

Canada “dead last” in spending; Expert urges replacing “chaotic mess” of programs with “community hubs”

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EXCERPTS FROM ARTICLE – emphases added

Canada ranks "dead last" among developed nations in its spending on early childhood education - despite overwhelming evidence of how crucial the first six years of life are, says a new study by the country's foremost expert in the field.

One problem is the country-wide "chaotic mess" of programs and assistance that exists now, says renowned child development expert Dr. Fraser Mustard.

To replace it, Mustard proposes a system of community hubs, ideally located in schools, that would offer play-based preschool activities, help for parents, social service referrals and child care.

In Ontario alone, Mustard estimates the cost of behavioural and mental health problems triggered by problems in early childhood to be \$30 billion; with programs in place, "that could get down to less than \$15 billion a year, and probably even lower than that,"

It puts Canada last among the 30 nations in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development,

In fact, Canada spends just 0.25 per cent of its GDP on early childhood programs - less than even the United States - whereas other developed nations spend up to 2 per cent.

If Ottawa was to spend at least 1 per cent of its GDP, that would equal \$10 billion, the report says, which would more than cover the cost of child/parenting centres.

Studies have also shown that the return on investment for early childhood programs is eight to one; with primary and secondary education, the return becomes three to one.

On a national basis, the report notes, child benefits, family leave and early childhood programs are "the three prongs of a sound family policy.

"Canada has made relative progress on the first two."

Early Years Study 2 Putting Science Into Action, by Mustard, Margaret Norrie McCain and Stuart Shanker of York University, is a 185-page follow-up to the groundbreaking 1999 Early Years Study Mustard and McCain were commissioned to do by the provincial Conservative government.

About one-quarter of Canadian children experience some learning or behavioural difficulty by age 6. By not intervening in the early years, "that's a huge opportunity lost," said Elena DiBattista, director of Peel's Success by 6 program, which is mentioned in the report for its initiatives.

"If you don't maximize access to services at that point, you're missing the point."

While Mustard has had the ear of governments around the world, he's still trying to get the government in his own backyard to listen.

"Here I am as a thinker in residence to the government of South Australia," Mustard said. "They understand the subject and will probably move on it. That says what's the matter with our country? It's as simple as that."

"People have intuitively understood the importance of early childhood development for hundreds of years," Mustard noted. "But now that scientific knowledge has come through to explain how the development of the brain in the earliest years - this is before a child enters the school system - sets trajectories of physical and mental health that will last throughout life, as well as learning behaviour, that's pretty fundamental.

"Only about one-third of the population are actually highly competent parents, the rest are okay, but about 17 per cent are godawful," said Mustard. "You do have to improve parenting - parents have a huge impact on brain development."

Studies have shown that early learning and behaviour problems can lead to poor school performance, social maladjustment, criminal behaviour, substance abuse and health problems later on.

"Even the amount of stress a baby is exposed to ... can determine not just how well they do in school, but if they're happy or have solid social relationships and also their physical health, mental health and their risk of depression, autoimmune disorders, cancer, whatever," said Shanker, an expert in developmental neuroscience and now president of the early childhood council.

"We are now beginning to appreciate the social enormity of these problems, plus the cost to society," said Shanker. "It's very expensive to do intervention on a school-age child and at best you'll only succeed about half the time."