



VOICES FROM THE FIELD - Child Care and Young Children: A Practitioner's View

**Pat Wege, Executive Director
Manitoba Child Care Association**

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Service perspective

The research findings of the CEECD papers¹⁻⁸ confirm that demand for child care continues to escalate for all age groups. More and more mothers participate in the workforce at increasingly earlier points in their child's life. However, the availability of regulated child care continues to lag far behind the supply. The development of new spaces has been painfully slow, inconsistent and uneven in Canada. For example, the Quebec government has taken the lead by significantly expanding spaces with the goal of universal accessibility for all children regardless of reason for service. The province of Manitoba has developed a *Five Year Plan for Child Care (2002)*, designed to enhance three major elements: quality, accessibility and affordability. Child care appears to be on the upswing again in Ontario. In early 2004, the Ontario government announced it will spend \$9.6M in federal child-care money to help cash-starved daycare centres make health and safety improvements. But some provinces, such as British Columbia, have experienced serious reductions in government funding at a time when the need is greater than ever and early childhood development is a hot topic.

We are miles away from universal access, but the scope of the gap becomes more clear when we also consider the ever widening range of service needs: for children with disabilities, part-time care, evenings, weekends, seasonal needs of farm families, on reserve programs, military families deployed for months at a time, and those in isolated communities. Parents of children with disabilities continue to need child care long past the age of 12. There is much pressure on facilities to extend hours, expand spaces and be flexible. But this is not easily, cheaply or quickly accomplished when dollars are scarce, the workforce is depleted, and government funding policies may lead to a loss of revenue to the centre or family child-care provider that provides flexibility.

The importance of quality child care is a strong and consistent theme throughout all the CEECD papers.¹⁻⁸ There is consensus that quality, positive child-care experiences can enhance child development. But research shows that high-quality child care is in short supply, accounting for only 10 to 15% of child care available in the United States.² This is also the case in Canada. *You Bet I Care, Caring and Learning Environments: Quality in Child Care Centres Across Canada* states that "the majority of the centres in Canada are providing care that is of minimal to mediocre quality. Fewer than half of the preschool rooms (43%) and slightly more than a quarter of the infant/toddler rooms

(28.7%) are also providing activities and materials that support and encourage children's development."⁹ Steven Barnett says that "quality of care is frequently low, and the primary reason is the relatively high cost of quality."⁸ This is absolutely true. Too many licensed programs struggle with inadequate and unstable funding that never stretches far enough to enable fair wages and benefits, well trained and resourced caregivers, a developmentally stimulating program and a physical space designed/adapted/suitable for early child-care education (ECCE). In my opinion, we are not going to improve quality until we resolve the underlying issues that make it difficult to attract and retain a skilled child-care workforce, including those who provide family child care.

There are several gaps in research, practice and policy that would foster better child-care service delivery. Several of the CEECD papers mention the lack of longitudinal data for child outcomes^{2,4,7} and the need to better define and disseminate information about quality.² This is true, but we also lack current data about the existing system of child care as a service or a profession. We are trying to build a universal, accessible, quality system, identify priorities, make recommendations, yet all too often we are forced to guess because we don't have the information we need when we need it. For example, we know we need "more" child care, but how much more? Which areas are most underserved? What is "affordable" child care? *The Canadian National Child Care Study (CNCCS)* included a parent component administered to a sample of Canadian economic families with children under the age of 13.¹⁰ Approximately one in every 90 Canadian households was included in the CNCCS sample. But those data are well over a decade old and therefore useless in planning for the child-care system of a new millennium. The *You Bet I Care* project, a comprehensive study on quality and wages, working conditions and practices in centres and family child-care homes (1991 and 1998), is now also dated.⁹ Most of our Canadian research is short-term and project-funded; it does not re-occur often enough to paint a picture of the Canadian context or provide enough basic information for advocates and stakeholders to use in our day-to-day work.

Political will is often a huge factor in whether child-care programs blossom, float or sink. Child-care advocates, eyes focused primarily on the licensed sector, have been lobbying provincial and federal governments for decades to provide the kind of leadership and funding and infrastructure that will enable practice and policy to reflect current research. Even the smallest bit of positive change was likely preceded by hours of meetings, much lobbying, many rallies, mountains of letters, petitions, campaigning and leading of the charge. We lobby for regulation and ongoing improvements to regulation as better practices and methodologies are uncovered. We lobby on behalf of families for new spaces, for better benefits, wages, working conditions and accessible ECCE training for the workforce. Then we lobby for post-diploma programs and funding support for tuition.

Child-care organizations and associations, mostly small, membership- or project-funded with shoestring budgets, led primarily by volunteers, strive to get and keep child-care funding dollars flowing, raise awareness of quality indicators, keep members informed of new research and trends, do public education, produce resource materials and provide formal and informal training opportunities through workshops, conferences and institutes. It is increasingly difficult to find volunteers to participate in advocacy, and registered

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charities now put their status at risk if heavily engaged in advocacy. In order to really get and keep child care on the policy agenda as the centrepiece of early childhood development initiatives, new and more powerful voices from academia, research and business must be recruited as active and ongoing partners.

It's past time to embed the integrated principle of early childhood care and education for children aged 0 to 12 years into the infrastructure of our country. Let's get on with the implementation of national guidelines for service delivery; develop a nation-wide accreditation program for training institutions and child-care facilities and certification of administrators and practitioners; and infuse real money into a universal system in which all children receive the very highest quality of early childhood care and education.

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