



Who Will Mind the Children?

Every morning across Canada, thousands of parents step out of their homes and into the workplace. Some are forced to leave their children in inadequate, expensive, unstimulating or unsafe child care arrangements. The personal worry faced by these parents is a symptom of Canada's growing crisis in child care.

In our society, child care has been assumed to be the responsibility of the parents, particularly the mother. While day care was provided grudgingly for the poor or bought by the rich, it was assumed that other women would be at home to care for their children. Day care, it was thought, would encourage mothers to leave the home and fragment the traditional family.

However, mothers of young children are already in the labour force in record numbers. Almost 40% of mothers of children under 2, and almost 50% of mothers of children from 3-5 are already in paid employment. Single parent families, economic pressures on the nuclear family and the need for personal fulfillment for women have meant increasing numbers of mothers in the workplace. Each family has to cope individually with the problems of finding child care.

Quality day care provides young children with a warm and caring environment where they can grow and develop. Good day care is more than just a babysitting service for working parents. A good day care centre or day care home is a place for children to mix, to learn and to understand other children and other adults.

Today's young family is small, mobile and isolated. Good day care provides play and friendship op-

portunities for the young child who may not have brothers or sisters. It is a network of community support for families who may be hundreds of miles from grandparents, aunts and uncles. Its trained staff and concerned parents provide knowledgeable advice for young parents on child rearing. It is a place where the community and the parents can share the joys and responsibilities of caring for children.

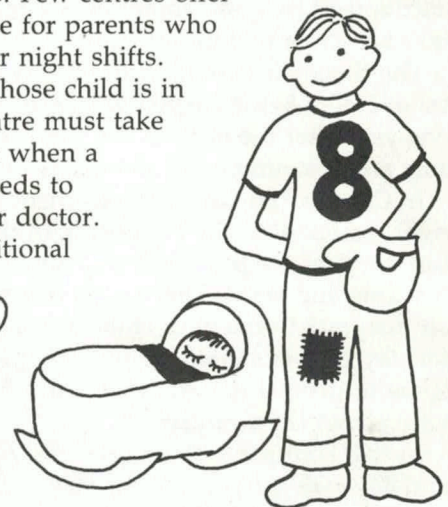
There are a variety of child care arrangements. **Public or non-profit** day care centres care for children in a group setting. These day care centres have trained staff to encourage the full physical, mental, emotional and social development of the young child. The centres are run by a variety of community, social and government institutions. They are regulated by law to control such things as programming, diet, play space, equipment, health standards and staff training.

Commercial or corporate day care centres also provide group care for children but many give a "franchised" service, restricting quality and quantity of staff, facilities and programming to show a profit.

Space in day care centres is hard to find. Every month, 3,500 inquiries are made to day care centres in Metro Toronto alone by frustrated parents looking for child care. Space in public day care centres has declined 40% since 1978 as a result of social service cutbacks and restraints. Corporate and commercial day care operations have grown by 28%.

Most centres care for children from age 2 to kindergarten. There are a few infant or school-age child care centres in Canada. For vacation or school holidays, parents must scramble for space in community programs or camps. Few centres offer 24-hour day care for parents who work evening or night shifts.

Even parents whose child is in an excellent centre must take time from work when a child is ill or needs to visit a dentist or doctor. Because of traditional





attitudes and women's lower wage levels, it is frequently the mother who uses her own sick leave or loses wages when a parent is needed to care for a sick child.

If parents are lucky enough to find space in a centre, the high cost of day care may discourage them. Some subsidies are available for parents of children in non-profit or public day care centres. These subsidies differ from province to province, but most exclude the middle-income earner. Day care costs run from \$140 to \$400 per month per child.

The high cost and unavailability of day care spaces drive many parents into private day care arrangements. One Ontario study found that 75% of children receiving care outside the home were in private child care situations. While there are some good day care homes, the majority of children are receiving care in unsupervised conditions, from untrained caregivers with no expertise or training in the physical, emotional and social needs of the young child.

Accessibility and cost are key factors in the provision of day care services. Almost all European countries provide extensive child care services at little or no cost. In countries such as France and Sweden, the majority of children aged 3-6 are in free or nominal fee, voluntary pre-school programs. Younger children benefit from a wide variety of services including infant care centres, lengthy paid parental leave and supervised family day care homes.

In Sweden, the social policy which emphasizes equality between the sexes and the close integration of work and family life has created an extensive network of child care services. Programs for children of school age provide lunchtime, after-four and vacation care. Either parent is given special leave for days when their children are sick or need special attention. Fathers are encouraged by government policy and advertising to take an active role in parenting.

The Swedish Parent Insurance system provides a taxable cash benefit equal to 95% of wages for up to one year after the birth of the child. Both parents are able and encouraged to share this flexible benefit.

In Canada, day care services are not seen as a social right, essential to the well-being of the family. Child care services are provided only when public pressure is strong and vocal. There is no national planning for an integrated system of child care services. Funding for day care is shared by federal, provincial and by some municipal governments, and funding systems vary across the country.

In this confusion of services and funding, parents and day care workers are the losers. Child care workers put in long, strenuous days with few breaks for minimal wages. Few day care centres are unionized,

and day care workers have almost no protection or benefits. Government restraint programs have kept wages and facilities at a very basic level.

Parents, community organizations and unions are demanding that child care be provided as a social right for children from birth to age 12 through a system of publicly-funded, non-compulsory child care services.

A universal, comprehensive network of child care services must be planned and include a variety of options so that parents can choose the care most appropriate for their child, including:

- Publicly-funded, non-profit day care centres in community locations such as schools, churches, union halls, libraries and community centres. These centres would be staffed by trained day care workers whose valuable work would be recognized in wages and benefits. In addition to providing group care for children, these centres could act as resource centres for registered, private day care homes and in-home day care workers.
- Registered, private day care homes with trained care-givers and facilities appropriate for the young child. These publicly-funded and supervised homes would use the day care centres as a resource. The home day care worker would also receive appropriate pay and benefits.
- Part-time programs for school age children including lunchtime, before and after school care, vacation and teacher development day programming.
- In-home workers who could go to the child's home to provide care during emergencies, illness or when parents are working evening or night shifts.
- A flexible system of community control of such child care services so that parents and day care workers retain control over decisions affecting the children in their care.
- Paid parental leave for up to 10 days per year for each parent for the care of children who are ill or require special attention.
- Paid parental leave for either parent to care for an infant for up to a joint total of one year after the birth or adoption.
- In recognition of the choice made by some parents of young children to spend more time in the home with their children, the comprehensive system of child care services may also include flexible hours.

As an interim step toward universal day care, some workplace day care centres could be established under the joint control of parents, union and management.

To implement a comprehensive system of child care services will take time and a concerted effort by parents, day care workers, unions, community groups and governments.

For Discussion:

1. How are the children of workers in your local being cared for while parents are at work? How many are in private day care homes, in public or non-profit day care centres, in commercial centres, with a relative, or are after-school "Latchkey" kids? What are the costs of day care services for these children? What kinds of services do parents in your workplace need most for their children?
2. Day care is often used as a support by young families. How do the strains of the single-parent family, two parents in the workforce, economic pressures, isolation from the extended family, etc., affect the families in your workplace? What services could the day care centre or day care home provide to ease these strains?