

# History and Vision: Blending Child Care and Early Childhood Education

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## Index

- The Social Policy Research Unit
- Publications
- History and Vision: Blending Child Care and Early Childhood Education
- Section I: Origins of child care
- Section II: Child as citizen
- Section III: Prospects for the future
- References
- Martha Friendly
- The Childcare Resource and Research Unit

## Table of Contents

The Social Policy Research Unit

Publications

History and Vision: Blending Child Care and Early Childhood Education

Section I: Origins of child care

Section II: Child as citizen

Section III: Prospects for the future

References

Martha Friendly

The Childcare Resource and Research Unit

## **The Social Policy Research Unit**

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## History and Vision: Blending Child Care and Early Childhood Education†

† This paper is based on The Stapleford Lecture, "Child Care and Early Childhood Education: Whose Right? Whose Responsibility?" presented by Martha Friendly at the Language Institute Theatre, University of Regina on March 6, 2000.

In a recent lecture, John Ralston Saul observed that " history is an unbroken line from the past through the present into the future. It reminds us of our successes and failures...warns us, encourages us" (Saul, 2000). Early childhood care and education has now been around long enough to have its own history, which, as Saul observes, can be a useful agent not only for understanding the present but for imagining the future.

I'm honoured to have been invited here tonight, especially as I understand that this is the first time that child care has been the topic of the Stapleford Lecture. For many of us in Ontario, however, the name Stapleford has always been associated with child care. Elsie Stapleford, who is here with us tonight, is well known as one of the pioneers of child care in Ontario—and in Canada. Indeed, her work in child care and early childhood education exemplifies not only some of the features of our history but contributes to a vision for the future.

Wanting to work with young children (and, as I understand it, not being able to sing well enough to be a kindergarten teacher), Elsie left Saskatchewan in 1930 as a recent university graduate to go to Toronto to attend the new Institute of Child Studies at the University of Toronto. Her master's degree gave her an expertise in child studies that few people had at the time, and when World War II came around and the Ontario government entered the field of child care, she became one of the people responsible for the nurseries set up for mothers working in wartime industries. What was unique about this, and remarkable for the time, was that through the expertise of Elsie and a few of her colleagues, the wartime nurseries were expected to be not merely safe places where children could be left but centres for play-based early childhood education as well.

After the war, Elsie helped create, implement and later broaden Canada's first child care legislation, Ontario's Day Nurseries Act, which is a landmark in child care because it established that centres would both care for and educate children. She then moved to become the director of Ontario's child care branch where she built Ontario's child care system over the next two decades.

Over the years, I have found—through Elsie's reputation and writing and, more recently, as I've had the chance to talk with her directly—two things. The first is that her ideas about children, families and women always seemed so much ahead of their time, and the second is that she always (years ago and, I think, to this day) seems to have been interested in solutions that were in the best interests of children.

The three main themes I want to talk about tonight are touched upon in this very brief description of Elsie Stapleford's contribution to child care and early childhood education. First, using an overview of the beginnings of early childhood services as an illustration, I'll examine how child care and early childhood education have evolved as two separate "silos" in Canada, and why

overcoming this division is critical. My second theme is about the new interest in children's rights, how child care and early childhood education are part of this conception and the implications that this concept has for effective action. Finally, I'll explore the barriers and opportunities for moving our issue ahead on the public and political agenda.

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## I

Canadian child care and early childhood education both appeared about the same time—in the 1800s—but their origins are somewhat different. Precursors to today's child care centres are recorded as early as the 1830s when a Halifax factory owner, wanting to attract women workers, established an infant school. In Québec, the first *crèches* were established to care for children whose widowed or abandoned mothers—migrants to the newly industrialized cities—had to go out to work to feed their families. Although these early centres concentrated on "care" not on "education," *asiles* [asylums]—used by both affluent and poor families—appeared as well. Although the *asiles* were intended to be educational, they didn't reflect the kinds of play-based early childhood education programs that we know today (Schultz, 1978). In both of these cases, perhaps because work outside the home for mothers was generally regarded to be a social evil fostering criminal behaviour in the young, there was a strong emphasis on moral education.

The Québec government made some financial contribution to the early child care centres, but this was later withdrawn. By the early 1900s, most centres had disappeared or become orphanages. It is interesting to note, though, that as early as 1882 a labour journalist for *La Presse* in Montreal, Jean-Baptiste Gagné-Petit, crusaded for much wider establishment of children's centres like those already providing both care and education in some places in Europe (National Crime Prevention Council of Canada, 1996).

