



NDP Leader Tom Mulcair proposes a national child care program at \$15 a day. He writes: "It's not uncommon for families to pay more for child care than they do for their mortgage." NDP photo

Affordable Child Care: A Smart Investment in a Priceless Resource

Tom Mulcair

Families in which both parents work have been commonplace for decades. Yet Canada still lacks a national child care policy. Ten months before the scheduled federal election, New Democratic Party Leader Tom Mulcair, reasserts his focus on the issue as both a social and economic priority.

Her voice betrayed exasperation, frustration and more than a little confusion. This was late last summer, and I was meeting with parents and early childhood educators at Waterloo's Emmanuel at Brighton Child Care Centre. Heather Stuart, mother of three, was among them. She told me how, after she moved to the region, a neighbour had shared a helpful warning: if she wanted a child care spot, she

would need to line up the day before registration began.

Heather ended up camping outside the centre overnight in February. As I heard her story, I wondered how this could possibly be. Parents are literally freezing in our dark Canadian winters just to find a spot in our child care system. (I note that Emmanuel has now moved to a central list so parents don't have to line up overnight.)

Parents weren't just freezing through the night for child care spots, they were paying through the nose for them, and still are. In Waterloo, parents were lining up for spaces that would cost them \$1,016 each month. Many pay more. Today, it's not uncommon for families to pay more for child care than they do for their mortgage—as much as \$2,000 monthly per child. In Toronto, a single woman making the median wage might have to spend her entire month's income for one child care space, if she can find one at all.

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I've met with countless parents over the past few months—each with their own unique needs and circumstances. Time after time, I've felt not just their frustration but their genuine confusion. Many simply can't fathom that in the 21st century, Canadians could be forced to line up overnight and empty their bank accounts just to meet their child care needs.

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These stories should be a wake-up call to anyone who thinks we can keep waiting for a national child care plan. Ottawa's outdated approaches and misplaced priorities are putting a clamp on our economic future. If Canada is going to succeed, the families who make it work can't be falling behind. That's going to take a different vision for government—one that seizes opportunities and adapts for the future, one that recognizes the role government must play alongside business, and that doesn't ignore the challenges facing parents like Heather Stuart.

Families with two working parents have been commonplace for decades. All over the world, governments have adapted to modern realities. Yet in Canada, parents, and women in particular, are still missing work or downgrading jobs because they can't find reliable care. According to key OECD indicators, early childhood care and education in Canada lags behind other developed countries, including Norway, Sweden and France.

The Royal Commission on the Status of Women first proposed a national child care program in 1970. In the 45 years since, we've seen federal governments acknowledge the need for action yet utterly fail to deliver. In 1984, the Liberal government struck the Task Force on Child Care. When it recommended a national child care program in 1986, the Mulroney government ignored the findings. The Liberals promised universal affordable child care in their first Red Book in 1993—yet they refused to act until their government was set to be thrown out over the sponsorship scandal 13 years later. In 2006, the Conservatives promised to create 125,000 new child care spots in

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Canadian parents deserve better. That's why I've laid out a plan for a national early childhood education and child care program. New Democrats believe parents should be able to find the quality child care spaces they need without paying more than \$15 a day per child.

This won't be easy, but I am committed to getting to work immediately with provinces, territories and indigenous communities. Our goal is to fund and develop national early childhood education and child care programs delivered with common principles such as universality, affordability, quality, accessibility, inclusivity and accountability. We will enshrine the program in legislation with measurable benchmarks, publicly-available reporting and long-term predictable funding so provinces and communities can plan ahead.

Quebec is already a leader when it comes to providing affordable child care. This is a success story to em-

brace and build upon. New Democrats believe the federal government can play a positive role to support Quebec's efforts and help maintain affordable child care services.

As a cabinet minister in Quebec, I saw this success story firsthand. After Quebec's child care program was implemented, women in particular were able to participate in the labour force at a much higher rate. Creating new child care jobs and increasing women's labour force participation boosted the Quebec economy by \$5.1 billion a year. This is the sort of smart investment Canada needs to make to compete in the 21st century.

I recently met with the Surrey Board of Trade in British Columbia. These business leaders are advocating for a national child care plan because they realize it's the kind of support a modern work force needs. Among parents with young children, incomes have stagnated in real terms since the 1970s, while child care and housing costs have increased. This struggle to keep pace with the cost of living hurts employers. Citing research by the University of British Columbia's Paul Kershaw, the board notes that work-life conflict among employees with preschool-aged children costs the B.C. business community more than \$600 million annually, and the Canadian business community more than \$4 billion.

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"Expanding child care access benefits our children and helps build for our future," writes Mulcair. He adds: "I want every family in Canada to have that opportunity." NDP photo

serve a fair start and the evidence is overwhelming that early childhood education can help provide that. Studies show that beginning reading activities at 18 months can contribute to a child's reading ability and help maximize a child's vocabulary. Early childhood education programs can also help to identify learning or developmental delays at an early stage, and provide children and parents with appropriate support.

Governments that say they can't afford to invest in affordable child care are wrong. What we can't afford is further delay. After 12 years, Quebec's child care investment has more than paid for itself through mothers' higher income taxes and consumption taxes, according to Pierre Fortin, an economics professor at l'Université du Québec à Montréal. For every dollar invested, \$1.75 is returned to provincial and federal governments. Not many investments can offer such lucrative returns.

For too long, governments have ignored the real challenges facing families and avoided planning for

our future. The Harper government made its priorities painfully clear in October, when it committed billions of dollars to an income-splitting tax scheme that offers no benefit to 85 per cent of Canadians. This desperate attempt to curry favour with a small segment of voters will cost more than \$2 billion a year—with most of the benefit going to households with annual incomes over \$150,000.

The reviews have not been kind to Stephen Harper. While economists and business leaders are stepping forward to back the case for a Canadian child care plan, even think tanks like the C.D. Howe Institute are dismissing the Conservatives' tax schemes. While a child care plan could help build Canada's future, the Conservatives are more concerned with preparing for the next election.

I think Canadians expect more from us. That's what I heard from Heather Stuart. That's what I'm hearing from parents from coast to coast to coast. And that motivates me to move forward with the solutions Canadians deserve.

My wife Catherine and I raised two boys, who both went to daycare. Our grandson turned one this past spring. Our granddaughter is at that age of insatiable curiosity about everything in the world—and she too benefited from quality child care. I understand how important it is to give our kids a good start, with quality care in a stimulating, supportive environment. I want every family in Canada to have that opportunity. Quality, affordable child care is a clear signal that we value not only our children's future, but our country's as well. **P**

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