



CHILD CARE IN CANADA

WHAT DOES THE PUBLIC WANT?

Fact Sheet 2

A new national proportionate study of the Canadian public provides important information about what Canadians want in child care.

As part of a larger project, *Advancing an Early Childhood Development Agenda*, funded by Human Resources Development Canada, the Canadian Child Care Federation partnered with the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada and contracted Dr. Jennifer Espy to undertake a national study of public attitudes to, and preferences for, child care. The study was conducted with a randomly drawn proportionate sample of 1200 Canadians from November 27 to December 12, 2002. All results are accurate to within +/- 2.9% at the 95% confidence level. The following information regarding public opinion is based on this study.

Are Canadians satisfied with child care and the child care system?

Currently, a majority of Canadians think the quality of child care is good (50%) or fair (32%). Few think it is excellent (6%) or poor (8%). Satisfaction is significantly higher in Quebec than in any other region of Canada.

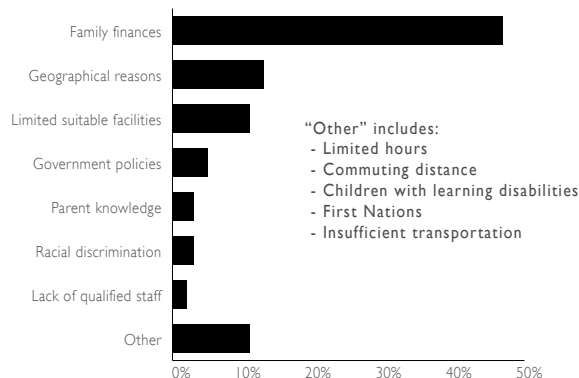
The public makes a sharp distinction between the quality of care provided to a child and the quality of the child care system. Canadians are more satisfied with the quality of care a child receives than they are with the quality of the system of child care. For instance, they are more likely to believe that child care is good for children's development and that it is safe than they are to believe that child care is affordable, accessible to children with special needs, regulated, easy to find or offers convenient hours. The public is most dissatisfied with the extent to which child care is inclusive of children with special needs and with the affordability of child care.

When evaluating child care, respondents rely heavily on the characteristics of the individual care provider rather than on a well-functioning system to ensure quality. For instance, 54% of respondents look to the experience of the care provider, almost a quarter said they look to the individual programs (23%); another 22% said they look to the cleanliness of the facilities; and almost 20% look to the references of the care provider. Conversely, only 3% of the public said they look to licensing to ensure quality.

While the quality of child care is seen predominantly as fair or good, almost three-quarters (71%) of Canadians believe that the opportunity to receive quality child care is unequal. The principal reason given for children's unequal access to quality child care are the financial resources of the family. Other reasons include geographical isolation, a limited supply of suitable facilities and a lack of standard government policies. (see chart 1)

Chart 1

Why do you think there is a difference in a child's opportunity to receive quality child care? (% of those who do not think quality is equal)

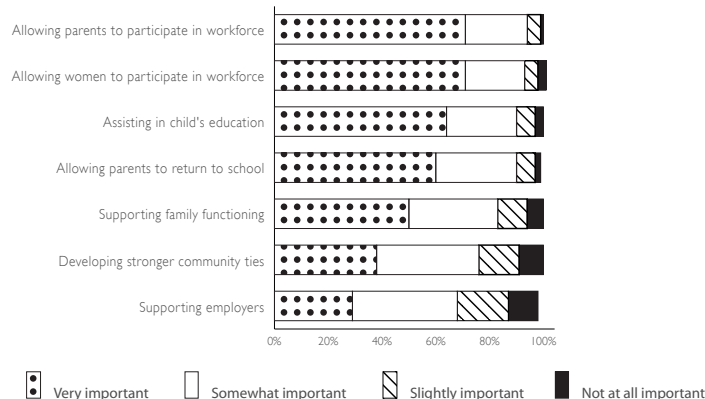


What is the role of child care in society?

Child care has passed important hurdles in public perception. Two-thirds of the public see child care as a developmental service for children. Conversely, only 17% see it as 'babysitting'. Child care is also seen as an essential social service to children, to families, to communities and to employers. (see chart 2)

Chart 2

People think of child care as being useful for different reasons. Please tell me whether you think child care is important to the following.