What is regarded as Europe's first child care centre or nursery was established in 1816 in Scotland by Robert Owen, an enlightened mill owner from Wales. At a time when industrialization was creating concerns about unsatisfactory care for children and the concept of universal education was developing, Owen, writing in 1813, described how his nursery would combine care with education:

The parents will be relieved from the care and anxiety which are now occasioned by attendance on their children from the period when they can go alone to that at which they enter school. The child will be placed in a situation of safety, where with its future school fellows and companions, it will acquire the best habits and principles, while at mealtimes and at night, it will return to the caresses of its parents; and the affections of each are likely to be increased by the separation. (1813, in Cohen, 1999: 13)

France developed custodial *crèches* as early as 1826 and assigned an educative role to them as early as 1833. The *crèches* eventually developed into today's *écoles maternelles*, blending care and education. Early childhood schools were included in France's first public education legislation in the later part of the 1800s and were quite widespread and well developed for children aged two to six by the turn of the century.

The concept of early childhood education was also developing in Germany as kindergartens organized by Fredrich Froebel had begun to operate in the mid-1800s. And as the beginning of interest in education for preschool-aged children emerged in Canada, the first Froebel kindergartens appeared in Canada in the 1870s.

Several provinces had these private kindergartens even before Dr. J. L. Hughes imported the idea of public kindergarten from the United States to Toronto in the 1880s (Prochner, 2000). It is interesting to note that while the Toronto kindergartens were primarily intended to be "educational," it is reported that at least one of Dr. Hughes' motivations in initiating them was to ensure that children in elementary school would no longer have to bring their young siblings along to class with them while their mothers were at work (Young, 1994).

In 1885, Ontario included kindergarten in its public school legislation, defining three- to five-year-olds as eligible for kindergarten. Children attended for a full day. There were kindergarten classes in many communities across Ontario by the turn of the century, but the length of the day and the age group were eventually scaled back so that, even today, full-day public kindergarten operates in only two provinces: Québec and New Brunswick. And outside Ontario, there is little public kindergarten or any other preschool provision for four- let alone three-year-olds. Québec established kindergarten as part of the school system shortly after Ontario, in 1892.

By the time of World War II, there were still few centres either for the care of children or for early education across much of Canada. Even the advent of World War II and the provision of the Dominion-Provincial War-time Agreement by the federal government in 1942 failed to change this. When the federal government offered 50-50 cost sharing to the provinces for the care of children who were working in essential war industries, only Ontario and Québec took the offer. As for the rest of Canada, either the provincial governments such as Alberta said there was "no need" for child care or the agricultural provinces were unable to access the federal cost sharing. Women whose men had gone off to war and who were engaged in farm work—not in munitions factories—were not deemed essential to the war effort.

In Ontario, the government's approach to the wartime day nurseries was quite visionary and would have a long-lasting impact. The provincial government linked its first provincial involvement in day nurseries to the Canadian centre of the "child studies" movement, the Institute of Child Study at the University of Toronto. Stimulated by the progressive education movement and the new social science of psychology, the Institute, established in the 1920s, provided a model for the Ontario wartime child care centres and trained teachers to work in them. Educators and psychologists associated with the Child Studies Institute set up the provincial program for the province, setting the stage for "care" services that also had a focus on child development.

After the war, Ontario introduced Canada's first legislation, *The Day Nurseries Act, 1946* (Ontario) specifically for child care centres, but the federal government withdrew from the wartime cost sharing. All of Québec's wartime child care centres were closed, but public protests in Ontario ensured that many of Ontario's day nurseries were kept open through the introduction of 50-50 provincial-municipal cost sharing.

The next time the federal government offered child care cost sharing to the provinces was after the 1966 introduction of the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), the first (and last) national welfare legislation. CAP's child care provisions, however, had nothing to do with early childhood education and, in contrast to the Dominion-Provincial War-time Agreement that responded to the need for women workers, CAP's focus was on social welfare. Its child care funding was to pay for child care (through "subsidies") for families "in need"; that is, families so poor they couldn't purchase services themselves. Later, the terms were modified to allow funds to pay for child care services intended for low-income families to prevent poverty (defined as "likely to become needy") if the service wasn't available.

