

# Early Years and Child Care: Good for Equality, Good for the Economy

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**Unifor Submission to the Ontario  
Consultation on an Early Years and  
Child Care Strategy**

**January, 2017**

## Who is Unifor

Unifor is a Canadian union with more than 310,000 members across the country in 20 economic sectors. Our 160,000 members in Ontario work in various sectors: auto manufacturing, aerospace, natural resources, road transportation, air and rail transportation, telecommunications, media, health care, social services, education, retail, hospitality, and gaming, among others.

We protect our members and play a leadership role in building thriving, safe workplaces and a strong economy so all workers in Canada have a good job and a decent standard of living.

Unifor advocates for and defends the economic and social rights of working people, including their right to: safe workplaces, secure employment, wages, and benefits that provide a decent standard of living, dignity and mutual respect in the workplace. To achieve these goals, Unifor is not only active in workplaces and at the bargaining table, but in all aspects of our communities and in the political debate to make Canadian society more just and equitable.

## Introduction

We welcome the government's intention to improve the early years and child care system in Ontario.

With the recommendations from Unifor, child care experts and community members across the province, the government has an important opportunity to make lasting changes to the child care sector that will improve the lives of families, children and child care workers across the province and strengthen the economy.

The benefits of accessible and high-quality child care are well-documented and broadly accepted in Canada. Accessible child care enables parents to work or obtain the education and training they need to obtain good jobs. It reduces poverty, improves women's equality and opens up additional opportunities for so many families who are struggling to get by.

Investing in child care also has significant socio-economic benefits to society. Economists estimate that there is a seven dollar return for every dollar spent on early childhood education.<sup>1</sup> This includes the creation of jobs, expanding the provincial tax base and boosting our local economies. Living wages for child care providers are spent in the community and help support a stable workforce. Access to programs also helps close the gender wage gap, where women are paid \$0.735 for every \$1 that men are paid.<sup>2</sup>

Unifor has provided responses to the key discussion questions outlined in "Building a Better Future: A Discussion Paper for Transforming Early Years and Child Care in Ontario." The responses have been structured based on the four key pillars from the paper: Access, Responsiveness, Affordability and Quality.

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<sup>1</sup> Heckman, James J. (2010). The Rate of Return to the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program. *Journal of Public Economics*, 94(1), 114-128.

<sup>2</sup> Cornish, Mary. (2016). *Every Step You Take: Ontario's Gender Pay Gap Ladder*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

## A) Access

### 1) What does access to early years and child care programs mean to you?

Access means that all Ontario parents would be able to place their children in early years and child care programs without barriers. Access to child care relies on quality programs that are affordable, but conveniently located and available for parents, within a system that is simple to navigate. The full inclusion of children with special needs and the inclusion of the racial, cultural, ethnic and family structure diversity in our communities is key to an accessible system.

Special attention should be paid to the working hours of parents including shift work, evening, nights and weekend work when assessing whether programs are accessible.

### 2) In your experience, what are the strengths of the current system and what are the biggest barriers to parents accessing licensed early years and child care programs in your community?

There are several barriers to parents accessing licensed early years and child care programs across the province.

Cost: Across the province, parents are faced with exorbitant fees for licensed child care. This upfront cost prevents many parents from accessing these programs and forces them to find alternatives that may negatively impact their employment prospects, among others.

A recent study demonstrated that infant fees in Ontario cities are the highest in the country. For example, Toronto has the highest median infant fees at \$1,649 a month (or \$19,788 per year), followed by Markham with fees at \$1,454 a month and Vaughan with fees at \$1,363 a month.<sup>3</sup> Parents in several other Ontario cities must pay at least \$1,000 a month to afford licensed child care.

For-profit providers make up an increasing proportion of child care spaces in the province. Unfortunately, parents are forced to pay more at such facilities. The average for-profit premium for pre-school fees in child care centres are as high as 26 per cent in Ontario cities.<sup>4</sup>

Lack of available licensed spaces: There simply are not enough licensed early years and child care spaces to address the need in Ontario. The discussion paper points out that 20 per cent of children aged 0-4 currently have access to licensed child care programs in the province – far below the existing need for these programs.

Even for parents who can afford the cost of child care, many are frustratingly placed on wait lists in their communities. The majority of child care centres in Ontario have wait lists and often parents are seen placing their children on wait lists for several centres at once. The percentage of centres reporting the maintenance of wait lists in Ottawa and London, for example is 96 per cent. In Brampton and Kitchener, 90 per cent of centres maintain a wait list, while 89 per cent of centres in Hamilton and Toronto

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<sup>3</sup> McDonald, David and Friendly, M. (2016). *A Growing Concern: 2016 Child Care Fees in Canada's Big Cities*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

maintain lists.<sup>5</sup>

The high demand and lack of spaces in the provinces unfortunately lead to the proliferation of wait list fees in many child care centres. The problem became so uncontrollable that the province banned the practice in 2015.

