



A guide to the Conservative government's child care doublespeak

The Conservatives claim child care is one of their priorities, but everything they've said and done indicates they don't believe in quality early learning and child care. Words such as "choice", "universal" and "institutional" take on peculiar meanings when Stephen Harper and his ministers use them.

It's time to deconstruct the Conservative spin on child care.

They say:

"Canada's Universal Child Care Plan provides parents with resources to help balance work and family as they see fit; a plan that supports families regardless of where they live, whatever their circumstances and preferences."

--Conservative Government web site

We say:

The child allowance isn't child care and there is no plan. A plan would have to include standards, and goals and timelines for building and sustaining a range of flexible high quality early learning and child care services throughout Canada. It would include complementary and equitable family supports. The Conservatives have not put forward any plan, nor provided the right kind of support to families.

And it isn't fair. While every family with a child under six gets the Conservative allowance, it is inequitable. Because it is taxed back, the allowance will give a wealthy banker's wife more money than the single parent bank teller.

As well, the money can be spent on anything. This cannot in any way be called child care, and certainly not early learning.

They say:

Some want to build a national system of institutional day care."

--Prime Minister Stephen Harper

"Institutional care is regulated child care."

--Human Resources Minister, Diane Finley

We say:

The Conservative government betrays its ignorance about early learning and child care services. The goal of a system of high quality services is to provide warm, stimulating and developmental environments for children through programs that are responsive and caring—a far cry from institutional care.

Canada does not have nearly enough flexible high quality child care, but regulated early learning and child care services do and should comprise a range of possibilities to suit families of all types: parents who are in the workforce full- or part-time; shift workers; and those who live in rural and remote communities, are students or in training programs, or choose to stay at home. Services can be as flexible as funding allows and community needs require.

It's difficult to understand why Minister Finley is so negative about regulated early learning and child care services. In Canada, most of these services are provided in community-based child care programs and many are in the homes of family child care providers. All provinces and territories regulate services to ensure they meet a baseline for children's health and safety and well-being. Regulations could certainly be strengthened to improve quality and focus on best practices, but at minimum they are needed to ensure our children are protected. And funding certainly needs to be increased to make possible more flexible services in rural and remote communities. Not many people would argue with that.

They say:

“This Allowance will let parents choose the child care option that best suits their family's needs.”

--Prime Minister Stephen Harper

We say:

The Conservative's claim of providing choice in child care is entirely bogus. There is nothing to show that giving people a small – or even a medium – amount of money creates or sustains choices. A small payment to parents will not create new early learning and child care services or even allow parents to afford and access the services that already exist – only enough for 24% of children aged 0-6.

Choice in child care means building a comprehensive early learning and child care program, coupled with good family supports. This means:

- ♦ High quality early learning and child care services, full-time and part-day, that are accessible, affordable and inclusive of children with special needs.
- ♦ Services that are available from nine to five, before and after school, during extended hours for shift workers, and seasonal care to suit rural family schedules.
- ♦ Family resource programs and other parental supports such as stronger maternity and parental leaves and an improved Canada Child Tax Benefit

They say:

“There already are millions of child-care experts in this country. Their names are mom and dad.”

--Prime Minister Stephen Harper

We say:

Parenting and early childhood education are mutually supportive, but they are not the same thing. Good parenting is important for all children, and early childhood education can support good parenting. At the same time, research shows that most parents rarely have enough information to be able to determine the quality of early learning and child care programs by themselves as consumers.

Parents are undoubtedly their child's "first teacher" and child care programs work best when parents can be involved. But just as it wouldn't make sense to advocate that teachers, education specialists and government get out of providing education to our children; or that doctors, health care analysts and government get out of providing universal medicare, in the same way, there is a need for trained staff, public oversight and accountability in early learning and child care.

They say:

"This budget allocates \$250 million beginning in 2007 to create real child care spaces as part of Canada's Universal Child Care Plan. We will work with governments, businesses and community organizations to develop a plan that works, a plan that actually creates spaces."

--Finance Minister Jim Flaherty

We say:

Another bogus claim. Providing only start-up funds for spaces is like building a hospital bed without providing the money for doctors or nurses, or building a school and not providing the funds to hire teachers. Creating **real child care** requires both capital funds and sufficient operating funding to sustain high quality, accessible services.

But don't just take our word for it. Here's what others have to say:

"They won't create any [spaces]. It's really important to understand that you don't just create a space. You have to provide ongoing, sustainable funding for these spaces.

--Mary Anne Chambers, Ontario's Minister of Children and Youth

"The big concern is that if they spend \$250-million on developing spaces, who pays for the ongoing operations and how is that accommodated for? [Minister Finley] again talked about these spaces being self-sustaining, which is pretty impractical when you're looking at lower or low-income families."

--Deb Higgins, Saskatchewan's Minister of Learning

"The key to a successful plan is ensuring enough child-care spaces are created and that they are accessible to the families who need them. This means building new facilities and staffing them with adequately paid staff. ...The Tory plan clearly does not [have these objectives in mind]."

--Catherine Swift, head of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business

"Only the regular funding that state investment brings is able to guarantee access and quality on a fairly equitable basis for all groups. A combined Federal/Provincial

investment approach to this situation seems to be necessary to plan incremental increases of budget for young children over the next decades.”

*---Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development,
Canada Country Note, 2004*

They say:

“There have been many studies that show that the best people to raise children are the parents.”

--Human Resources Minister Diane Finley

We say:

Ouch! That one really hurts. What an insult to Canada’s working parents. Can the minister really be saying that working mothers don’t raise their own children? And what about fathers, most of whom are away from their children at work? Does the government believe they don’t raise their own children?

The fact is, “many studies” show that high quality early learning and child care is good for children no matter what their parents (mothers and fathers) do. Parents know this – that’s why so many of them – regardless of their labour force status – opt for early learning and child care programs when the choice is available.