



Labour Market Matters

Special points of interest:

- Study finds that children from families induced to use public childcare in Quebec experienced substantial declines on a variety of developmental outcomes
- Justification for universal early childhood intervention programs found to have weak basis in evidence.

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Michael Kottelenberg
(Queen's University)

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Universal Childcare Reform in Canada: Can the Lessons from Quebec be Applied to the Rest of Canada?

With the move by women into the paid labour force over the last four decades, and the increasing need to have more than one income to raise a family, parents and employers are increasingly calling on governments to support high-quality non-parental care for young children. Without a doubt, Quebec is the leader among Canadian provinces in developing policies to transform their early childhood education and care system. Specifically, in 1997, Quebec revised its family policy away to include a significant increase in the number of licensed child care places available to children living in the province, and access to child care at a rate of \$5 per day (increased to \$7 per day in 2004) for parents with children aged 0-4. Surveys of Quebec residents continuously demonstrate that these policies are enormously popular. These responses have led to universal publically funded child care occupying a growing place on political agendas in the rest of Canada.

In a paper entitled **“New Evidence on the Impacts of Access to and Attending Universal Childcare in Canada”** (CLSRN Working Paper no. 105), CLSRN affiliates Michael J. Kottelenberg and Steven F. Lehrer (both of Queen's University) evaluate the impacts of the introduction of universal childcare in Quebec and find that the results reported

in earlier work demonstrating that access to subsidized child care actually had negative impacts on individual developmental, behavioural, and health measures do not vanish in more recent years when suppliers gained experience providing child care in the new policy environment. Using empirical strategies to identify the causal impact of attending child care on both child and parent outcomes; the authors present evidence that there are large differences between the estimates of the effect of attending child care for the full population and the average effect only for those children and families who chose to attend child care in response to the introduction of policy. This result suggests that some groups may derive more benefit from child care than others. Disturbingly, the authors present evidence that for those children and families who were induced by the policy to use childcare experienced substantial declines in a variety of developmental and health outcomes, on average.

In applications of child care at the universal level, as with the Quebec child care policy, significant treatment effect variation is plausible. For example, children who receive high quality one-on-one parental care at home may experience negative outcomes when they shift to public child care that includes higher adult-child ratios, while other children may benefit



Steven F. Lehrer
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from the transition to public child care. The authors suggest that any improved understanding of the array of behavioural responses in the household to the child care policy in Quebec is needed.

From a policy perspective, the results from this study expand our knowledge about the effectiveness of policies that subsidize child care in Canada, and suggest that larger societal benefits may be possible if policymakers were to target child care according to those who would benefit most from its provision. At a minimum, the analyses suggests that the current early childhood education and care policy debate should move beyond being focused simply upon whether or not a universal program should be provided, but also determine if such a program is indeed more efficient than a targeted child care policy.

The Case Against Universality in Early Childhood Interventions

Several expansions of universal early childhood programs have occurred across Canada in recent years. Expenditures on the Federal Universal Child Care Benefit are estimated to be near \$2.6 billion in 2010/11.¹ In British Columbia, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, P.E.I., and Quebec, full-day kindergarten has been made available to 5-year-olds, and to 4- and 5-year-olds in Ontario. A universal, public child care and early education program for children starting from birth was introduced in Quebec in the 1990s.

Justifications for universal early childhood programs include better socialization of children, better educational outcomes, and better socio-economic outcomes in the future. In a paper entitled [“Universal early childhood interventions: what is the evidence base?”](#)² CLSRN affiliate Michael Baker (University of Toronto) argues that the case for universal early childhood interventions does not have a strong foundation in evidence. In his analysis, Baker reviews programs that target children who are infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

The Perry Preschool Program, an experiment conducted in the United States in the 1960s is one of the most commonly cited studies in support of early childhood intervention programs. The Perry Program involved 123 low-income African American children, 58 of which were randomly assigned to a high-quality preschool program at ages 3 and 4, while the remaining 65 received no program (control



Michael Baker
(University of Toronto)

group). Program participants were then surveyed periodically about their lives, with the most recent participant data up to age 40. The estimated impact of the program on a variety of outcomes is quite remarkable. Among program participants, the proportion of those with an IQ of 90 or higher at age 5 was 139% higher, that graduated high school was 44% higher, that earned at least \$20,000 at age 40 was 50% higher, and that had been arrested five or more times by age 40 was 35% lower, compared to the non-program group. Estimates of the economic return to the Perry Preschool investment range from 7-10% to 16%-17%. Related evidence from other experimental targeted interventions, such as the Early Training Project, the Carolina Abecedarian Project, and Milwaukee Project, generally support these findings.

The case for universal early childhood intervention programs is often made by citing the results of these specialized programs that addressed the needs of at-risk children. Programs that were successful for small groups of

at-risk children may not be appropriate when applied universally to children of all socio-economic backgrounds, which may result in misallocation of public resources. For example, Baker notes that these experimental programmes were small scale and provided very high quality education, which would be hard to replicate in a large-scale universal program setting. Therefore, it is not clear that universal programs can deliver similar benefits to children at risk. Also, even if universal programs could offer similar levels of care and education it is not clear that more advantaged children would benefit to the same degree as the less advantaged. For example the children targeted in programs such as Perry Preschool were quite dramatically at risk. Thus it remains uncertain whether such programs would have the same dramatic effects on more advantaged children.

“[W]hile universality is a hallmark of Canadian social policy, a clear case for making early childhood interventions universal will require more research into the differing outcomes for children of all socio-economic backgrounds.”

In closing, Baker provides some Canadian evidence of how early childhood learning deficits play

out differently for children from low and high income families. The deficits of children from low income families are far more likely to persist at older ages, underscoring the potential benefit of programs that remediate these deficits at early ages. In contrast the deficits of children from higher income families are less persistent, perhaps due to remedial action taken by their parents.



Children from different socio-economic backgrounds are found to benefit differently from early childhood intervention programs.
Image: phanlop88/freedigitalphotos.net

Baker concludes by noting that while universality is a hallmark of Canadian social policy, a clear case for making early childhood interventions universal will require more research into the differing outcomes for children of all socio-economic backgrounds.

¹Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2010.

² This paper was also released as [CLSRN Working Paper no. 86](#)

Endnotes

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