

Kids deserve Liberals' day-care promise

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The writ has been dropped, and they're off. Like divorced parents vying for their children's affections with ever more expensive toys, the leaders seek to buy our votes by outdoing each other with the promise of goodies.

The Liberals have unveiled their \$500-million national child care plan.

The Conservatives say their \$100 a month to families for every child under six gives parents choice. Actually, it does nothing of the kind for parents who must put their children into institutional day care, because it barely makes a dent in the cost.

The Liberals, however, say they wouldn't cancel the \$100 a month.

I am not a fervent supporter of day care. As a single mother for many years, I had to put my children in day care so I could go to work. And with one exception, the many day cares my children attended in Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba were awful. They looked bright and clean on the surface, and the staff were chirpy and cheery, but a parent who's dropping kids off and picking them up for a few minutes each day doesn't see what really goes on.

It was only through unannounced visits that I saw sanitation practices were abysmal at those day cares (staff going from changing diapers to preparing food without washing their hands; open garbage cans with flies buzzing around next to where children ate; babies not kept properly clean so that they developed horrendous diaper rashes). Bottom line: the staff weren't paid enough to care.

We should accept the reality that many parents use institutional day care, and make it better by funding it properly.

Recently, the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada issued a news release citing its own 2006 poll that asked parents which child care arrangements they prefer.

"Parents don't actually choose institutional day care as their No. 1 choice," said Andrea Mrozek, the institute's manager of research and communications.

It doesn't surprise me that more than 80 per cent of parents said they'd prefer to have one parent at home with the kids, with their preferences after that being a relative caring for the kids, then a family day care, followed by a non-profit, and last, a for-profit day care.

The operative word here is "prefer." I'd prefer to win the lottery, too, but in the absence of that, I think I'll show up for work tomorrow.

Reached at her Ottawa office Tuesday, Mrozek proposed alternatives to institutional day care, including "local community solutions," such as "neighbourhood care centres, family care." What does a local community solution look like?

Mrozek explained there might be "parents whose children go to the same school or live in the same area, their kids take ballet lessons at the same community centre." This would lead to parents chatting and setting up child care arrangements in each other's homes. "While parents may be going off to work, they may like the opportunity of being able to offer some compensation to a neighbourhood family or someone who helps with afterschool care," she said.

Is anyone going to do a police check on the individuals in that home? How will a parent know that what goes on in the home all day meets her own standards of care? How will she know if the children are properly supervised outdoors? What about safety and other things that day cares and licensed family day homes are regulated for?

"If there's going to be help for every family, have it be accessible," Mrozek said. She argues that the \$100 monthly payments are a step in the right direction because they enable parents to choose all sorts of options.

"Why wouldn't you put more money into parents' pockets?" she asked.

"Look at Quebec; they created all those spaces. There are still wait lists in Quebec. This is the endless conundrum . . . When we look at solutions, we shouldn't look at spaces which are not enough, and the government creates more. There are a lot of options that don't include the government creating spaces," she said. Among those are grandparents and other family members.

Maybe the other family members work. Maybe the grandparents are enjoying their freedom and don't want to care for their grandchildren 10 hours a day, five days a week.

Mrozek takes issue with those who focus only on the positive side of institutional day care. "Often, there's a bit of a skew that only the positive side comes out. Slam dunk, universally positive. If that is my circumstance (that I'd need institutional day care for my child), I'd like to be aware of the pitfalls."

I agree. The pitfalls -and there are plenty of them -are too often glossed over. So, let's fix them. Institutional day care is not going to disappear. A national plan, in which Ottawa gives money to the provinces for day care, would fund improved facilities, higher salaries for staff, and all those other good things.

"I do think there is a need for targeted programs for those who have no other option," Mrozek said.

Me, too. We should stop squabbling over ideology and focus on funding top quality institutional day care for the children who need it.