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# **Child Care: Who Should Provide?**

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## Executive Summary

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With the increase in two earner and single parent families, the availability of good child care services has become a political, economic and social issue.

- Several elements are important when examining the provisions of child care: the provision of spaces, financing, quality, and responsibility for day-to-day operation.
- There are four models: the government model, the employer model, the mixed model, and the parent model.
- Under the first model, the government is the total provider, responsible for all elements of child care.
- Under the employer model, the provision of spaces and financing are the employer's responsibility while quality is that of the provincial government and day-to-day operation is that of a private organization.
- Under the mixed model, the quality is again the responsibility of the government and the operation that of a private organization; the parent, however, is responsible for finding spaces while financing is shared in some way by the three actors — government, employer, parent.
- The final model — the parent model — most closely resembles the current system under which the parent is responsible for finding spaces and for financing with assistance through tax credits, the government is responsible for quality, and most of the day-to-day running of facilities is done privately.
- Although there are many benefits to the employer model — reduced absenteeism and tardiness, parental access to good quality child care, convenient location, feelings of security — the costs are prohibitive for many employers.
- In the final analysis the government model provides the most benefits to the most people

## Introduction

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### **Social Changes Impacting on Child Care**

- Two-earner families
- Single parent families
- Female-headed families
- Working mothers with young children

Child care has become a political, economic and social issue touching every aspect of Canadian life. Articles on the child care crisis and working parents and women and stress appear in almost every major magazine. Social forces have resulted in changes that have affected family life styles, composition and income. There has been an increase in two earner families and the traditional bread-winner family is now in the small minority. Many couples need more than one income to survive. There has also been an increase in single parent families, especially those headed by women. Sixty percent of female-headed families live below the poverty line and may be locked into welfare because of the lack of available child care (Mitchell, 1987, p.6). Knowing that child care arrangements are complicated, expensive and inadequate, some women are choosing not to have children (Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1988).

Daily experience attests to the reality of these social changes. The majority of parents are experiencing difficulties as they try to fulfill both work and family roles, whether affected directly as a parent, or indirectly as an employer, supervisor, community health or social worker, or as a taxpayer (Lero, 1989).

The dramatic increase in labour force participation by mothers with younger children has resulted in a greater need for child care services and facilities. The demand for licensed spaces far exceeds the supply. In 1970, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women estimated that twenty percent of women with children under the age of fourteen years were in the labour force. In 1987, sixty-five percent of these women were in the labour force.

In 1987 there were 243,545 licensed day care spaces of which approximately 125,000 were government subsidized. It was also estimated that more than 1.9 million children under the age of thirteen needed some type of supervision because their parents worked or studied outside the home. At that time, the existing system of licensed child care met approximately thirteen percent of the need in Canada (Phillips, 1989, p.166).

Before the mid 1970s, child care was perceived primarily as a service for the needy. But by the late 1970s public pressure to improve access to child care for working parents had mounted. By the 1980s, child care was an issue in national political and policy debates (Friendly, 1991). There is continuing debate about the extent to which women should be expected to make sacrifices if they 'choose' to have children and the extent to which society (i.e., government) has a collective responsibility for ensuring that all children are properly cared for and educated (Lero, 1989):

Controversy continues over the adequacy of federal cost-sharing, public funding of private day care centres, the wages and qualifications of child care workers, the level of financial assistance for child care paid directly to parents, jurisdiction over Native child care, and the development of child care standards. (Baker, 1990, p.1)

When examining the provision of child care, there are various elements to be considered including

- the provision of child care spaces,
- financing,
- quality and
- the responsibility for the day-to-day running of child care

There are four models of child care, moreover, including

- the government model,
- the employer model,
- the mixed model and
- the parent model.

The major actors involved in the provision of child care include government, employer and parent.

For the purposes of these models, if a particular actor is responsible for providing child care spaces only, the actor is considered to be a mixed provider of child care. If an actor is responsible for providing child care spaces and financing, the actor is considered to be a primary provider of child care, and if an actor is responsible for providing child care spaces, financing and either or both of the day-to-day running of a facility and quality, the actor is considered to be a total provider.

