

# Examining Child Care through a Child-Centred Lens Implications for Canada's National Early Learning and Child Care Framework

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## Introduction

Despite the wide recognition of early childhood development as a key social determinant of health, and the protection of early childhood education and care (ECEC) as a child's right, through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, child care continues to be portrayed in today's Canadian discourse as, at worse, a threat to traditional family values and parental choice and, at best, a labour support issue for working parents (namely, mothers). Seldom are child-centred considerations factored into the discussion, including the negative effects of poor-quality child care on children's development, and the potential of child care as a social justice equalizer that ameliorates systemic issues of inequity that many children endure.

A child-centred lens, developed by childhood theorists across many disciplines, inserts child-centred considerations into the policy-making process. By adopting such a lens, children are ensured their rightful place in the social order, which requires the consideration of all its members, not just its adult members.

The objective of a child-centred lens is to expose and redress the ways in which children are disempowered in the social world, similar to the way in which a gendered lens reveals how women are disempowered in the social world. Without a child-centred lens, policies and practices are derived exclusively from adult-centric perspectives, which may – intended, or not – contribute to the oppression of children.

## The View of the Child and Child Care Policy

According to Davidson (2010), the world view of the child has progressed along a property-welfare-rights spectrum of perspective. In Europe during the Middle Ages, children were viewed through a property perspective. Reflected in the legal principle of "reasonable chastisement", parents had the right to subject their children to corporal punishment and dangerous work conditions. They could even sell their children into apprenticeship (Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, 2005). With uncontested parental power of control, children were considered the legal property of their parents (Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, 2005).

With the child-saving movement of the 19th century, supports for children were met through a charity model determined on need and worthiness. This era reflects a welfare perspective whereby children were viewed as needy, broken, incompetent, at risk, and under developed. In the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a human rights perspective of the child first emerged, one which values children as citizens (not 'citizens-in-the-making'), fully human, with a voice that must be listened to and rights that must be upheld through progressive social policy and a caring society (Hick, 2005).

One can see evidence of these perspectives of children when examining child care policy. When child care is framed as a labour support service, the child is viewed through a property perspective: young children are a burden (albeit, a welcome burden) to working parents for which they must find child- minding solutions. When child care is framed as a targeted program for the poor, the child is viewed through a welfare perspective: young children are the object of child-saving intervention. And, with its emphasis on maximizing the investment in children, the human capital frame of child care returns the view of the child to that of the property perspective: young children are underdeveloped resources to be nurtured and mined. Only when child care is embraced as a human right are children viewed as persons with full citizenship status and entitlement rights.

### **A Child-Centred Lens on Child Care and Canada**

Several countries in the OECD have developed domestic legislation to ensure child care as a universal right for all children irrespective of their family's employment or income status. Canada's child care policy approach has not paralleled this progressive movement. Its "patchwork" approach to child care has long been criticized for failing to ensure children's access to regulated child care space (Ferns & Friendly, 2014). In fact, coverage data suggests that there are only enough regulated child care spaces for 20 percent of young children in Canada. Moreover, 62 percent of Canadian children under age six who receive regular, non-relative care while their parents worked or studied, received such care in unregulated settings (OECD, 2006). This is a troubling statistic given the research that indicates the quality of care in unregulated child care settings is poorer compared to that of regulated child care (McCain, Mustard & McCuaig, 2011).

There is much research to demonstrate that the caliber of child care young children receive has a lasting impact on their well-being and their success in learning (UNICEF, 2008). Researchers argue that impoverished families struggle the most to secure high-quality child care for their children, and suggest that the benefits of such child care may be reserved for children of affluent families while the harmful effects of poor- quality child care may fall to those from disadvantaged homes (UNICEF, 2008; Prentice, 2007).

Such early disadvantage in children's lives perpetuates the cycle of inequity and entrenches a form of oppression called "generational discrimination" (Ravnbøl, 2009, p. 13): discrimination against parents (e.g., systemic barriers that preclude them from securing high-quality child care for their child) that cause a cycle of discrimination affecting their child (e.g., being denied the benefits of high-quality child care and having to access unregulated and poorer-quality child care). Some theorists suggest that systemic adultism perpetuates generational discrimination against children whereby adult-centric legislations and policies fail to uphold children's rights.

### **Child Care and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**

The children's rights movement recognizes that children "have agency; that they are participants in social processes; that they are persons not property..." (Freeman as cited in Smith, 2007a, p.151). Central to children's rights is the obligation of parents, guardians, society, and governments to create the conditions through progressive social policies wherein children can exercise their rights. The UNCRC reflects these important principles, and, with its nearly universal ratification, countries across the globe, including Canada, have entered into agreement to create the conditions in which children's rights can be truly honoured, including the right to child care.

*Article 18* of the UNCRC pertains to children's rights to child care, and sub-sections 18.2 and 18.3 specifically refer to the government's responsibility to developing child care services and facilities from which children may benefit. Further clarified in 2005, General Comment 7 urges state parties "to adopt comprehensive, strategic, and time-bound plans for early childhood within a rights-based framework. This requires an increase in human and financial resource allocations for early childhood services and programmes" (UNCRC, 2006, p. 52). General Comment 7 defines education and development as beginning at birth and calls for a child-centred approach to such early education whereby "the education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" (UNCRC, 2006, p. 173).

In Canada, the UNCRC is not incorporated directly into domestic law. As such, some have argued that it is without legal teeth, though many believe, including Canada's Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, that in ratifying this international treaty, Canada has entered into a commitment beyond simply a symbolic gesture. The Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights is authorized by the Senate to make recommendations on how Canada can best implement the UNCRC and submits reports related to its progress. With regards to child care, the Standing Committee outlines a clear role for the federal government, recommending that it "meet with provincial and territorial governments to help coordinate the establishment of measurable standards and guidelines for delivering early childhood development and child care to children

across the country, matched by adequate funding” (SSCHR, 2007, p. 145).

It is important to note that the Standing Committee does not simply *recommend* federal funding transfers to support the growth of child care services across Canada; it includes the call for measurable standards and guidelines to ensure a Canada-wide child care system built upon common principles. While its recommendations have not been acted upon since their release nearly ten years ago, there is a renewed sense of hope among child care advocates that Canada’s new federal government will, at long last, answer its call to action.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

Through its commitment to work with provinces, territories, and Indigenous communities to develop a *National Early Learning and Child Care Framework*, Canada’s newly-elected Liberal federal government (2015) has a history-in-the-making opportunity to lead Canada toward a national child care program. It remains to be seen whether these levels of government will incorporate a child-centred lens to their work, and whether the resulting Framework will reflect Canada’s commitment to the UNCRC through which children’s rights to early childhood education and care are ensured. As previously cautioned, the failure to adopt a child-centred lens in the development of a national child care program may result in the unintended consequences of the oppression of children, including generational discrimination. Therefore, it is imperative that child-centred considerations of child care be brought to the forefront in policy-making. Only then will Canada finally honour its commitment to the UNCRC and uphold its promise to ensure all children receive their right to early childhood education and care.

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