

Strengthening Canada’s Child Care Workforce: Six Principles for Addressing the Challenge

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(Adapted from Retention and Recruitment in Child Care: Six Principles for Addressing the Challenge, published in the ECCDC Community Update, vol. 8.1, March 2004. Used with permission.)

Child care programs across the country face significant and ongoing human resource challenges. Low wages, demanding working conditions and few opportunities for advancement mean employee turnover is higher in child care than it is in other professions, and if left unchecked, these factors can easily undermine the quality and stability of child care programs upon which working families depend.

The discipline of community development requires that we seek sustainable solutions, which means seeking to address root causes. In the case of recruitment and retention in Canada’s child care industry, the root causes are troubling. They relate to the fact that, as a whole, our society undervalues children. How our society views children determines how our society views child care providers. How our society views child care providers, determines the policy and funding environment in which the nation’s child care providers operate, which in turn, determines our ability to strengthen the child care workforce.

From this perspective, the solution to many of the workforce challenges child care professionals face, is to work on changing public attitudes about children and child care. That’s a tall order to be sure, but as professionals and as citizens, we have opportunities to make a difference each and every day. To borrow a line from Dr. Phil, the first step is to “get real” about the scope of the problem.

The fact that Canada has the second highest rate of child poverty in the industrialized world, is a pretty strong indicator that as a whole, our society undervalues children. In fact, one in six Canadian children lives in poverty. This problem is exacerbated by our nation’s violation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. In a report issued in March of last year, the UN noted that the lack of access to affordable, quality child care in Canada limits women’s ability to participate in the labour force.

Another indicator of our society’s overall disregard for children is Canada’s failure to meet its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that all children, regardless of their location or family’s socio-economic status, have the right to benefit from child care services and facilities; and that governments must take appropriate measures to provide children with this basic right.

Nationally, approximately 14% of Canadian three-year-olds receive early childhood education and care, whereas in other industrialized nations the majority of children receive early childhood education—for instance Denmark (85%), France (95%) and Belgium (100%).

Although access is restricted by the number of spaces, even if the number of available spaces were to increase, access would still be limited by parents’ ability to pay. Depending on the family’s income, that ability can be quite low. The same holds true for subsidized spaces—where the fee per day per child can’t exceed what funders are able or willing to pay. In most communities, the monthly cost of a full time child care space can range from \$500.00 to \$700.00—more than many families’ mortgage payments.

Space availability and affordability limits parental choice and also places limits on the sector that simply aren’t present in most other industries, where prices can be more readily adjusted to reflect operating costs. These limits force child care operators to keep their operating costs, including the cost of wages to the absolute minimum. From the practitioner’s side, this creates workforce challenges and offers little incentive to remain in the field.

Clearly, Canadian policymakers are out of step. Rather than seeing early childhood education and care as a significant component of healthy child development, many continue to subscribe to the outdated notion that women’s labour force participation is optional, and child care provided by anyone other than the child’s mother is second

rate—a kind of consolation prize for disadvantaged families. Devaluing children in this regard places a heavy burden on society, however, and there may come a day when Canada can no longer afford to exclude large numbers of highly skilled parents from participating in the paid labour force; or to fund remedial education programs and juvenile justice interventions that would be far less necessary, if more parents were working and fewer children were growing up in poverty.

In recent months, child care has once again found its way onto the public agenda, primarily because a handful of major employers have emerged as champions of the child care cause. While true child care professionals support any effort that benefits children, the idea that recent government moves to increase funding for child care came about solely due to employers' labour market and workplace absenteeism issues begets the question: *why does our society see children as a commodity to be managed, rather than as human beings at a legitimate and necessary stage of life?*

There are many other examples of how our society devalues children—from a criminal justice system that makes it easy for sexual predators to re-offend, to huge corporate empires that compete for the largest share of our tweens' allowance money. Simply recognizing this weakness in our culture is an important step toward addressing the recruitment and retention challenge, because it allows us to focus our efforts.

There is considerable momentum right now for governments at all levels to do something about child care. As a sector, Canada's child care practitioners may be closer than they've ever been before to gaining the widespread public support they need to ensure that every family in every community across the country has access to high quality, affordable child care. By working together, both within our own communities and beyond, child care practitioners and working parents can be the dominant voices in shaping the policies that will determine the future of Canada's child care industry. What child care practitioners need to do now is to agree on some very basic principles, and work within their own spheres of influence to accelerate the pace of social change.

The following six principles are offered as a framework for moving forward:

Principle 1: A child care professional is any caregiver who wants to provide quality experiences for young children and their families.

Simply put, the credentials of the child care provider and the location in which the care is provided are less important than the goal of providing quality care.

Principle 2: Child care professionals must speak with a unified voice.

In Canadian communities, there are dozens of organizations that speak for child care. From time to time, these groups take differing positions on various issues, often leaving the sector in a tail spin that distracts us from our real need, which is government investment in high quality, affordable child care for all families. That's the bottom line and all child care professionals can safely align themselves with any organization that is clear about that goal.

Principle 3: We must continue investing in our professional organizations.

If child care professionals are to achieve legislative recognition and be held fully accountable for the quality of child care they provide, child care professionals need to agree to a framework that allows them to function as a self-regulating industry, the way doctors or lawyers do. The professional organizations related to child care must be empowered and supported to develop this infrastructure for self-regulation, which should include a standardized job classification system that allows better qualified and more experienced child care professionals to be compensated fairly, and individuals who are new to the sector to map out clear goals for advancement.

These associations will also need to expand and sophisticate their certification processes and develop standards of practice that determine the core sets of knowledge required for the ECE designation. Investing in these professional associations is essential, so that they can focus on creating the

infrastructure for self-regulation, rather exhausting their limited resources to increase memberships, produce newsletters and host conferences.

Principle 4: Each child care professional is individually responsible for driving social change within his or her own community.

To drive social change, child care professionals need to ensure their own thinking about the industry and the profession isn't undermining their efforts. We need to believe in our hearts that child care provided by a child care professional specially educated for the task isn't second best to the care provided by a child's own parents. We also need to get over the idea that it isn't okay for child care professionals to ask for what they need to do a good job. No one can afford to keep quiet when children's futures are threatened by outdated attitudes or poorly constructed government policies. Children are just too important.

Principle 5: We must start today.

The newly elected Liberal government has put affordable, high quality child care for all families on the public agenda. While campaigning, Prime Minister Martin promised to spend \$5 billion to establish a "National Day Care Program" by 2009. He also promised that this program would be founded on four principles – quality, universality, accessibility and developmental programming. While this pledge has gone unfulfilled since the 1993 Liberal Red Book, child care professionals now have the opportunity to ensure its implementation. Contact your political representatives to tell them that you expect them to fulfill their commitment to the families that elected them, and that they must make quality child care universally accessible. Tell them the number of families you serve. There are more than 11,000 regulated child care centres in Canada and if we each just do one small thing each day, it can make a big difference.

Principle 6: We must put children first.

If the root cause of the child care industry's recruitment and retention challenge is the fact that our society undervalues children, perhaps the most direct route to a solution is changing public attitudes—one person at a time, one attitude at a time, starting with ourselves.

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Resources:

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