



Raising kids shouldn't be a luxury

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When did staying home to raise your own children become the Mercedes-Benz of options?

Late last week, the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada released a poll showing 76% of Canadians believe it is best for children under six to be at home with a parent.

In short, no matter how good the daycare provider, Canadians believe small children are better off with their parents.

If that's not possible, they prefer a home-like environment.

Some called the results a no-brainer.

Wouldn't everyone prefer a Mercedes to a KIA or a Ford?

It may be best, they said, but realistically, most Canadians just can't afford it.

This sentiment implies two things.

The first is that staying home with small children is a luxury.

Secondly, as with all luxury items, it implies that staying home with small children isn't terribly important.

It's like 16-way power adjustable heated seats or voice-controlled GPS; nice to have, but not necessary.

These thoughts build on stereotypes that are neither true, nor particularly fair.

First of all, many parents who are classified as "both working full-time" are often juggling their schedules to allow one parent to always be at home with the kids.

We have no evidence that only wealthy families are staying home with children.

We do have evidence from Quebec, the only province with a highly subsidized provincial daycare plan, that higher income earners benefit more from the program than low-income earners.

Public policy today preferentially funds one form of care: Daycare spaces.

By doing so, it excludes other options.

If parents find it increasingly hard for a parent to stay home with small kids, it's not by accident.

Seventy percent of Albertans, 65% of Quebecers and 57% of Ontarians in our poll said they'd like funding to go directly to parents, instead of systems or spaces.

Yet provincial governments worry about expanding daycare spaces, instead of funding families.

They do so on a number of faulty claims.

They claim early learning programs are better for kids. They claim that pint-sized people are launched to Chris Hadfield heights through early learning.

They claim children in daycare improve their vocabularies, among other skills.

They feed into parental anxiety over child socialization.

Yet there's research they don't cite.

Young children don't need programs to be socialized, they need strong attachment figures.

Check out Dr. Gordon Neufeld's book *Hold On to Your Kids* for more information on this concept.

Studies further show that the educational benefits fade in the medium to long term.

For example, if your child excelled in preschool, don't necessarily assume he or she will also be graduating summa cum laude from Yale.

Finally, even in light of skyrocketing costs in Quebec, studies have gauged the quality of care to be poor.

Not a terribly impressive return on investment.

To return to the initial question: Is a parent at home the Mercedes-Benz of child-care choices?

Perhaps.

After all, parents offer high-quality care and the benefits last a long time.

It's just too bad government so often gets in the way of trading up.

— Andrea Mrozek is the Executive Director of the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. The new poll can be found at www.imfcanada.org/daycaresdesires

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