

REAL QUESTIONS ABOUT UNIVERSAL CHILD CARE

Since the start of the pandemic, calls for universal child care have picked up steam. Before pursuing this policy approach, however, there are important questions to answer. These questions pertain to all aspects of child care—accessibility, quality, and cost. Every family is different, and child care needs and desires vary.

Will a federally funded, universal system be able to meet these needs?

THE QUESTION: DO THOSE WHO OPPOSE A NATIONAL DAYCARE SYSTEM ALSO OPPOSE WORKING MOTHERS?

Concerns about universal models stem less from an opposition to something than from a commitment to mothers choosing what works best for their family. Universal child care fails to meet the diverse needs of Canadian families. It is possible that some believe mothering to be a job all on its own, demanding full-time attention, but it is at least as likely, and perhaps more likely, that opposition to national daycare stems from a personal preference for more flexible, diverse forms of care that are more local and based in the home.¹ There are many reasons to engage in waged work on a full- or part-time basis, whether a parent or not. Many view a government push for highly subsidized child care as stemming less from a desire to enhance family choices and more to serving business or union interests.² Whatever the view, it is worth understanding the concerns of those opposed, rather than making assumptions about why these views are held.

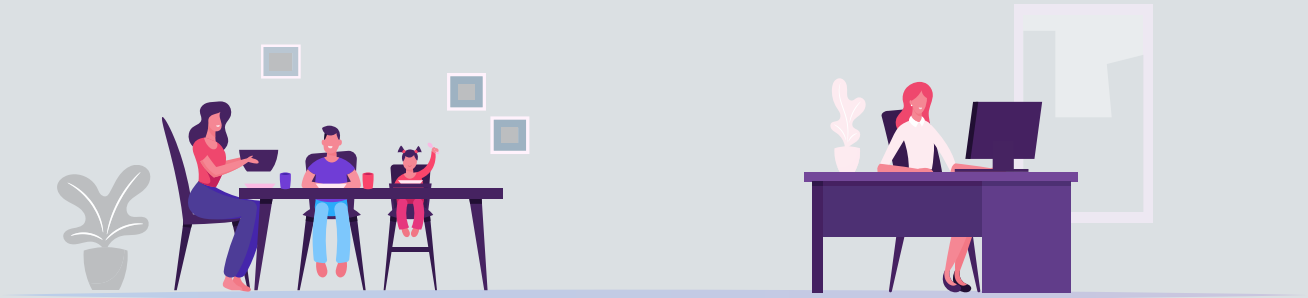
Those against national daycare are sometimes mischaracterized as being against women's rights. This is ironic, given the drive to help families have more time together, with greater diversity of choices in care—values often associated with the progressive left. This may be why the coalition of those opposed to national daycare includes Canadians from a variety of backgrounds and political persuasions.

Other viable options to enhance mothers' choices include ensuring that mothers are not penalized when they return to the paid labour force after a longer period raising children. Policy here might include changing, lengthening, or making parental leave more flexible, or ensuring that occupational regulations don't place undue burdens on the mothers re-entering paid employment. Likewise, institutional settings

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1. Rick August, “What Child Care Do Parents Really Want?,” August 2015, <http://rickaugust.ca/what-child-care-do-parents-really-want/>.

2. Tasha Kheiriddin, “Liberals’ ‘National Childcare’ Plan Serves Unions and Business Interests, Not Parents | National Post,” *National Post*, December 1, 2020, <https://nationalpost.com/news/tasha-kheiriddin-liberals-national-childcare-plan-serves-unions-and-business-interests-not-parents>.



such as universities, hospitals, and businesses should not penalize employees (mothers or fathers) for taking time off from their jobs to raise their children in the early years. Inherent in this type of discussion is the recognition that parenting is hard, valuable work, as is care work of any kind, paid or unpaid.

We have a tendency to honour paid caregivers and ignore those who are unpaid, particularly if they are family. A better question is to ask why those who favour nationalized models of child care appear to place the burden for economic recovery on the shoulders of mothers with young children.

THE TAKEAWAY

One reason why we don't have a national daycare system after fifty years of advocacy is that the majority of voters, including mothers, don't want it. Understanding the varied reasons why many reject national daycare will help engender myriad other imaginative policy solutions, allowing a more neutral approach to the various vocations that parents pursue.