Two key things are illustrated by this historical piece on how child care and early childhood education have developed in Canada. Not only do these continue to be features of the landscape to this day but they also have significant implications for action. First, child "care" while mothers worked and "education" to develop the child have mostly been two separate domains. These services, while they have overlapped and intersected a number of times, began as separate silos and have, by and large, remained so. The service silos have endured in spite of the fact that one of the most salient things about child care and early childhood education in the late 1990s (at least at the discussion level) has been the recognition that young children can be educated or "developed" or can learn at an early age *and* be "cared for" while their parents—mothers—are in the paid workforce. Observation of models for blended early childhood services in other countries such as France, Denmark, Spain and Italy, has contributed to this understanding not only in Canada but in other countries, notably the United States, that have maintained care and education for young children as two separate silos. Carol Bellamy UNICEF's Executive Director, sums this up when she says, "There is a growing consensus that child care and early childhood education are inseparable" (Bellamy, 1999: 71).

However, while the recognition may have broadened, the reality (i.e., policy, funding and service delivery) has not changed. Although the standards that are in place in every province are intended to make it more educational or developmental, the *primary* purpose of regulated child care is to look after children while parents work or train. Indeed, regulated child care services are really structured as programs for children with mothers in the workforce, not as programs for *all* children. The single focus approach to child care as an employment-related program is perhaps best exemplified by the federal Child Care Expense Deduction or Ontario's vouchers (payments made to parents to pay for care) under the Ontario Works workfare program, neither of which distinguish between high-quality developmental child care and care that is merely custodial, or even unsafe.

At the same time, kindergartens and nursery schools across Canada intended to provide early childhood education are not ordinarily set up to be sensitive to the labour force needs of parents. And to complicate matters further, in some regions in the 1990s, other services called child development that usually target poor or "at risk" children and their parents have emerged (e.g., Health Canada's Community Action Programs for Children, or CAP-C).

Ironically, there has been much discussion in some parts of Canada about integrating children's services (Thompson & Jenson, 1999). But, although good models from Western Europe and Québec are readily available to show that child care and early childhood education can be

organized to be seamless, in practice the environment for Canadian families and children has become even more fragmented and dichotomized than it was 20 or 30 years ago. That Canada does not provide adequate early childhood care and education has been well documented and is not in dispute. Every aspect of early childhood education and child care varies widely across Canada's provinces and territories in terms of the range of services offered, eligibility, funding, statutory requirements for their provision, monitoring and enforcement of standards. There may be almost as much range within provinces as there is among them. Services in most of Canada have been developed so incoherently that, although each province and territory has a tangle of programs, only a small minority of children and families has access to the services they need or that parents want (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2000).

The second observation I want to draw from the historical description is more about the ideas that rationalize the provision of these services than about the services themselves. Over the years, these ideas or "discourses" have shifted again and again as social needs, cultural attitudes and even fashions have come and gone. The various discourses have included the need for mothers in the workforce (as during the war industries of World War II), the alleviation or prevention of poverty (as was the focus of CAP), women's equality (personified by the 1970 report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women), "readiness to learn," children "at risk," and family support. The goals and objectives put forward in the past 20 or 30 years have been as narrow as "helping single moms move from welfare to work" (or reducing the welfare rolls) to as broad as "providing the ramp to equality in the workforce for women"; from as narrow as a "head start" for children at-risk to a more inclusive goal of "school readiness for all children"; from healthy child development to "life-long good health"; from crime prevention to community solidarity and social cohesion.

The two most recent, popular discourses that have had some degree of success in advocating for early childhood development services, as they are now often called, are 1) human development is fixed for life in the first few years, and 2) early childhood development services are in the public interest.

The *importance of the early years* discourse has become quite prominent in public discussion about early childhood in the last few years. Although this perspective is not really a recent one, in the past few years it has been given a new spin by the addition of an overlay of "hard science," primarily basing the rationale not on the copious body of "soft" research in developmental psychology, but on "hard" studies in the field of neuroscience. Drawing upon animal studies as well as upon scientific work on brain functioning, this discourse is characterized by the view that, as one public education campaign puts it, "the years before five last the rest of their lives," and that "what a child will be depends on you and me."

Aspects of this rationale have been challenged by eminent child development and cognitive scientists (and supporters of child care) such as Jerome Bruner (Bruner, 2000) and Jerome Kagan of Harvard (Kagan, 1999) as reductionist and, given the scientific evidence, unjustified. Whether or not the conclusions are justified, the discourse has served to focus public attention on the importance of the early years in a new way. One extremely important aspect of this discourse—exemplified by a report commissioned by the Ontario government using Canadian data—is that it has strongly reinforced the case for universal or population health rather than targeted approaches to early childhood services (McCain & Mustard, 1999).