## **Elements of Child Care**

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In considering the government, employer and individual parents, each may have a primary or secondary role in the overall provision of child care.

### **Responsibility for Facilities**

Primary responsibility for child care spaces involves creating new child care spaces and providing at least sixty percent of the financing of capital costs for spaces, or where this is not possible, finding child care spaces among existing locations and thus absorbing the cost of the existing facilities.

An important aspect of the provision of child care spaces is insuring that the spaces are accessible in all communities and that they are comprehensive in nature. For example, child care should be accessible regardless of parents' income level, employment status (Cooke, 1986) or geographic location (Mitchell, 1987).

Comprehensiveness of service includes services for infant, preschool, and school age (6-12) children and flexibility of hours for the child care. Cooke (1986) and Mayfield (1990) see the need for before school, after school and holiday/summer programs. Flexibility of service, including evening, overnight and weekend hours, is required for parents who work shifts, for seasonal workers, as well as for

parents who study, volunteer or need to take a break. Cooke (1986) also points out that comprehensiveness of service could include diagnostic counselling, health care services, parenting classes, resource centres for parents, toy and equipment libraries and information and referral services.

## **Financing**

The second main element of child care provision is the responsibility for financing. While financing is related to all of the provision elements, of central concern here is financing for the operating costs of the facilities. Wage and salary costs, annualized capital costs (physical assets) and equipment costs and food costs etc. are encompassed in operating costs. In order for an actor to be considered as having primary responsibility for providing financing, a particular actor must provide at least sixty percent of the operating costs.

### **Important Elements in the Provision of Child Care**

- Accessibility to all regardless of income, employment status, or geographic location
- Comprehensive services e.g. all age groups, hours beyond 'regular' school day/week/year, support services
- Quality care by trained caregivers

## **The Quality of Care and Licensing Standards**

The third main element of the provision of child care is the responsibility for supplying quality care and the licensing of minimum standards. Cooke (1986) argues that child care must meet the developmental needs of children (food and nutrition, health and medical care, a safe environment, love, consistency and security), provide support to parents (by providing reliable, affordable service consistent with their values and beliefs) and coordinate with community health and counselling services.

There are several indicators of quality care. Mayfield (1990) points to research that suggests that where caregivers have specific early childhood education and care training, the quality of programs is likely to be higher. Cooke (1986) confirms this by adding that a caregiver's specific education is a better determinant of quality than the caregiver's length of experience. Stability of staff (low turnover) (Mayfield, 1990), continuing education programs and screening potential caregivers for motivation, communication skills and enjoyment of children are also related to quality (Cooke, 1986). Doherty (1987) further adds that caregivers need specific training related to the age group they work with, that caregivers looking after children with special needs require more training related to that type of child, that programs for Native children should be staffed by Native caregivers and that supervisors and directors require training in administration and management.

Other indicators of quality child care include caregiver-to-child ratios and group sizes. Staff-child ratios should reflect the age of the child and the degree of special care needs. The group size at the place of child care should not be so large as to preclude individual attention and interaction or so large as to inhibit

group activities. This is important for the development of independence, self-assertion, problem solving and cooperation in children.

With regard to programming, organized activities ( i.e. structure) seem to be more important than content for quality. The physical setting (physical arrangement) of the child care is another indicator of quality. It encompasses the overall size of the centre, crowdedness, design and layout of space and availability of materials. The environment should also be well ventilated, have some natural lighting, meet health, safety and fire standards and be suitable for small group, large group and individual activities. The equipment should be age appropriate and promote skill development (Cooke, 1986, Doherty, 1987).

### **Some Minimum Standards**

- indoor space/child — 3.5 sq. meters
- Outdoor space/child — 7 sq. meters
- Infant /toddler group size — 6-10
- Pre-schooler group size — 14-16
- Staff/children under 3 ratio —1:3
- Staff/preschoolers ratio — 1:7
- Staff/6-12 years olds ratio — 1:12

Although at this time there is no specific research to indicate a connection between parental involvement and quality, parents could get involved by participating on boards, volunteering and/or contributing money and equipment to child care centres. In this manner, parents could monitor quality and participate in ensuring quality standards are adhered to.

