

## Universal child care

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Canada is definitely in a child care policy rut: There are many options and a universal, government-funded system is one of the least attractive. This, in spite of the vaunted cognitive benefits for children - things like improvements in spelling and math - that supposedly result from time spent in institutional care. Recent headlines have announced that universal child care pays off in learning down the road: and that is true - about one-tenth true. And something that is one-tenth true - would in turn be, is it nine-tenths false? (My math has always been weak. No universal child care for me; cue violins now.)

A recent Council of Ministers of Education of Canada report shows improved reading and math for 13-year-olds in Quebec over all other provinces. While this may indeed show longitudinal benefits of the universal child care system there, it may also show that early standardized government education can better pander to later standardized government testing.

In any event, "cognitive outcomes" are and should be only one factor in considering the care of our very youngest. Who wants a seriously smart child who wins the spelling bee on words like "vituperation"? (That's a "sustained and bitter condemnation" which in the case of a 13-year-old, will generally be aimed directly at her parents.)

There are, of course, other under-publicized outcomes for universal child care systems which include, but are not limited to: Wait lists in Quebec in spite of high funding levels, behavioural problems for kids persisting into the sixth grade and stress for parents - one study reporting that "mothers of the children in day care were more depressed. ... The quality of their parenting practices declined."

Canada deserves a more balanced approach. While institutional care is certainly not always bad, the same old ideas are trotted out in support of it, time and again, as if it were always good: It helps kids. And parents. It's what women want. It prevents leukemia. (That last one is new, but falls in line with the universal-child-care-can-cure-anything approach.)

In short, the ranks against universal care are entirely comprised of Scrooges, who work to wantonly deprive Tiny Tim of any chance at a normal life.

That's simply not the case. Rare is the study that actually shows institutional care to be better than parents in the early years. Perry Preschool in the U.S. - a decades-old study used to show the benefits of universal care - is actually evidence in favour of spending approximately \$15,000 per child (in today's dollars) in a targeted program involving moms at home too.

One of the authors of the largest, longitudinal child care study ever undertaken, Dr. Jay Belsky, says: "the evidence that some interventions can work, in the long run, slid into statements that all interventions do work - and have no downside."

A recent report from the United Kingdom highlighted the mixed results for children in day care, saying this: "A (2004) review for the National Audit Office pointed out that there are at best mixed results on the effects of child care in a child's first three years, with damaging effects reported just as often as positive results."

That British child care report recommends a weekly parental allowance instead of universal child care systems - a slightly more creative approach that allows all parents to have direct input in their children's lives, while easing some of the stress associated with raising kids in a world that seems to demand both parents work.

Support or oppose it, universal child care cannot replace good parents and will not create Ueberkinder. Pull out the finger paints and big Crayola markers - a little more imagination on child care policy could go a long way to avoiding a universal system that cannot possibly deliver what it promises.