
CHAPTER 9

Concluding remarks

If we imagine that a generation now spans about 35 years, then this generation's children are leading very different lives than their parents did. Thirty-five years ago, almost all young Canadian children had mothers at home full time—in 1967, only 17% of the mothers of children under the age of 6 were in the labour force, and many of those mothers had little intention of returning to work even when their children were in school. Now, about $\frac{2}{3}$ of young children have working mothers, and most mothers think of themselves as having a permanent attachment to the labour force.

Yet Canada's child care policies have evolved much more slowly over that period than have the lives of the children they should have been serving. In 1967, we were already developing subsidies for the child care available to Canada's poorest families. Despite considerable political debate and commitments since then, there has been relatively little progress outside of the province of Quebec.

To us, this lack of progress is shocking. Research tells us that what happens in the lives of young children is critical in how they develop and learn. Yet while their parents work, the majority of Canada's children receive inadequate care in unlicensed unsupervised facilities. This care is provided by workers who are often untrained and who receive compensation barely above the minimum wage. Former U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan asked the appropriate question: "Will we be the first species that forgets how to raise our young?"

Whenever proposals are made to remedy this situation, a series of objections are always raised: "children are better off with their parents"; "parents have children—they should raise them"; "child care costs too much". It is to deal with these objections that we have written this monograph. We hope to arm those who fight in the public arena for good child care with the facts to address these arguments.

We are of course both economists. Not for nothing is economics referred to as the dismal science. The attention to dollars and cents demanded by the profession seems light years away from the concerns of children and those who care for them. Yet our experience has suggested that the tools of economics can be brought to bear on the issue of child care in ways that are more persuasive to policymakers than one might expect. Since the objections to child care programs are often phrased using economic principles, it seems appropriate to meet those objections on the same ground.

Despite the lack of progress in child care policy, we remain optimistic. We sense a certain desperation in the arguments brought against child care, as if those who make those arguments understand that the forces of history are against them. Women are in the labour force to stay. Their children need better care. The prosperity of the country—both now and in the future—depends on developing good child care policies.

More than arguments, governments respond to voters. Children don't vote, but their parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles do. Increasingly, politicians have working parents in their families and know the children of those working parents. Canada has the example of Quebec. We are struck by the fact that despite the high cost of Quebec's new program, and despite the fact that little federal money has flowed to this province to assist it in paying for the program, the new child care policies are overwhelmingly popular with Quebec citizens.

As we write the final draft of this monograph, Canada is heading towards a change in federal leadership and then a federal election. We hope that child care will once more emerge on the agenda of that campaign. And we hope that this volume will aid those committed to child care in their efforts to convince politicians and voters of the need for comprehensive, high quality child care programs.