

Promoting early learning isn't for the children

By Andrea Mrozek,
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'My kids have 'kennel cough,'" says John, a dad who has created this joking term for the ongoing sickness his children-in-daycare experience. "My four-year-old son is so tired at the end of the day that he falls asleep at the dinner table," says Marie. "I feel like I hardly see my children," complains Julie.

Though the names have been changed, these are the experiences of real parents. They use daycare because they must. And yet they are aware it's not ideal.

So why do activists, some government officials and now even bankers work to increase early learning funding? Last month, TD Bank joined hands with lobbyists declaring that "early childhood education has widespread and long-lasting benefits."

The report parrots an existing body of shoddy, non-peer-reviewed research. The conclusion is that "early learning" is the single most important thing we can do for our young children. They tell us "investment in early education can help to address core economic and social challenges ... can help reduce poverty, address skills shortages, improve productivity and innovation and a host of other national priorities."

But then they tell us to wait to launch these programs until provincial and federal budgets are balanced.

Wait a minute — if these programs really do "address core economic challenges," doesn't this mean they would also eradicate our deficit and debt? So what gives?

It appears the authors don't believe the miracle cure of their own recommendations.

The authors can't gloss over the fact that there is no way to accurately discern what the financial benefits of "early learning" are. "Quantifying these benefits is not an exact science and a large margin of error likely exists," they write.

They neglect the research revealing an increased chance of negative behaviours for children in too much institutional care. And they certainly don't mention that some of the studies they cite, like the intensive Perry Pre-School project for high-risk children, are not broadly applicable to the general population.

Intuitively, we know daycare is not a panacea. Quebec brought in provincial daycare in 1997. The costs have gone up about 850 per cent since then. The quality is mediocre and wait lists remain. Neither does there appear to be a return on investment. It's true that their miracle daycare children will only enter the workforce in approximately 2015 — no word yet on whether this will be before or after they are done rioting over tuition increases. In Sweden, the mother of all state-subsidized daycare programs, teens exhibit some of the poorest mental health of all European nations.

The TD Bank report emphasizes that they don't know "why schooling starts at ages 4-5." So let's clarify.

It's because some small children are actually only ready for schooling later, at the ripe old age of six or seven. It's because developmentally, our youngest children are at varying degrees of readiness for entering the decidedly adult outside world of classrooms with schedules, lineups, circle time, standardized nap times and organized play, led by a total stranger. It's because shyness is not a criminal trait for children. It's because there's no reason to be "school ready" before being potty trained.

It's because children need to have a sense of self. In the words of Dr. Gordon Neufeld, a Canadian developmental psychologist, they need to be able to "hold on to themselves" before they can handle engaging others. "Premature socialization," says Dr. Neufeld, "was always considered by developmental psychologists to be the greatest sin in raising children ... (w) hen you put children together prematurely before they can hold on to themselves, then they become like (the others) and it crushes the individuality rather than hones it."

In short, our penchant for standardized early learning programs may be wiping out the uniqueness of our children.

Early learning is critical. Children are like sponges, soaking up new things everywhere they go, starting even in utero. Early learning can be provided better by loving, consistently present adult role models — typically known as parents. In short, early learning happens outside classrooms and, gasp, without professional help. Parents, says Dr. Neufeld, are their child's best bet — not trained professionals.

So let's return to the question: Why are we pushing forward on these programs? Perhaps it's to expand the influence of the provincial ministries of education, since public schools are losing kids because of demographic decline. Perhaps it's to expand the pool of labour because Canada needs workers now.

If only one thing is abundantly clear, it's that investment in early learning is not for children. Parents like John, Marie and Julie intuitively know why, even when the nation's bankers do not.

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