

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: DOES THE QUEBEC MODEL HELP PARENTS?

Research shows that parents in Quebec, Canada's only province with a "universal" system, have poorer health, poorer (parental) relationships, and "less consistent parenting."

The Quebec model incorporates state-run centres and home-based child care funded by the government, along with subsidies for parents using private care, resulting in similar user costs for parents. Researchers Baker, Gruber, and Milligan found that "the new (Quebec) childcare program led to more hostile, less consistent parenting, worse parental health, and lower-quality parental relationships."¹ Subsequent research showed changes in parenting behaviours, to the detriment of children, particularly girls. Lehrer and Kottelenberg write, "In general, families with girls increasingly experience worse home environments. . . . Following the introduction of subsidized child care, on average, girls face significantly lower levels of parent consistency and lower levels of positive interactions with their parents relative to boys."²

THE TAKEAWAY

Child care is the care of a child, no matter who does it, and acknowledging this important definition puts parents in the driver's seat of their children's care. Given the primary role that parents play in caring for their child(ren), favouring a system that correlates with poorer parenting and parental relationships is counterproductive. Should the federal government follow the Quebec model, when peer-reviewed research shows it correlates with negative outcomes for parents?

1. Michael Baker, Jonathan Gruber, and Kevin Milligan, "Universal Child Care, Maternal Labor Supply, and Family Well-Being," *Journal of Political Economy* 116, no. 4 (August 2008): 709–45.

2. Michael J. Kottelenberg and Steven F. Lehrer, "Does Quebec's Subsidized Child Care Policy Give Boys and Girls an Equal Start?," Working Paper, Working Paper Series, National Bureau of Economic Research, March 2017, <https://doi.org/10.3386/w23259>.