The second current discourse, *the public interest* discourse, incorporates multiple perspectives about how society-at-large benefits from early childhood development services. A good example of this conception is provided by a cost-benefit analysis by University of Toronto economists Cleveland and Krashinsky. They conclude that high-quality child care that simultaneously enables mothers to be employed and children to learn returns two dollars to the public purse for every one public dollar spent (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 1998). This study is careful to broadly conceptualize learning in the early years as learning to cooperate with other children and adults, gaining the social and intellectual skills that are a prelude to successful careers in compulsory education, and acquiring the behaviours and attitudes that contribute to developing good citizens.

Another approach to the idea of a public interest in ensuring that early childhood development services are readily available comes from the field of justice, which posits that the provision of services can help prevent criminal behaviour—documented in the United States, at least, by the Perry Preschool Project and some of the Head Start research (National Crime Prevention Council, 1996). In the health sector, the contemporary idea is that "determinants of health" make a major contribution to the health and well-being of the population, ultimately reducing the costs of providing health care by physicians and hospitals. This view emphasizes the importance of adequate income, good nutrition, a healthy environment, decent housing and environments that contribute to healthy child development. The 1997 final report of the National Forum on Health illustrates this recognition of high-quality child care's contribution to healthy child development and life-long good health:

The period from birth to the age of six...is critical....Healthy development affects health and the capacity to participate fully as a citizen and be a productive member of society in later life....The negative effects of poor quality child care and the positive effects of high quality child care have an impact on children, regardless of social class....[It is recommended that] governments give priority to ensuring that families have access to such services [high quality care and development] during early childhood. The different levels of government should work together to negotiate mutually agreeable solutions. (National Forum on Health, 1997: 15)

Child care policy analyst Peter Moss of the United Kingdom proposes blending or integrating the child care, early childhood education and child development services with their variety of discourses to create "early childhood services that are community institutions in their own right" (Moss, 1997: 28). This would mean widespread establishment of community-based early childhood settings as public places where young children and their families can become part of civil society. This concept of early childhood services as "community institutions in their own right" is described in a recent book by Moss, Gunilla Dahlberg and Canadian Alan Pence:

Early childhood institutions...are forums located in civil society. They make important contributions to other projects of social, cultural and political significance.... Further, early childhood institutions can play an important part as the primary means for constituting civil society...and for fostering the visibility, inclusion and active participation of the young child and its family in civil society. (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999: 7)

What's particularly significant about this policy analysis is that it has introduced some new concepts to the debate about child care and early childhood education in North America. A key contribution is the distinct articulation of the importance of values as central to development of early childhood policy and programs. The concept of values has not been a very explicit part of the child care debate in Canada—although there has long been recognition of why and how young children should be better valued by our society.

This articulation of the role of values in shaping early childhood services leads to consideration of an additional discourse not yet part of public discussion in Canada. This is the idea that children, even in their first six years, are citizens with citizenship rights and that, as citizens, they have a claim to a fair share of our society's resources. It also presumes that children have a value here and now, not simply for what they might become—whether they might become better students or better citizens or less inclined to criminal behaviour. One way to think about this is, as has been said: "Children are people, not merely adults in training."

Moss and his colleague, Helen Penn, summarize some of the implications of this perspective. First of all, it recognizes children as a societal—not only a private and parental—responsibility. It means that children's access to resources should not merely be determined by their parents' ability to pay. It means that children's institutions should be as valuable as those institutions (i.e., schools and universities) for older children or for adults, as should the work and the workers involved with them. Finally, it means that institutions and policy for young children should be taken seriously enough that public policies are developed to recognize their importance, just as public policies have been developed to ensure health care and education (Moss & Penn, 1996).

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## II

I want now to move beyond what have been the popular ways of viewing child care and early childhood education in Canada to some new ideas, which I expect will be quite congruent with most of us here tonight. This idea of the child as citizen is a prominent part of what has historically been a theoretical or academic interest in children's rights. In the 1990s, this has evolved into a more pragmatic debate about the position of children in present-day society. This debate has, at least in part, been stimulated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, although it both preceded it and is more wide-ranging. I'm going to use the Convention because it provides an excellent framework for examining how child care and early childhood education are connected to the concept of children's rights.

The Children's Convention draws directly from the landmark 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as from other international antecedents like the Declaration on the Rights of the Child. The conception shaping the Convention is that children are not only entitled to citizenship rights but also to special care and assistance. This suggests that a comprehensive approach to children's rights should include the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights inherent to the human dignity of the child (United Nations, 1991).

