



## **New national childcare poll lets Canadians express their preferences**

### ***Seventy-six percent say it's best for children under six to be at home with a parent***

By Andrea Mrozek

Who knows what is best for children? Parents or politicians? Families or bureaucrats?

Parents are rarely asked what they want in the perennial daycare debates. Legislators weigh in. Educators weigh in. Activists weigh in. But parents—too tired to write up press releases after the kids go to bed and lacking a union to speak for them—are an afterthought.

The end result is family policy that pushes for more institutional, government-funded care. In Ontario, the expansion of all-day kindergarten was initially intended as a first step toward universal daycare. The costs are completely unwieldy, so this is likely where the expansion will stop. And yet, voices still cry for more and more daycare spaces, purportedly to benefit parents.

As it turns out, this is not what parents want. We can see this very clearly thanks to a new poll, which examines parental childcare preferences nation-wide.

The results show that seventy-six percent of Canadians in general and 69% of Canadian parents with children under six right now believe it is best for small children to be at home with a parent.

The poll further asks how the government should spend money to look after children. Sixty-one percent of Canadians believe that government money should go straight to families.

Only 12% believe that government should provide subsidies to daycare centres. A mere 10% believe that the government should expand the public school system so that daycare for children of all ages is included. Adding those together, that's still only about one in five parents who agree with the current direction of some provincial governments.

It's true that the poll is limited to asking about parental desires. There's a lot the poll doesn't address.

**It doesn't address the research showing that early learning programs are not the leg up in life that we are told children need to excel. Many of the much-touted benefits of "early learning" fade away in the medium to long term.**

Neither does the poll ask how families make alternate child care arrangements. We do know that even those who identify as “staying at home” are, most often, working in some capacity. Flexible work and care arrangements are key for parents working part-time or doing hours that aren’t nine to five.

What we do see in this poll is that from coast to coast, there is a high consensus amongst Canadians that the best place for small children is with their parents. It’s a no-brainer result, in many regards, because no one on their death bed ever wished they had spent more time in the office.

Still, it’s interesting that this belief is universally held regardless of age, income, gender or even province.

**Eighty-three percent of Albertans believe children are best cared for at home by a parent. British Columbia comes in next at 80%, followed by Atlantic Canada at 79%, Ontario at 75% and Saskatchewan and Manitoba at 75%. Even in Quebec, which has a state-funded, provincial daycare system, 70% believe this is true.**

Those pushing for free or low-cost institutional daycare claim they are helping children, parents and the economy at large. There is little substance to those claims.

Nor is there any substance to the sort of attack that comes when groups like ours speak about parental care. Dr. Charles Pascal, former education advisor to then-premier of Ontario Dalton McGuinty, is quoted in the May 27, 2013 issue of Maclean’s saying: “I understand there’s a world view out there that if women stayed home that the kids would be raised perfectly and there would be more jobs for the boys.”

What Dr. Pascal may not realize is that with those words, he is insulting the three quarters of Canadians who neither believe women must stay home, nor wish there were “more jobs for the boys,” but rather, quite simply, believe it is best for young children to be cared for by the person closest to them, most likely a parent. Seventy-five percent of women and 77% of men in our poll say it’s best if one parent stays home to care for small children. This is neither strange nor extreme.

This is not an issue that ought to be decided by bureaucrats, educators or unions. The question is: Why does government policy on this file not even come close to meeting the aspirational goals of the majority of parents?

Flexibility and freedom is the solution in the perennial daycare debates.

*Andrea Mrozek is Executive Director of the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada ([www.imfcanada.org](http://www.imfcanada.org)).*

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