The licensing of minimum standards is one way of trying to maintain quality. Primary responsibility for quality, which in all the models presented falls to the provincial government, should include the standards as set out below. Supervisory staff should have specialized training and experience related to child development as well as education in early childhood development (i.e. completed an approved program in early childhood education appropriate for the age group that is being taught). There should be 3.5 square metres (about 35 square feet) of indoor space per child and 7 square metres (about 70 square feet) of outdoor space per child (Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1986). With regard to group size, infants and toddlers should be in groups no larger than six to ten and pre-schoolers in groups no larger than fourteen to sixteen (Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1986). Staff-child ratios should not exceed 1:3 for children under three, 1:7 for preschoolers and 1:12 for six to twelve year olds (Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1986). Of course, the child care facility would be expected to meet fire and public health regulations and municipal building and zoning codes.

### **The Operation of Facilities**

Finally, the fourth main element of the provision of child care is the responsibility for the day-to-day running of the child care facility. As with financing, the day-to-day running of a child care facility is closely related to the other provision elements, particularly quality. Options available for the operation of facilities include publicly operated child care or privately operated child care. If child care facilities are publicly operated, they could fall under social services or education. If child care facilities are privately operated, they could be run by a profit or non-profit organization.

## Models of Child Care

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### The Government Model

In this model the government is the total provider, responsible for providing child care spaces, responsible for financing, responsible for quality and responsible for the day-to-day running of a child care facility. The child care facility would be a publicly run (i.e. government run) non-profit centre and the child care workers would be government employees. The following table outlines some benefits of this approach.

<b>Benefits of the Government Child Care Model (Verry, 1990)</b>
<b>Parents:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• increase in earnings</li><li>• increase in leisure time</li><li>• reduced financial hardship</li><li>• reduced educational, training and earnings inequality between men and women</li></ul>
<b>Firm:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• better returns to training</li><li>• less turnover and absenteeism</li></ul>
<b>Children:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• increased socialization</li><li>• improved educational achievement</li><li>• improved educational opportunities for the disadvantaged</li><li>• decreased risk of abuse</li></ul>
<b>Society:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• increased tax receipts</li><li>• reduced health and education costs</li></ul>

### The Employer Model

The employer model is one in which the employer is responsible for providing child care spaces at or near the work site and is responsible for financing. Quality would be the responsibility of the provincial government through licensing and the day-to-day running would be operated by a private organization either for profit or not. The following table summarizes some benefits of this model.

<b>Benefits of the Employer Child Care Model</b>	
<b>Parents:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• convenient location (Ritter, 1990)</li> </ul>
<b>Firm:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• improved employee recruitment and retention (Ritter, 1990; Levine, 1989)</li> <li>• reduced absenteeism and tardiness (Gibb-Clark, 1989)</li> </ul>
<b>Children:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• security of parents close by</li> <li>• increased socialization</li> </ul>

Employers may enjoy many benefits if they take a dominant role in child care. The potential for improved employee recruitment and retention are two such benefits. Ritter (1990, p.13) found that sixty-one percent of job applicants said that a child care centre was a factor in accepting a position and Nyloncraft enjoyed a lower turnover rate after the introduction of a day care centre (Levine, 1989, p.43).

Other employer benefits may include reduced absenteeism and tardiness. Gibb-Clark (1989, B3) found that one-third of full days missed from work over a six month period were for family reasons. A study by Portland State University (referred to by Gibb-Clark) found that employees with children under age twelve missed forty-three percent more days per year, left early nineteen percent more times per year, were late sixty percent more times a year and were interrupted one hundred and twenty-seven percent more times per year, than other employees.

Parents may have the benefit of having access to high quality child care at or near work. They also have a convenient location for child care which saves them travelling time and the benefit of having their children near in case of an emergency or for visits during the day (especially beneficial for nursing mothers). Children may feel more secure knowing that their parents are nearby and the travelling time to and from work allows additional time for family togetherness.