When the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child on November 20, 1989, Canada played a key and public role not only in drafting the Convention but also in mobilizing the world's nations to sign it. Former Prime Minister Mulroney was one of the organizers and leaders of the World Summit on Children at the UN in New York, where more than 75 nations signed on to the Convention.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child has now been ratified by all the world's nations, except for the United States and Somalia. Perhaps reflecting their profound concern for children, the world's governments ratified the Children's Convention more quickly and in greater numbers than any other human rights instrument, even greater than the very wide embrace by most of the world's nations of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The nearly universal ratification of the Children's Convention suggests that children have become more visible and powerful in recent years, and that, indeed, the "adoption of the Convention of the Rights of the Child was a milestone in the development of policies for children, parents, and the whole society" (Conference of European Ministers, Strasbourg, May, 1999). The Convention's preamble states that childhood is entitled to special care and assistance, that the family should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance to fully assume its responsibilities, and that the child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society as an individual separate from the family.

The 54 clauses of the Convention can be categorized into three broad kinds of rights intended to protect children's interests: *protection* rights (i.e., protection from discrimination, exploitation, neglect, abuse), *participation* rights (i.e., enabling children to participate in decisions about the circumstances of their everyday lives), and *provision* rights (to resources, goods and services). It has been noted that the rights outlined in the Convention are aspirational; that is, much of the Convention has still to become reality in law, policy and practice (Penn, 1999). Essentially, this means the document represents a vision of children's rights at which the nations are expected to aim. Thus, the compliance process involves setting goals, targets and timetables. Ratifying nations are obligated to report to a special committee of the United Nations on a regular schedule to demonstrate compliance with the 54 clauses.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child has significant implications for nations that agree to comply. It is important to recognize that the Convention is not intended as mere rhetoric, but is structured to encourage action by requiring public education and regular reporting to the international community. Although it has no actual legal status to compel action, ratification of a UN Convention implies acceptance of a set of moral and political obligations. At the international level, there is a considerable apparatus surrounding the Children's Convention, including goals, targets and timetables; research and communications; a regular reporting mechanism; and relationships to a host of other related international protocols and agreements (e.g., to CEDAW and to the International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights).

In ratifying the Convention, signatory nations have pledged to harmonize national law with its principles and are expected to assume responsibility for institutionalizing appropriate mechanisms to ensure compliance. Article 4 declares: "States Parties shall undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the Convention" (United Nations, 1991).

Several of the Convention's articles are directly applicable to child care and early childhood education. Article 18 asserts: "States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child care services and facilities for which they are eligible" (United Nations, 1991). Child care is also associated with Article 27, which commits governments to provide support programs to enable parents to provide adequate

living standards for their families. Concerns about the quality of early childhood services are associated with Article 3 of the Convention—a general article stating that "the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform with the standards established by competent authorities, particularly in the areas of safety, health, in the number and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision" (United Nations, 1991). Today, considerable research suggests that the absence of adequate early childhood education may have negative implications both for Canadian children's well-being and their future prospects, making Article 28 about the right to education relevant. And, as children with disabilities are an especially disadvantaged group regarding early childhood care and education, Article 23 of the Convention pertains.

It is enlightening to examine the process some nations have taken in the 1990s as they move to comply with the Children's Convention. Perhaps the Council of Europe has done the most in-depth work on this in Europe. The Council of Europe is made up of government representatives of 40 European nations and is intended to protect democracy and human rights as well as to promote European unity through cooperation on social, legal and cultural matters. Established after World War II, the Council has designed numerous international treaties and conventions, among them the *European Social Charter* and the European Convention on Human Rights. Among its activities has been the extensive work on the Children's Convention.

The Council of Europe suggests that the Convention is so comprehensive that "rather than accumulating individual measures which affect children without being set in a policy framework, it requires coherent planning of overall policies for the stage of childhood itself" (Council of Europe, 1996:5). Over the 1990s, the Council of Europe undertook extensive analysis of policies and legislation across Western and Eastern Europe with a lens of children's rights in general and the Convention on the Rights of the Child specifically. This has included everything from the adoption of an Action Plan at a Summit of Heads of State, conferences of pertinent ministers (e.g., the ministers for Family Affairs), country reports and extensive research and analysis on a variety of topics, including child care and early childhood education. Many European nations have changed legislation, reorganized government responsibilities or formed new government bodies in response to the extensive work on the Children's Convention. In a number of countries such as Ireland, Cyprus and Portugal, this has meant improved child care provision.

