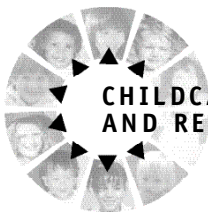

Fact and Fantasy

Eight Myths About Early Childhood Education and Care

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■ INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The inspiration for this paper was a request made several years ago by Sandra Griffin, Executive Director of the Canadian Child Care Federation, to which we could not adequately respond. She makes a large number of speeches each year about the importance of public and private support for good quality early childhood education. Questions from the floor after these speeches sometimes raise the alternative of providing direct financial assistance to allow mothers to stay at home with their own children. Doesn't this idea make sense? Wouldn't this kind of direct financial assistance be better for children, preferred by parents and cheaper for the taxpayer?

She wanted to make a thoughtful, popularly phrased response to these questions. As we had recently completed a study of the benefits and costs of good quality child care in Canada (1998), she turned to us for an answer.

Based on our professional judgement as economists, we said that a proposal to pay mothers to stay at home would probably not be better for children, parents or taxpayers. It might be better for some children but worse for many others. It would be preferred by some parents but—especially when the costs were factored into taxes—would be rejected by most. And most certainly it would not be cheaper for the taxpayer than the most reasonable alternative—public funding for good quality early childhood education services available to all children. But Sandra wanted numbers and evidence, not just instincts. And so the idea for this study was born.

This paper responds to popular myths about public financial support for early learning and care services (high quality child care). We are economists at the University of Toronto—so, of course, it has a strongly economic orientation. We make no apology for this; many of the arguments for and against public spending on early childhood education involve economic propositions. As the logic of economic arguments can easily confuse those without economic training, we have tried hard to straighten out this logic and present evidence and arguments in a clear and careful manner.

We isolated eight main myths that are often heard in public debate about child care services. Of course, some of these are closely related and as a result, our responses to them sometimes overlap. The myths, which this paper addresses, are:

1. Children need to have full time care from their mothers when they are young; non-parental care interferes with parent-child bonding;
2. Child care outside the family will harm children; children cared for exclusively at home are better prepared for school and life;
3. Families should pay for their own child care;
4. Parents always know what is best for their own children; the government should not interfere with these decisions about their care;
5. Families with mothers who stay at home when children are young are discriminated against by the tax system; end the discrimination and more mothers will look after their own children;
6. Mothers would prefer to stay at home when children are young; the government should make this possible;
7. Child care erodes family values and interferes with the ability of families to pass on their values to their children;
8. Providing good quality early childhood education for children would cost too much and would therefore harm the Canadian economy.

The main objective of this study is to provide a reasonably thorough response to these ideas—to subject these arguments and associated research to critical scrutiny and respond in a popular fashion. Research evidence and logic are combined to provide a readable critique to these frequently heard assertions.

Nothing is more fundamental to the success of early childhood programs than public support for their continuance, expansion and public funding. The battle for public support and public understanding is carried out in Parliament, in provincial/territorial legislatures, in municipal councils, the media, public meetings, child care centres, schools, churches, universities and colleges, and families. Many of the arguments heard in those forums are familiar. They are repeated, embellished and altered as new experiences occur, as new research provides fresh insights and as political currents ebb and flow.

We believe it valuable to have a coherent review of the arguments for early childhood education and care services and a response to the frequently heard arguments against them. This paper represents a companion piece for our earlier study of the costs and benefits of good child care (1998). Here the evidence is presented as responses to a set of popular but—as we will show—fallacious statements about early childhood education and care services. We also present research to back up our responses.

Each chapter is written in a common format. Each briefly characterizes the nature of the myth being addressed. There follows a point-by-point ten to fifteen page critique of the case, with evidence from both research and economic theory. At the end of each chapter, a brief, point-form summary of the main arguments is presented.

We would like to thank Sandra Griffin for providing the initial inspiration for this paper and for reviewing it in draft form with extensive comments to improve its exposition. Several other experts provided assistance with crafting and reworking the ideas that you see before you. Jane Jenson, political scientist from the Université de Montréal and Director of Canadian Policy Research Networks' Family Network offered helpful comments, as did Shelley Phipps, an economist at Dalhousie University and expert in children's policy. Similarly, Martha Friendly, Coordinator of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, University of Toronto was meticulous in her criticisms. She has also cheerfully and skillfully guided this manuscript through final editing, layout and publication. Johnathan Kesselman, professor of economics at the University of British Columbia and a specialist in public finance and taxation provided insightful and helpful comments on the relevant chapters of this book. A similar enthusiasm and attention to detail was provided by Gillian Doherty, an expert in child care policy and Adjunct Professor at the University of Guelph. Jane Bertrand deserves special mention and thanks. Jane is the Executive Director of the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development (CSCD) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/ University of Toronto and very knowledgeable about the literature in many fields related to early childhood care and education. She did her best to make the authors more knowledgeable too.

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Gordon Cleveland
Michael Krashinsky