The largest disadvantage of employer child care is obviously the cost:

It is an expensive undertaking to open and maintain a child care facility.  
(Shecter, 1990, p.55)

Mayfield (1990, p.130) has estimated that the initial start-up costs of the on-site program can range from \$20,000 to more than \$1 million dollars (median cost \$200,000) depending on the location, availability of space and the need to build

a facility rather than renovate an existing space. This cost may be too much for many smaller companies. Related to this is the issue of liability for the company and the payment of insurance. If anything 'negative' were to occur at the child care centre, it could reflect poorly on the company.

Another corporate concern is the issue of licensing. While licensing is accepted as necessary, great frustration and expense has been incurred by companies due to the conflicting requirements of different agencies involved in the licensing process like building inspectors, municipal zoning by-laws, fire marshalls and day care licensing staff (Mayfield, 1990).

Employers also have to take into account that child care may be construed as a benefit unfair to those without children and thus employers may face an equity problem in the company (Fernandez, 1986). Older employees may make use of existing benefits to a greater extent thus 'evening out the score.'

For parents, employer child care may not be the preferred choice of child care arrangements. Parents often prefer neighbourhood care. Travelling with children during rush hour, especially on public transportation, is difficult, and parents do not get 'wind-down time' before and after work. Also, this model of child care does not allow for parents who are not working and/or work at home, for example, parents with a business at home or farmers.

For the children, they miss out on the chance to get to know the neighbourhood children. A more serious concern is the fact that many workplaces could be potentially detrimental to children's health. For example, urban work sites often have no green space and industrial sites are not appropriate for children.

### **The Mixed Model**

Many different combinations of a mixed model are possible but the mixed model presented is illustrative of these possibilities. The mixed model is one in which the parent is responsible for finding child care spaces among existing sites. Together the parent, government and employer (union if applicable) are responsible for providing financing. Financing can be shared in many ways, but no one player would be responsible for more than sixty percent of the financing. The government would be responsible for quality and the day-to-day running of the child care would be privately operated. This could be run commercially for profit or non-profit.

### **The Parent Model**

The parent model is one in which the parent is responsible for finding child care spaces among existing locations. The parents are also responsible for financing child care. The government is responsible for quality and the day-to-day running of child care is either privately operated for profit or is non-profit.

## **Comparison of the Models**

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The models presented — the government model, the employer model, the mixed model and the parent model — serve to define where the various players could be involved in child care. Specifically, the models represent differing levels of government involvement in child care.

### **Responsibility for the Child Care Spaces**

The first child care element, responsibility for child care spaces, is important because child care spaces in Canada are severely lacking. In the government model, the government is responsible for providing child care spaces and this is of benefit because the government has the ability to obtain the funds needed for such a substantial project. Also, because the government is a central agency, it is better able to coordinate child care spaces and ensure that they are accessible in all communities and comprehensive in nature.

In the employer child care model, the employer is responsible for providing child care spaces at or near the workplace. This is of benefit because it relieves the government and the parent of a significant financial burden. Because the employer benefits from child care it should contribute to its financing. The employer, however, is not likely to contribute willingly. Financing capital costs places a hardship on firms which may have trouble funding such a large project. The lack of coordination and structure between firms would make it difficult to deal with the special needs of parents and children with regard to accessibility and comprehensiveness.

The mixed child care model and the parent child care model place responsibility for the provision of child care spaces on the parent. As parents will not be able to increase available child care spaces, they must look among existing spaces which are few and not affordable to many.

The most effective way to make child care spaces available and to be able to offer the range of child care options necessary to make real choices available to parents requires substantial well directed public funding (Friendly, 1991). The government model is best suited to accomplish the task.

### **Responsibility for Financing**

The second child care element, financing, is important because without funds available for operating costs, the child care would cease to function and/or the quality of child care would be poor. In the government model, the government is responsible for financing which will help ensure a consistent supply of funds and add stability to the system.

In the employer model, the employer is responsible for financing. As with responsibility for child care spaces, employers may be unwilling to take on this responsibility as it represents an ongoing cost for them. Employers are also more likely to put profit ahead of quality if they are funding a for-profit centre.