Canada's relationship to the Convention and approach to compliance provides a contrast. Notwithstanding our involvement in initiating the Convention and our public role in promoting it, Canada has not even *begun* to engage in self-reflection about the Convention's implications. To date, there has been little or no systematic analysis of gaps in existing policy and programs affecting children directly or indirectly such as the impact of the Canada Health and Social Transfer, of accelerating privatization or of the policy changes to Unemployment Insurance, welfare and housing.

When Canada made its first report in 1994, the UN Committee, in responding to the report, issued a number of criticisms of Canada's progress up to 1992. There were particular concerns about the growing number of Canadian children living in poverty and about the non-recognition of the Convention in our national legislation and policy making. In response to Canada's statement that progress has not been achieved because a number of the areas covered in the

Convention are within provincial—not federal—jurisdiction, the Committee stressed that regardless of its internal intergovernmental arrangements, "Canada is bound to observe fully the obligations assumed by ratifying the Convention" (United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1995: 2).

This is significant because, since 1994, Canada has moved even more dramatically towards devolution of social policy, with the federal government assuming a more minor role than it had had for several decades and the provinces assuming domination in areas under provincial jurisdiction constitutionally (Friendly, 1999). The Government of Canada's second report on its progress towards compliance, due to be tabled with the Children's Convention Committee in Geneva in the summer of 2000, will be based on the period from 1993 to 1997. This is the period when the national welfare legislation was abolished, downsizing and massive cutbacks eroded social services, health care, education, post-secondary education, housing and environmental protection, and a commitment for a national child care program was abandoned. The UN's response to Canada's report and the opportunity for non-voluntary organizations to participate will probably come next year—2001. And in that year, there will be a Special Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations on Children to review world progress on children's issues with a theme of "emerging issues for the 21<sup>st</sup> century." Several key outcomes for children have already been identified, including:

Nurturing young children in caring environments that enable them to be physically healthy, mentally alert, emotionally secure, socially competent and intellectually ready to learn, and...ensuring that all children have access to basic education of good quality. (United Nations, 2000)

I want to turn now to the association between rights and responsibilities for ensuring the rights are met. What are the processes for ensuring that, as the Convention states, "the best interests of the child are a primary consideration" or that, as the participants at the World Summit agreed, children should have "first call" on society's resources? One way to look at this is from the perspective of what's called a public good. Many of the benefits of high-quality child care and early childhood development services accrue to the community or to society-at-large; they are, in part at least, collective benefits. Thus, if self-reliant families, a healthy, proficient citizenry and cohesive, compassionate communities are desirable features of a society, and early childhood development services contribute to their formation and maintenance, then the larger society gains. The public good model assumes there is an interest for the society as a whole to ensure that all young children develop certain skills and characteristics. Thus, it is in the self-interest of society, or government, to assume the responsibility for making sure that early childhood services are available.

The way the Children's Convention approaches the idea of responsibility is different. The Convention focuses on the rights of the child from the perspective of citizenship. This means that the child must be respected as an individual in her/his own right, not as an asset to the society. The Convention recognizes the primary responsibility of the family to recognize and secure these rights and it acknowledges that the family operates within a wider social framework from which it draws support to help fulfill its obligations to its children. Ultimately, though, the Convention assigns the responsibility of enabling parents to carry out their parenting role to government, not merely to the more ambiguous "community." The responsibility of the State is explicitly outlined in a number of articles in the Convention—as, for example, in "rendering appropriate assistance

to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and...ensure[ing] the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children" (United Nations, 1991). Thus, while parents have the primary responsibility for their children, and communities are important settings for both children and families, a duty is placed on governments to help provide for children. An extremely apt comment from psychologist Jerome Bruner sums up this concept nicely. Describing how a much more complicated world means that simpler mechanisms (such as "the community") for meeting social and moral responsibilities may be insufficient, he says, "Hillary Clinton may indeed be right that 'it takes a village to raise a child.' But the village would be in tough shape without federal and state funds" (Bruner, 2000: 27).

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### III

This then leads me to the third theme I want to address—what are the prospects for the future? I am often asked:

If our governments have a responsibility to help families provide for their children, why has Canadian child care and early childhood education never developed beyond a rudimentary level? Why has a nation which was able to create a national system of health care, at one time recognized as one of the best in the world, not been able to create a social program to support the healthy development of its youngest children? (Friendly, 1999)

Expert opinion in a wide variety of areas has come to support the urgency of action on child care and early childhood education—for children, for parents, for women, for communities, for productivity, for health, for Canadian society at large and for the human or citizenship rights of children. In the past two decades, there have been many reports, proposals and campaigns urging improved and expanded child care and early childhood education. In the past few years, the reports and proposals have become more insistent and have come from new perspectives such as the Vancouver Board of Trade, 1999; the Rotary Club of Toronto, 2000; Stroick and Jenson of Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2000; Battle and Torjman of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2000; and the Atkinson Foundation, 2000.

