

Child Care

The need for universal public child care has long been clear. Research from across Canada and around the world has shown that high-quality, accessible, and affordable child care contributes to children's healthy development, women's workforce participation, good jobs for the sector, and a strong economy overall. It has been over 50 years since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women recommended a national child care program for Canada. Yet today the child care landscape across the country is a patchwork, characterized by long wait-lists, unaffordable fees in most cases, and low wages for early childhood educators (ECEs).

The pandemic shone a light on these gaps, as well as on the value of child care—not just for families with young children, but also for our workplaces, communities, and the economy as a whole. It has also made it clear that investing in child care will be core to the post-pandemic recovery. Given the gendered impacts of the pandemic, economist Armine Yalnizyan said: “No recovery without she-covey. No she-covey without child care.” While plans for a national child care system were announced in the 2021 federal budget, and the federal government has reached agreements with 8 provinces, the plans could still be derailed if the federal government decides to introduce austerity policies after the election.

Liberal

In its first term, the Liberal government replaced the Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB) with the Canada Child Benefit, which increased the support low- and middle-income families received. The 2017 Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework and the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework were supposed to be a major step toward improving child care. Unfortunately, the funds were insufficient. There was also not enough accountability or transparency to make sure provinces and territories were reaching the goals. There was also a failure to address workforce issues.

In the 2021 budget, following a lot of public pressure and 28 years after the Liberals first promised a national child care program, the government announced \$27.2 billion in new spending over 5 years to build a Canada-wide system. The Liberal platform focuses on reducing fees by 50% by the end of 2022, and moving towards an average of \$10 per day by 2026. It commits to creating 250,000 new high-quality child care spaces and hiring 40,000 early childhood educators (ECEs). The platform also includes working with Indigenous partners to ensure Indigenous children have access to culturally appropriate child care. It commits to enacting federal child care legislation to strengthen a national child care system.

The federal government is currently involved in bilateral negotiations with provincial, territorial, and Indigenous partners to reach bilateral agreements on how exactly the funds will be spent. So far, 8 provincial governments (including Conservative, Liberal and NDP governments) have signed agreements to move ahead with the program.

Conservative

Instead of funding a national child care program to create low- cost spaces, the Conservatives are proposing a refundable tax credit for families with children. The amount families would receive would depend on income. A family with an income of \$30,000 would receive up to \$6,000 a year, while a family with an income of \$120,000 would receive up to \$4,560.

The claim that the tax credit will cover up to 75% of child care costs may be misleading. In many places, the median cost of child care for a toddler is over \$10,000 a /year. That means that, even families receiving the maximum payment (families with an income of \$30,000 or less), and with only one child needing child care, would still be paying \$4,000 or more a year. This is almost double what a family would pay with a program providing \$10/day child care. Families with higher incomes, or with more than one child in child care, will be paying even more. The Conservative Party's recovery plan does not say anything about increasing the number of child care spaces.

NDP

The NDP has historically supported a universal child care program. It has reaffirmed its commitment to a universal \$10-per-day child care with enough new spaces that wait-lists aren't an issue. As an immediate measure, the NDP propose a relief fund so not-for-profit child care centres that are at risk of closure can reopen. The party has also supported fair wages and working conditions for the sector. During the pandemic, the NDP called for \$2 billion in emergency funding and for the implementation of universal child care with \$20 billion invested over 4 years.

Green Party

The Green Party platform supports developing a universal child care program. It commits to increasing federal funding to reach 1% of GDP per year, an international benchmark, and to eliminating tax on construction costs for new child care spaces. It commits to ensuring the training, recruiting, and retaining well-paid staff and to high-quality, culturally appropriate programs for Indigenous children.

Conclusion

The need, and the rationale, for a universal child care system has been around for decades. But the renewed attention on the value of child care, and the child care workforce, during the pandemic brought unprecedented public and political support for universal child care. We are in a unique moment for child care in Canada. The next government has an opportunity to make a universal, public, affordable, and high-quality child care system a reality.

