.

The most recent announcement was the signing of the *Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care*. This framework allocates \$935 million over five years for child care and education programs.

PEI will receive \$100,000 in the first year with increments over the next four years in order to improve access to regulated child care.

A lot of child care advocates are hailing this as a "good start," noting that it would take a much higher level of investment in order to develop a truly universal program.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Early Childhood Care and Education

Q What do you mean by “universal program?”

A For a program to be considered universal, all parents would have equal access to quality child care and education, regardless of income, geographic location, family type, or any other factor.

Other Western nations besides Canada offer such programs. Governments such as those in France, Germany, and Sweden view child care as a necessary part of societal infrastructure and allocate about 1% of their country’s Gross Domestic Product for that purpose.

The closest thing to universal programming here in Canada is offered in Quebec where, for \$5/day/child, parents can send their children to provincially subsidized community-based child care centres. That provincial government has chosen to forge ahead without a federal commitment.



Reports from Quebec indicate that things are far from perfect with the current system. In some respects, it is growing too rapidly, placing great demands on early childhood educators to provide service within this new structure.

Some parents would argue that it is not growing fast enough as it can be difficult to find spaces at provincially subsidized centres.

Lately, the newly elected provincial government has indicated that it may make some changes to this system.

Q You keep mentioning the word “quality.” What does quality mean in relation to child care and education?

A Caring for children means more than protecting their health and safety. It means being able to provide valuable learning experiences that promote children’s physical, emotional, spiritual, social, language, and intellectual development.

Research is showing that the most crucial years for learning are the pre-school years when the child’s brain is growing and developing. Those are the years when nurturing and appropriate stimulation will reap long-term benefits as children develop self-worth, self-confidence, and a host of new skills that will serve them for a lifetime.

Right now, a lot of Island child care programs are providing this type of environment. There is a culture of quality here on PEI.

A recently developed project that uses an internationally recognized evaluation and learning tool to help child care programs assess and improve what they offer shows that Island programs are doing well. But, the long term stability of this quality care may be at risk as owner/operators of programs find it increasingly difficult to meet the basic infrastructure costs, including staff, facilities, and continuing education.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Early Childhood Care and Education

Q How much money would it take to provide a national, universal, quality program?

A Two researchers, Dr. Gordon Cleveland and Dr. Michael Krashinsky, explored this question in a 1998 report, *The Benefits and Costs of Good Child Care*. They concluded that a national, universal, quality program would cost about \$5.3 billion annually, or less than 1% of Canada's annual Gross Domestic Product. And, they demonstrated that, for every dollar invested in high quality child care, there would be a \$2.00 benefit for a total benefit of \$10.54 billion.

Q How would providing child care result in economic gain?

A The researchers suggest there would be gains derived from child development benefits and parental employment benefits.

They present research showing that, regardless of socio-economic background, children who participate in early childhood education perform significantly better in school than those who do not participate.

High risk children who participate in pre-school programs are far more likely to complete high school, go on to post-secondary studies, and be gainfully employed and less likely to commit a crime or require public assistance than their counterparts who did not participate in such programs. An investment in the early years will pay off as the child develops and grows into a healthy, functioning adult.

Having access to quality, affordable care would mean increased workforce participation by single mothers and women from two-parent families. The researchers found that, if child care costs were fully subsidized, the rate of full-time employment for mothers would increase by about 20% nationally.

At the same time, public investment in high quality early childhood care and education would create 170,000 new jobs for Canadian child care workers in the regulated sector while eliminating 250,000 jobs in the unregulated sector. While the net effect on employment would be negative, the new jobs would be better ones with increased pay and benefits.

Both of these changes would mean that there would be lower social spending on children and families and higher tax revenue for the government.

Q Is this all about money? What about parent-child relationships?

A This is all about choices, not about money. The changes being suggested simply reflect the realities of today's society. Most mothers of young children also work outside the home and when the primary caregiver is not available, someone needs to look after the children.

Right now, it is mostly left to parents to figure out how to get care for their children. If we really valued the parent-child bond, we would not make it so difficult for them to get their basic needs met.

Relationships blossom when both parent and child feel secure and happy in their life choices and work/learning environments.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Early Childhood Care and Education

Q What about women who choose to care for their own children? Are they being left out of the picture?

A Whether caregivers are paid or unpaid, they need support in their role. A minority of women do choose to care for their own children in their own home and they have a variety of reasons for doing so. That is as legitimate a choice as any other that a woman might make. But, it is true that any woman who makes that choice will suffer an economic loss as she will not derive an income from the work she does with her own children.

That is why governments need to work towards innovations that will help women make that choice without such severe economic consequences. For example, could caregivers make CPP contributions for their retirement? Could they claim their own child care contribution on tax returns? What can be done to support parental choices?

And, let us not forget that no woman can provide care for her children all the time. Women working in the home can benefit from quality services like occasional care or emergency care along with parent support and information services. Child care is not an all-or-nothing scenario. It's required by all parents at least some of the time.

Q What are some issues that are specific to PEI and need addressing?

A There are some unique scenarios in PEI that make policy making and service delivery challenging. First, it should be noted that Island women have the highest labour force

participation rate in the country, about 20% higher than the national average. And, a lot of that work is seasonal, creating unique demands for flexible services in rural areas. At the same time, we have pockets of urban-based mother-led families with lower incomes and specific needs.

Our kindergarten program is different than in the rest of the country, offered in community settings, not in the public school system. And, overall, we still have greater access to extended family and community support systems than what may be available in many other parts of the country.

We have a solid base of caring for children here on PEI. What may be missing is a similar level of concern for those who provide the care - mostly women.

Q What do women want, then?

A Each individual woman could make a list of their own "wants," tailored to meet their own individual circumstances. But, overall, what women need is for all of society to share in the responsibilities associated with caring for, nurturing, and educating young children.

Right now, in terms of time, energy, and financial commitment, Island women are bearing the brunt of this huge commitment. The costs of providing quality care and education to the Island's young children are already being paid ... mostly by women themselves.

For the sake of fairness and equality and to achieve the best possible outcomes for everyone, this situation needs to change.