Distance: While the basic availability of spaces is crucial for parents, such spaces need to be conveniently located in their communities. For large urban centres, the proximity may be easier to address given the density of the population, but gaps still exist. For smaller communities and rural areas, the distance to services and programs continues to be a problem.

If parents cannot access child care programs close to their homes, it makes it very difficult to balance their daily work and family responsibilities. Parents are also spending more time travelling to and from their workplaces, which reinforces the need to have access to conveniently located child care spaces. The average person in Toronto and Oshawa spends 66 and 64 minutes commuting per day, respectively.<sup>6</sup> While 16 per cent of workers in Toronto and 19 per cent of workers in Oshawa spend at least two hours per day on their commute.

Lack of flexible programs: Access to programs also requires that such programs are flexible enough and available for parents given the nature of work and employment in today's labour market. Parents are increasingly employed in jobs that comprise of non-traditional work hours. This includes shift work, on-call and temporary work, and more evening and/or weekend work.

Early years and child care programs overwhelmingly cater to parents who work in traditional nine to five jobs but this doesn't properly reflect parents' needs. Flexible programs need to be available for parents who are increasingly engaged in non-traditional work.

Strengths of the current system include the dedicated workforce in early learning and child care. These workers, mostly low waged women, strive to provide quality service.

### **3) In your experience, what can be done by governments, communities, employers and providers to increase access to early years programs and licensed child care?**

Governments have an essential role to play in increasing access to early years programs and licensed child care. In Ontario, the discussion paper highlights the developments related to full-day kindergarten and the increase of 100,000 licensed spaces over the next five years. These have been important initiatives and have demonstrated the role that the government has in funding child care in the province.

The provincial government also has an important role in regulating the early years and child care system through enforceable legislation and regulations. In recent years, the government established the new *Child Care and Early Years Act* and responded to calls from parents by banning the practice of wait list fees. Establishing a provincial framework that aims to leave no child behind can build on these developments.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Statistics Canada. (2011). *National Household Survey*. Government of Canada.

Some concrete examples of constructive government actions include:

- funding the capital costs needed to create additional child care spaces
- making child care fees more affordable by providing operational funding to licensed child care centres, introducing a sliding scale for fees and capping maximum parent fees
- Continuing the role of municipal child care system managers in consulting with communities to prioritize new spaces being developed in under-served communities
- Earmarking a segment of the new spaces created to accommodate parents who work shift work based on community need

The government must play a central role in ensuring quality standards are met and must address the now prominent role that for-profit child care centres have established in the province.

In addition to the province's current role in early years programs and child care, there is an essential function that the federal government must play. The current federal government committed to work with the provinces and territories, and Indigenous communities, to establish a National Early Learning and Child Care Framework. The federal government must deliver on this promise in order to more effectively bring affordable, accessible and high-quality and child care to Canadian families. This will only come about if the provincial government is dedicated to engaging in the process with the federal government and is pushing to establish a framework that includes sustained federal funding.

## **B) Responsiveness**

### **1) Do parents have the early years and child care options they need?**

The simple answer is no, and for a number of reasons.

In many cases, parents are priced out of any options because of the high cost of regulated, licensed programs. In other cases, child care options that are conveniently located or provide flexible programs to meet parents' schedules do not exist. The combination of affordable, regulated spaces which are also conveniently located and flexible is often impossible to find for many parents.

The lack of options is particularly acute for families who work non-standard hours and those living in rural areas.

We support an approach that also focusses on the need for culturally safe and appropriate care. This is particularly crucial for indigenous families.

### **2) What are the strengths of the current system and options available? What can be done to provide your family with more choice and flexibility?**

The funding for the creation of new regulated spaces certainly is a positive step in providing more child care options for parents. However, this funding and the creation of these spaces will not guarantee that such programs will be affordable for the parents who need them. Capital and operating funds must be invested in developing more public and non-profit child care centres. A provincial strategy that builds on

the current commitments, along with effective collaboration with the federal government for a comprehensive national framework, would be the long-term solution for a successful child care system.

By addressing the main barriers that parents face in accessing child care – cost, availability of licensed spaces, proximity of services and the lack of flexible programs – families will have options that work for them. However, this can only be done with appropriate funding, federal-provincial collaboration and effective standards and regulation of the system. It is worth stating explicitly as well that decent wages and working conditions for the child care workforce must enter into the design of a successful system.

## C) Affordability

### 1) What does an affordable child care system look like to you?

An affordable child care system would ensure that every parent in the province has access to child care programs without having to sacrifice their other basic needs and where every parent is empowered to participate in the workforce if they choose to.

