

NATIONAL POST

Stop pushing us to outsource parenthood

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Who should care for our children? A study published this week by the Institute for Marriage and Family Canada found that three quarters of Canadians believe that parents should. Of those polled, 76% said that it is best for children under six to be home with Mom or dad, versus 18% who believe it is best for them to be with another competent caregiver (6% didn't know). Even in couples where both parents work, 74% believe parent care is best. The view is also consistent across demographic, gender, income and regional lines -and in Quebec, home of \$7-a-day daycare, where 70% of those polled think parents make the best caregivers for their children.

Financially, many families feel they cannot afford a parental stay-at-home option, and thus need an alternative. According to parents with children under the age of six, their non-parental preferences are, in order, relatives (50%), neighbourhood home daycare (24%), not-for-profit daycare (15%), and for-profit daycare (6%).

In other words, family and family-like settings trump institutional daycare across the board. So why are so many governments and political parties running in the other direction, promising to create more big-box spaces, implement full-day junior kindergarten, and find other creative ways to outsource our kids?

The answer lies in who's got the loudest lobby - and in Canada, it isn't stay-at-home parents, it's unions.

Check out the websites of pro-daycare organizations, and you will find that they are dominated by, if not heavily associated with, the labour union movement. The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care bills itself as "non-partisan," but co-sponsors its events with the Ontario section of the Canadian Union of Public Employees. The website of the B.C. group cantaffordchildcare.ca, which is promoting \$10-a-day childcare, is run by the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union. And a favoured guest of organizations in both provinces is NdP MP Olivia Chow, who isn't exactly on the side of management.

Why is organized labour on the front lines of the childcare debate? It's not hard to guess. daycare and full-day kindergarten represent a growth industry for the union movement, which has seen its membership decline in recent years, as manufacturing jobs and traditional employers such as Canada Post feel the pinch of a changing economy.

Big labour's involvement in child care, however, is not positive for families. When governments implement cheap state-funded child-care, unionized providers step in, drive up costs - and go on strike. Last year in Quebec, daycare workers walked off the job, inconveniencing thousands of parents; their demands included six weeks of holidays after 15 years service. And over time, their wage demands have pushed the cost of the program sky-high. According to CIRANO, a leading Quebec research Institute, in 1996 Quebec's then \$5-a-day daycare was estimated to cost taxpayers \$288 million a year - but by 2010, they were forking out \$2-billion annually.

Other initiatives, like full-day junior kindergarten, also cost Canadians dearly, while reducing options for parents.

Case in point: my neighbourhood in the Ontario town of Whitby boasts three local public schools. Not one offers just half-day junior kindergarten. At one school, which shall remain nameless, the registrar told me that they would be forced to mark my daughter as "absent/truant" if she left at lunchtime. (She also added that she wouldn't send her own child to school all day there at the age of four.) So this fall I will end up driving my daughter 15 minutes each way to a private half-day program in another part of town, while paying taxes for the full-day JK I don't want.

Unlike in Canada, in the United Kingdom, the voices of stay-at-home or part-time working parents do get attention. A debate has raged since early this year about the UK government's proposal to increase the number of children cared for by outside caregivers. Last week, the groundswell of opposition from stay-at-home parents forced Prime Minister David Cameron to declare that he did not want to force mothers of small children to go back to work - and to explore other options such as a marriage tax break.

In Cameron's words, "The idea is not to dictate to people what they should do, but to support the choices they make." It's a mantra that more Canadian governments would live by if they paid attention to what parents really want.