As an important social service, child care is seen to offer benefits throughout society – to parents, to children, to the educational system, and to employers. However, the costs of child care are seen to be borne largely by parents. Eighty percent of Canadians believe that parents bear a great deal of the cost (points 4 and 5 on a five-point scale). Conversely, just 46% think the provincial government bears a great deal of cost, 35% think the federal government bears a great deal of cost and 22% believe employers bear a great deal of cost. Yet, there is a strong public preference for greater cost sharing by federal and provincial governments and by employers. The perceptual map plots the intersection of the mean value for perception versus

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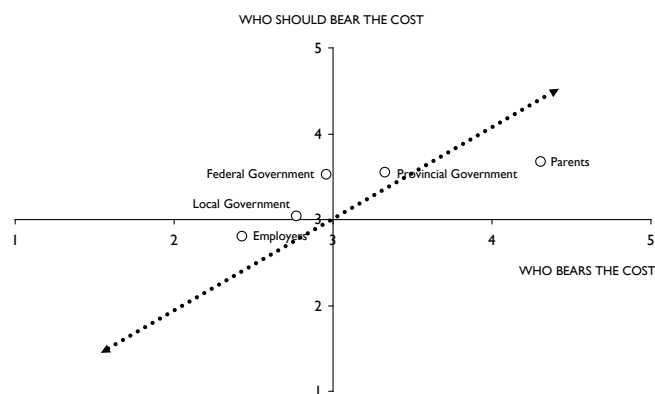
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preference of cost-bearing. As evidenced by the figure, the Canadian public believes that parents are significantly over-burdened, while the federal government and employers are significantly under-burdened. (see chart 3)

Chart 3



Are Canadians paying attention?

While the Canadian public is almost universally aware of the importance of care for early childhood development:

- 94% believe that the most critical years for brain development are the first six years
- 89% believe that, regardless of family background, poor quality child care hurts a child's development
- 79% believe that child care providers who have more training provide better care

The public is less aware of the policy context of child care. Currently, for instance, they over estimate government involvement in regulation and financing:

- 45% believe that all child care in Canada is regulated for certain standards, another 4% are uncertain
- 26% believe that government pays for half of all child care in Canada, another 11% are uncertain

What do Canadians want for Child Care?

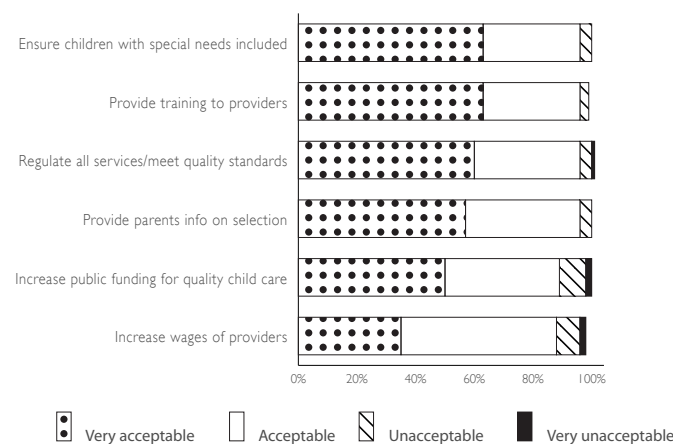
We tested public preferences for child care in a number of ways to ensure reliability of responses:

- 90% of Canadians think "Canada should have a nationally-coordinated child care plan that ensures that all children have access to quality child care regardless of family income, disability, race or the region of the country they live in"
- 90% of Canadians believe that "government could do more to ensure that all Canadians have access to quality child care"
- 86% agreed that "there can be a publicly-funded child care system that makes quality child care available to all children in Canada"
- 73% of Canadians believe that the benefits of providing access to quality child care for all Canadian children outweigh the costs

A number of policy options suggesting particular improvements were tested. All policy options tested received extraordinarily strong public support across all regions and demographic groups in Canada. (see chart 4)

Chart 4

There are a lot of suggestions for how to improve the quality of child care in Canada. How acceptable are the following?



When crafting policies to improve child care, it is most important to Canadians that improvements ensure equality of access and quality.

For instance, 90% of the public believes that it is important improvements help ensure that quality child care is affordable for everyone and 89% said it is important to offer the same level of service to everyone. Finally, 88% believe that it is important that improvements help child care be more inclusive of children with special needs.

Ninety-one percent believe it is important for improvements that contribute to the healthy development of children and help prepare children to be ready for school.

Conversely, only 44% of the public said it is important that improvements to child care not require public funding.

Canadians believe that quality child care is an essential service to children, to parents, to communities and to employers. While benefits are believed to extend throughout society, the cost is seen to be borne largely by parents. Satisfaction with the quality of care provided to a child is significantly higher than satisfaction with the system of child care. In fact, almost three-quarters of Canadians believe that the opportunity for a child to receive quality care is unequal and dependent on family finances. The Canadian public strongly supports public policies to ensure that all children in Canada have access to quality child care. Canadians expect government to ensure that quality child care is available, accessible and affordable to everyone. There is strong majority support across all demographic groups and regions for a publicly funded, nationally coordinated child care system.