For some years, public opinion has endorsed government support for child care. The most recent public opinion poll, conducted in 1998 for Human Resources Development Canada, found that 88 percent of Canadians polled strongly agreed with more government support for a child care program (Environics, 1998). Perhaps one reason that child care has gathered broad expert and public support is that it is part of so many diverse agendas. It may be for this reason that, however inconvenient for governments, it has not disappeared from public view but has come back again and again.

In the last decade, it has become increasingly evident that early childhood development services are a crucial component in a wide array of strategies that address broad national policy objectives. As I discussed, these strategies include promoting optimal development of all children, reducing the incidence of child poverty, developing a healthy society and economy and promoting women's equality. With the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the

Rights of the Child and with the new interest in children's rights, the objective of meeting children's rights adds an ethical as well as an international dimension.

In taking stock of the opportunities for movement of the child care file, we must note three items that create the current context and will play a significant role. These are the Social Union Agreement, the National Children's Agenda and the elimination of the deficit and expansion of the surplus. First, the Social Union Agreement. Whatever happens with child care, it is a foregone conclusion that it will have to be "SUFA-friendly." SUFA means the Social Union Framework Agreement, committed to by the federal government and the provinces (except for Québec) in February 1999. According to the federal government:

The primary objective of the social union initiative is to reform and renew Canada's system of social services... and to reassure Canadians that their pan-Canadian social programs are strong and secure. It focuses on the pan-Canadian dimension of health and social policy systems, the linkages between the social and economic unions, and the recognition that reform is best achieved in partnership among provinces, territories and the Government of Canada. (Government of Canada, 1999)

Key to this concept of a social union is that any new social initiative must be a dual venture between the provincial/territorial governments and the federal government—although, to be sure, the constitutional arrangements in Canada always meant that the federal government could not compel provincial social policy. Nevertheless, the federal government's spending powered its ability to shape national social programs. What has changed in the last half of the 1990s is that the federal government has agreed to only introduce national social programs in areas of provincial jurisdiction if a majority of the provinces agrees. This means that federally initiated programs like Medicare or CAP are no longer a possibility. This is a dilemma that is in no way inconsequential.

On the other hand, the Social Union Agreement is capable of playing a role in promoting closure in an era of trepidation and disappointment, uncertainty about directions and roles and a behind-closed-doors approach to policy making that has excluded almost all Canadians. Although the Agreement is ambiguous and general, it may, at least, provide guidance for what comes next and, at best, facilitate creation of a national strategy for early childhood development services.

There are possibilities for several things under SUFA. First, SUFA can be an instrument for new pressure for child care through its principles of "ensuring access for all Canadians, wherever they live or move in Canada, to essential social programs and services of comparable quality" (Social Union Framework Agreement, 1999). Second, it outlines commitments to accountability, transparency and collaboration. Finally, although it presents new impediments, it clarifies the rules for how the federal spending power can work to provide social programs. Overall, it seems that the social union concept will be both a barrier to concerted action on social issues and a vehicle for facilitation.

This principle of SUFA is especially fascinating in light of Québec's groundbreaking (for Canada) early childhood initiative. If SUFA is to establish equity across regions and ensure access for all Canadians—wherever they live in Canada—to essential social programs and services of comparable quality, then the fact that children in Québec can now access blended

child care and early childhood education at a nominal price (\$5 a day) is not insignificant and changes the equation dramatically. Interestingly, child care groups across Canada are beginning to call on their provincial governments to implement "the Québec model" of early childhood services.

From the perspective of federal/provincial dynamics, child care last came to the agenda in 1995 at precisely the wrong time, when anxiety about Québec separation had peaked. It will be interesting to see whether the agreement to the Social Union Framework has improved these dynamics, and what other factors (like financing) can contribute to a more collaborative federal/provincial dynamic.

The second item that creates the current context for movement on the child care or early childhood development services file is the National Children's Agenda (NCA). The NCA is one of the first activities of the Social Union, although its initiation actually predates it.

A national children's agenda has been discussed since 1996, when Social Services ministers proposed exploration of a national children's agenda in cooperation with ministers of Health. The NCA initiative is both cross-sectoral (with participation of Health, Social Services or Human Resources, Justice and Education authorities) and led by a federal/provincial/territorial working group. Finally, last May (1999), a "vision" statement was released for public consultation by the Minister of Human Resources Development Canada and the Saskatchewan government.