To provide some context, parents in Montreal and Quebec City pay median monthly infant fees of \$164 and \$179, respectively. Whereas it was previously mentioned that parents in Ontario pay up to \$1,646 (in Toronto) a month for infant care. Equitable access to child care services has been a key outcome from Quebec based on the affordability of programs in the province.

Child care programs should be available at affordable fees. We support fees on a sliding scale and geared to parents' income.

### 2) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the subsidy model in Ontario?

The subsidy model in Ontario contains several weaknesses. In general, the subsidy model is a band-aid solution to addressing the affordability problem for child care programs.

Child care subsidies will provide some relief for parents who receive them, but they only cover a portion of total child care fees. The nature of this model does not adequately address the issue of child care fees since it does not prevent child care costs from escalating nor does it reduce the proliferation of for-profit child care operations.

In addition, not every parent in need has access to child care subsidies. In Toronto alone, where infant care can cost up to \$20,000 per year, more than 13,000 Toronto children are waiting for child-care subsidies.<sup>7</sup> Their child care needs do not go away in the meantime; they are forced to pay full fees while waiting.

The subsidy model in Ontario is also more bureaucratic – with a patchwork of programs that is eligibility and application based – which inevitably will leave people out and does not necessarily provide relief for parents in a timely manner.

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<sup>7</sup> Monsebraaten, Laurie. *Ontario parents welcome new focus on daycare*. Toronto Star: September 12, 2016.

To address these weaknesses, the government should shift to a more sustainable funding model that provides long-term operational funding to child care centres with fees on a sliding scale based on income.

### **3) What are the most important things governments, communities, providers and employers should do to make early years programs in Ontario more affordable?**

Moving from a market-based, patchwork approach to a child care system requires commitment and investment. Where provinces have regulated fees and made up the difference through provincial core funding to services, costs to families are the lowest.

Governments must play an essential role in making early years programs in Ontario more affordable. As noted earlier, the federal and provincial governments must work in partnership to properly fund an early years and child care system that eliminates the financial barriers for parents. This includes a National Early Learning and Child Care Framework with sustained federal funding, along with continued provincial commitments that build on the recent investments in child care.

Investment in child care is a key to closing the gender wage gap. The increased participation of women in the workforce and their enhanced earning ability brings returns to the government and enhances the lives of families. Decent wages for the child care workforce is also key to closing the gender wage gap.

## **D) Quality**

### **1) What does a high quality early years or child care program look like?**

A high quality program should be based on an early years and child care framework that follows the best available evidence and best practices for child development, well-being and happiness. Such a framework should also incorporate human rights principles around the full inclusion of children with disabilities and respect for diversity.

An integrated approach to early childhood education and child care is important. This includes linking elements around governance, infrastructure, policy development, financing, labour, research and data in developing an effective framework.

Enriched learning environments and quality programming also relies on the people who care for our children. A system that enables workers to engage in education, continuous training and professional learning is important in this process. Safe and positive working conditions and appropriate compensation for our child care workforce is also key to maintaining quality programs and retaining our skilled workforce. Workers in the field should be valued and compensated fairly for their work.

### **2) What role should the province play in ensuring high quality early learning and child care programs?**

The provincial government also has an important role in ensuring high quality early learning and child care programs through a provincial framework and regulating the system through enforceable legislation and regulations. As highlighted earlier, the government established new rules in the *Child*

*Care and Early Years Act* and still maintains a central role in ensuring quality standards are met in the province.

For workers to develop the skills and qualifications to work in the field, and to engage in continuous training and professional learning, strong education programs and standards must be available. This requires proper integration with the Ontario post-secondary education system, where the provincial government maintains a central role in funding and accrediting programs.

Better wages and training for staff results in lower turnover and better learning environments for children. A focus on public and non-profit providers results in a higher quality of care compared to commercial care. The most responsible use of public dollars is to expand child care in the public and non-profit sectors.

### **3) How should we measure quality in our early years and child care programs?**

Measuring quality – which includes looking at how children learn and develop, and designing measures and methods for assessing development and evaluating program quality – are complex tasks. Measuring early childhood development includes assessing ongoing developmental progress and outcomes, evaluating children’s environments and monitoring the impact of these environments on the development of children in local communities across the province.<sup>8</sup>

Measuring quality within a comprehensive framework should be based on informed evidence and best practices for child development and well-being. It should also recognize the role of early childhood practitioners in using quality measures to inform their practice and help create good environments for children and decent workplaces.

The province should engage with child care experts and researchers to create measures to monitor quality as programs develop.

## **Conclusion**

Unifor members are involved in early learning and child care from many angles: we are parents, child care workers, community members, workers and co-workers. Everyone depends on someone who depends on child care. This is a crucial time to take bold steps to build a system that is accessible and of high quality. This is an investment that is good for equality and good for the economy.

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<sup>8</sup> Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. (2007). *Quality in Early Learning and Care in Ontario: Measuring UP?*