In the mixed model, the parent, government and employer (and union if applicable), all share in the responsibility of financing. This is an equitable solution except that there may be problems coordinating the funding and the system may lack consistency because of it.

In the parent model, financing is the responsibility of the parent. However, many parents can not afford to pay the full price of child care.

The most effective way to deal with financing appears to be with the government model because unlike the other models, the government model can ensure a consistent supply of funds.

### **Responsibility for Quality**

Quality is important for child development. In the government model, as with the employer model, the mixed model and the parent model, quality is the responsibility of the provincial governments through licensing. This will ensure consistency of standards only if the standards are enforced.

### **Responsibility for the Day-to-Day Running of Child Care**

The day-to-day running of child care could impact on all the previously mentioned provision elements. Whoever is responsible for the service provision of child care hires child care workers (who impact quality) and controls the administration (which will impact on financing and quality).

In the government model, child care would be publicly run. This would be advantageous because it would be non-profit and would eliminate some quality concerns that often arise with for-profit care. The co-ordination of administration across child care centres would also be less costly.

In the employer model, the mixed model and the parent model, the day-to-day running would be privately operated. This could be for profit or non-profit. If child care is run for profit, quality concerns arise. Profit is sometimes achieved at the expense of important needs. Staff salaries are often lower in for-profit centres than in non-profit centres and the turnover rates are often higher. Also, substitutes are not always called when regular staff is absent or sick. The resources may be limited and rationed (Pepin, 1987).

The government model with public funding is the most effective way to deal with the day-to-day running of child care because it is non-profit and administration would be better coordinated across centres.

#### **Disadvantages of For-Profit Child Care**

- Lower staff salaries
- Higher staff turnover
- No substitutes for absent staff
- Limited/rationed resources
- Less quality co-ordination and control

## **Current Government Role in Child Care**

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The federal government assists in child care provision in two primary ways. One way is through the Canada Assistance Plan, which is a cost-sharing arrangement with the provinces to provide subsidized child care. Another is through the Child Care Expense Deduction which allows for a deduction per child on income tax returns. The federal government has also commissioned several studies and has proposed a now partially defunct national child care strategy. At this point in time, a real strategy is still lacking.

Child care provision developments in Ontario prior to 1990 were facilitated by two principal acts: the Day Nurseries Act 1983 and the Ministry of Community and Social Services Act. The Day Nurseries Act 1983 allows for the ministry to establish standards for the operation of child care programs and the Ministry of Community and Social Services Act helps to fund support services to enhance the quality of informal child care arrangements. In 1987, the Ontario government announced New Directions For Child Care, as a child care strategy. It is not certain if this strategy would have been successful, since it was cut short with the advent of the election of the New Democratic Party.

The present government of Ontario, the New Democratic Party, has yet to announce a formal policy on child care. They have, however, conducted public consultations on child care reform from which a report is being prepared.

## **The Current Child Care Model**

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Based on the four models presented, the parent model most closely approximates the current government role in child care. In the parent model, as in the current child care system, the parent is responsible for finding child care spaces from among existing sites and the parent is responsible for financing these spaces. In both the current child care system and the parent model, quality is the responsibility of the provincial governments and most child care service provision is privately operated.

While the parent model conforms closely to the current government role, there are a few differences. With regard to child care in the current system, parents are responsible for finding child care spaces among existing sites but in the current system of child care, some parents may receive assistance from their employers or unions. Employers or unions may either pay the capital costs to start up a child care centre or they may provide a referral service to parents to help locate child care spaces. Workplace child care is offered very sporadically across Canada, however. The child care spaces currently available are not accessible in all communities or comprehensive in nature. Both the federal and Ontario governments have recognized these problems but at present no concrete solutions have been developed.

In the parent model, as in the current system, parents are responsible for paying for the operating costs of child care. In the current system the federal and provincial governments do contribute to financing in a minor way. The federal and provincial governments contribute to child care by way of the Canada Assistance Plan which provides subsidized care for low income families. The federal government also allows a tax deduction for child care. The Ontario government provides grants and subsidies to caregivers that are supervised by an agency. Employers may contribute to child care by providing vouchers to parents which can be used to help pay for child care.

