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Fund the child, not the system

The truth is that affordable, high-quality, universal child care is bad for kids, says child-care activist KATE TENNIER

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During an all-candidates meeting on child care last month, prominent NDP MP Olivia Chow said that a national child-care program would be good for the economy. This was a remarkable statement, not only because it betrayed the hidden agenda of a national child-care program (it's about the economy, not kids) but because it was wrong. Liberal and Bloc Québécois politicians also made this erroneous assertion before the election and we now have some provincial premiers demanding that the myth of affordable, high quality child care not be abandoned.

Many Canadians voted for the Conservatives in this past election due to their promise that their child-care program would fund families with young children rather than fund a national child-care bureaucracy. But, in equal measure, people also voted for the termination of those provincial daycare deals.

While we in the growing, grassroots fund-the-child movement have been portrayed by paid daycare activists as being rich whiners, unwilling to extend the benefits of state daycare to the little people, nothing could be further from the truth. Not only does our membership include families living below the poverty line and families where both parents do paid work, but our main goal is to ensure that misguided government policy not be inflicted on Canadian families.

The truth is that affordable, high-quality, universal child care is bad for kids and bad for the economy. The problem lies more with a daycare program than daycare itself, something a growing body of research and evidence is demonstrating.

Studies conducted by the U.S. government's National Institute of Child Health and Human Development indicate that the amount of time away from parents, more than the kind of child care itself, is the determining factor as to whether a child will develop behavioural problems. And while it has been thought that parental sensitivity could counter any negative effects of child care, an interesting discovery by a study of Quebec's child-care system released last week showed that the more a child and parent are apart, due to the parents' greater participation in the work force, the more problematic and less sensitive can be the parenting. While the answer to that would be to promote part-time work, a large bureaucratically controlled program is not responsive enough to deliver part-time and variable-use care in a cost-effective manner. Rather, we hear politicians demand that daycare spaces be funded -- what that refers to is full-time child-care spaces be funded with full-time staff. A child-care centre would not be fully funded if it was not reaching its full capacity. Sure enough, in Quebec, most child-care providers vastly favour the delivery of full-time spots.

Adding to this impetus toward full-time care is the fact that, outside Quebec, the subsidized daycare flowing from the federal Liberal program would have been offered to the neediest families first. It would be rational and, perhaps, even necessary for low-income parents to make full use of their subsidized spot as their earnings from a low paying, service-sector job would simply not be enough if they were to only work part-time.

In other words, the system encourages parents to stay away from their kids.

Currently, almost half of Canada's children under 6 are still cared for by parents, and the other half average only 27 hours per week in child care. The continuation of the daycare deals would actually encourage parents to spend less time with their children and, in the process, sabotage the one ingredient necessary for positive child-outcomes -- time with their parents.

Part-time, government controlled care is not economically efficient, but full-time delivery is not much better. The increased labour force participation by mothers after the 1997 introduction of universal daycare in Quebec has not generated enough taxes to cover the cost of that province's subsidized daycare program. While the public did not benefit from increased tax revenue, and the benefits to families were mixed due to reduced child and parenting outcomes, the corporate sector came out ahead. It acquired a new source of cheap labour -- "cheap" because it did not have to pay the true costs of acquiring it -- specifically, the cost of child care.

Most parents would prefer to care for their children themselves; more families are turning to care by relatives, and a majority of stay-at-home parents say they would like to work part-time. When combined with the fact that government controlled child care has never been proven on the whole to be better than the choices parents currently use, the only cost effective and responsive policy is to fund the child, both universally and on a sliding scale.

The great news is that because of the drastically reduced overhead and greater efficiencies of this model, only a portion of the amount earmarked for public daycare would need to be directed to parents. And, because many parents would make choices other than daycare, this would free up spaces for those who felt that a centre was the best choice for their child, thereby solving the daycare shortage.

Finally, as for the early-learning component of this costly government program, not once during my years teaching Grade 1 did I hear a colleague wish that a child had spent more time in an early-learning program. What we did wish for was the encouragement of a culture of learning in each and every home. When state controlled daycare does not benefit the public economy, when the parent-as-educator is the most effective model for early-learning delivery, and when more daycare is not actually better for kids, the only justifiable government policy is to fund the child.

Kate Tennier, a Toronto mother, is founder of Advocates for Child Care Choice, part of a grassroots fund-the-child movement.