



TD Bank on early learning: Do they believe their own recommendations?

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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 experience in daycare. "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? On November 27, TD Bank joined hands with lobbyists declaring that "early childhood education has widespread and long lasting benefits."¹

Parroting shoddy research

The report provides no new information. Instead, it parrots an existing body of shoddy, non-peer-reviewed research.² 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."³

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?

At bottom, it appears the authors don't believe the miracle cure of their own recommendations.

The TD Bank report can't gloss over the fact that there is no way to accurately discern what the financial benefits of "early learning" are. "[Q]uantifying these benefits is not an exact science and a large margin of error likely exists," write the authors.⁴

The report neglects to mention research revealing an increased chance of negative behaviours for children in too much institutional care.⁵

Neither do they 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.⁶

Of course, 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.



The “success” of Quebec daycare

Intuitively, we all know that daycare is not a panacea. Quebec brought in a provincial daycare plan in 1997. The costs have gone up about 850 percent since then.⁷ 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.

In two different places, the TD Bank report authors emphasize that they haven’t a sweet clue as to “why schooling starts at ages 4-5.” So let’s clarify.

School readiness comes with a sense of self

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, who are now being told they need to be “school ready” before they are 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.⁸

“Premature socialization,” says Dr. Neufeld, “was always considered by developmentalists 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.”⁹



There are behavioural problems that can arise when children are not attached to adult role models. One such problem is children not being themselves—copying other kids, choosing a different favourite colour, claiming they no longer love swimming as they did all summer—simply because they have attached to (put differently, want to fit in with) the other children.

Kids who are strongly attached to adult role models can hold on to their own unique personalities better.

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

Parents, says Dr. Neufeld, are their child’s best bet—not trained professionals.

So what’s the solution?

For parents who must use daycare, it is largely because they are trying to make a living to support their families because times are tight. Obvious solutions to decrease the burden on parents include much lower taxes, so they can keep more of their hard-earned money in order to decide what they want to do with it. We might consider ways in which to make work flexible so that parents can work around their young children. However, early learning programs—so terribly expensive even when done poorly—simply increase taxes and decrease choice.

Certainly, demand for subsidized programs always increases. However, far from this being an indication of want or need, subsidizing *anything* distorts the market, as TD’s economists must know.

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. We could continue to muse about why.

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

Endnotes

¹ Alexander, C. and Ignjatovic, D. (2012, November 27). Early childhood education has widespread and long lasting benefits. TD Economics Special Report. Retrieved from

http://www.td.com/document/PDF/economics/special/di1112_EarlyChildhoodEducation.pdf

² The Early Years series are political/ideological reports. See here for a comparison between a longitudinal study of data versus Early Years Study 2. Mrozek, A. and Fraher, K. (2007, April 11). The raging daycare debates. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.imfcanada.org/issues/raging-daycare-debates>

³ Alexander, C. and Ignjatovic, D. (2012, November 27). Early childhood education has widespread and long lasting benefits.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Belsky, J. et al. (March/April 2007). Are There Long-Term Effects of Early Child Care? *Child Development*, 17(2), p. 682.

Loeb, S., Bridges, M., Bassok, D., Fuller, B. & Rumberger, R.W. (February 1, 2007). How much is too much? The influence of preschool centers on children's social and cognitive development. *Economics of Education Review* 26(1), p. 64.

⁶ Kids First Parent Association of Canada. (2010, March). Submission to the social policy Committee of the Ontario government regarding Bill 242, pp. 17-18. Retrieved from <http://www.kidsfirstcanada.org/bill242submissionOnt.pdf>

Mrozek, A. (2008, January 10). Study the real costs of all-day kindergarten. *Toronto Sun*. Retrieved from <http://www.imfcanada.org/news/study-real-costs-all-day-kindergarten> "The Perry Preschool project began in Ypsilanti, Michigan in 1962. It was a uniquely-crafted, small-scale program for black children living in poverty, designed to raise the children's IQs. Children were in half-a-day of care, and the program included an hour-and-a-half per week of parent education in the home. The child-staff ratio was less than six-to-one, and the cost estimates in 2000 dollars were about \$15,000 US, per student."

⁷ Mrozek, A. (2009, November). The cost of a free lunch. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, p. 10. Retrieved from <http://www.imfcanada.org/sites/default/files/IMFC-Cost-of-a-free-lunch.pdf>

⁸ On May 18, 2012, the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada interviewed Dr. Gordon Neufeld, Canadian developmental psychologist and author of *Hold on to your kids: Why parents need to matter more than peers*. (Vintage Canada, 2005). The article resulting from the interview is Nurturing children: Why "early learning" doesn't help. Retrieved from <http://www.imfcanada.org/issues/nurturing-children-why-early-learning-does-not-help>

⁹ *Ibid.*