The provincial governments in both the parent model and the current child care system are responsible for legislating minimum standards of quality for child care centres. Each provincial government has its own set of minimum standards and thus quality will vary across provinces with regard to caregiver qualifications, caregiver-to-child ratios, and group sizes etc. Quality will also vary across and within provinces because these standards will only apply to licensed child care. Of course, legislated standards will not be beneficial if they are not enforced. The current regulation of standards is not sufficient as almost forty percent of licensed child care spaces operating in Ontario in 1987 were not in compliance with the Day Nurseries Act (Globe and Mail, 1989).

In the parent model, the child care facilities are privately run. In the current child care system there is a mix of municipal and privately operated for-profit and non-profit child care, although publicly run child care would be in the minority.

### **Current Problems**

- Tax credits benefit higher income earners
- Tax credit insufficient to purchase child care
- Insufficient licensed spaces
- Quality of care uneven and often inadequate
- Low wages, poor or no benefits

### **Criticisms of the Current System**

To date, the child care debate has been set in a political discourse which views child care primarily as aid for needy families. (Phillips, 1989, p.197)

The government approach to funding has resulted in a mismatch of needs and services that does not serve any segment of the population well.

Opponents of the federal government system strongly criticize the use of the tax system, through child tax credits and deductions, to deal with child care provision. Deductions are regressive because they benefit higher income earners more than low income earners and many parents cannot use deductions because their income is too low or they cannot obtain receipts from the unregulated market.

The child care tax credit is not enough to allow families to purchase child care and does not make any new child care spaces available. Child care advocates recommend reduced reliance on the tax system and increased reliance on direct investment where money could be more efficiently spent.

The current system of child care is fraught with other problems as well. The largest of these problems is that there are insufficient spaces to accommodate the children in need. Indeed, there are not even enough licensed spaces available to

accommodate low income families. Some young children are left to care for themselves. Child care in Canada is a fragmented series of programs and services which have evolved on an ad hoc basis over a period of time. Licensed spaces which do exist are unevenly distributed and licensed care for children of parents who work weekends or split shifts is rare. Child care for children in rural, Native and northern communities is also inadequate. Choices for parents are severely restricted as the availability of care varies widely.

Throughout the country, quality of care is uneven and often unknown. The inadequacy of standards, high staff turnover and unqualified caregivers all result in questionable quality. Most child care workers are paid very low wages and receive poor, if any, benefits.

For the average family, the cost of licensed care is prohibitive, especially if there is more than one child involved. As the Canadian Union of Public Employees (1988) have stated, child care has been placed in a 'no-win' situation. Through the current federal system, only those on welfare and the 'well to do' can afford licensed care.

There are many possible reasons for the current state of child care in Canada. The lack of shared goals among Canadians on child care, the belief that families should assume their own responsibility for child care, jurisdictional issues between the federal and provincial governments and the current deficit are some principle reasons.

## **Conclusion**

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From the above analysis, one child care player emerges strongly as the most effective to take responsibility for child care. This player is the government within the government model. The government model provides the most effective means of provision for all four child care elements.

Aside from being the most effective model with regard to each of the elements, the government model has the most benefits of all the models. This model benefits parents, firms, children and society in several important ways: from increasing earnings and equality for women, to job creation, and a possible reduction in health and education costs for society. The many benefits of the government model should outweigh the large cost of such a system, although this cost cannot be overlooked.

Following the government model, either the mixed child care model or the employer child care model would be the next alternative. The employer model is a better alternative than the mixed model in that the employer is responsible for creating child care spaces, while in the mixed model, the parent must locate child care spaces from existing sites. The employer model also has many benefits,

particularly for the employer, but the employer pays a large price to obtain them. However, the mixed model is preferable to the employer model in that the financing arrangements of the mixed model are more equitable and realistic.

The parent child care model, the model currently in place in Canada, is not working and is not a good solution to the child care problem. The parent model has no concrete benefits except relieving the government and hence the taxpayers of paying for child care.

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