One could say that this process has moved with glacial speed. This winter prior to the federal budget, impatient children's advocates unanimously called for the federal government to include a down payment to encourage the provinces to come to the table to negotiate a plan for early childhood services. Instead, Finance Minister Martin restated the fall Throne Speech commitment to negotiate a plan for early childhood development with the provinces by December 2000, adding to the Throne Speech goals of "common principles" and "fiscal parameters" (Government of Canada, 2000). Whether or not these goals, vague as they are, are met will be the first test of the Social Union Framework Agreement. The mechanisms are there; again, the unknown ingredient is political will.

Financing is, of course, always a key political issue. As discussed earlier, child care last came to the table at precisely the wrong time when the deficit and debt had become the issues of the day. Now is obviously a better time financially as surpluses are more the order of the day. At the same time, financial health is a relative and ideological issue, and economic ideologies very much define how much public funding is available to pay for a public service. Massive tax cuts at both levels of government will have a substantial impact on whether money for early childhood services is available. As a national early childhood development strategy is likely to arise only if political agreements can be reached between the federal government and the provinces, how the federal government defines its ability to spend money for children will be a key factor. In the past, federal financing has provided an incentive for provincial participation in developing social programs.



The concept of federal leadership is very much imbedded in all these other key issues. Almost all analyses of the child care situation have concluded that, to solve it, the federal government must (or should) take a leadership role (see most recently, Battle & Mendelson, 1999). The Task Force on Child Care pointed out more than a decade ago that the provinces and territories clearly have the capacity and the constitutional mandate to act on child care. However, "were the capacity to act sufficient in itself, the necessary child care services might already have been provided by provincial governments, acting alone" (Cooke, Edwards, London & Rose-Lizée, 1986: 288).

No social program has been developed in this century without a key federal role in making it a national program—whether that be health care, public pensions, unemployment insurance and so on. The Government of Canada should be prepared to play an active role in making early childhood care and education a pan-Canadian program. This does not mean that provincial jurisdiction should not be respected nor that the federal government should act unilaterally. As SUFA commits to collaboration on implementation of joint priorities—when this would result in more effective and efficient service to Canadians—and to ensuring access for all Canadians to essential social programs and services of reasonably comparable quality, the challenge for the Canadian government is to use vision and ingenuity to create the environment necessary to find solutions for matters of national importance. A federal government committed to children and having the political will could build collaboration to assist in developing provincial programs within a national vision. As the Caledon Institute has defined it, this collaboration on a national vision could be built around "reasonable" federal conditions on spending (Battle & Mendelson, 1999).

The rather banal phrase "thinking outside the box" is applicable to Canada's dismal and stalemated early childhood education and child care situation. This idea, which means only that knotty problems can sometimes be solved with new ideas, captures today's child care challenge. Can the Social Union Framework Agreement contribute to thinking outside the box? If it can't, then what can? The challenge for our governments is not to say it can't be done, but to find a way to ensure that it *is* done.

Speaking at a child care conference last Spring, I got the question from the floor: "What do you think it will take to get us the child care program we're talking about?" I responded somewhat facetiously: "I guess that child care is looking for its Tommy Douglas." One of the things I've always admired about Tommy Douglas is that he brought out the best in Canadians by pursuing a principled vision about "the Canada we want." While the issue of children's rights had not yet fully come to the political agenda when Tommy was still alive, nor had child care, I feel sure he would have embraced the idea that Canada should ensure that children have early childhood services—because it's the right thing to do.

We hear much rhetoric about how we want to achieve the best we can as a society—about improving productivity and giving young children the best possible start in life. Many of us who advocate for children have put forward what we believe is a convincing case: that a national approach to high-quality early childhood care and education is essential to many outcomes and to achieving the best we can as a society. But even more than that, we should ensure that early childhood education and care services are available because it's the right thing to do for children.

What's necessary are vision, commitment and the political will to make a system for early childhood education and care for all children a reality.

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**The Childcare Resource and Research Unit** is part of the Centre for Urban And Community Studies, University of Toronto. It focuses on early childhood care and education research and policy. Its purpose is to provide public education, resources and consultation on child care and early childhood education policy; to carry out and support research and policy development and analysis; and to facilitate communication on child care and early childhood education policy and research. The Resource Unit has an extensive resource library collection and database, an Occasional Paper Series as well as other publications (all of which are online), and a website that includes an online version of the resource collection database ([www.childcarecanada.org](http://www.childcarecanada.org)).

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