

UNICEF REPORT

## Canada ties for last among developed countries in early-childhood care

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Canada lags far behind its fellow rich nations in the care and education of its young children, according to a study released last night by UNICEF.

Of 25 economically advanced countries, Canada has scored at the very bottom - tied with Ireland and behind most European countries, the United States, Australia and Mexico.

Countries were scored based on 10 minimum benchmarks, including whether a country provides for one year of parental leave at 50 per cent salary, the level of child-care staff training, staff-to-child ratios in child care, the level of subsidies and accreditation for early-education services and whether a country spends a minimum of 1 per cent of GDP on early-childhood services.

Canada achieved only one benchmark: At least 50 per cent of staff working in accredited early-education facilities have a minimum of three years of relevant postsecondary education. Sweden topped the rankings, meeting all 10 benchmarks, while Iceland, Denmark, Finland, France and Norway all scored eight or more. The United States met three of the benchmarks.

Marie Adèle Davis, executive director of the Canadian Paediatric Society, issued a call just last week for a national child-care strategy. Still, she was surprised by the report.

"I knew we weren't doing as well as we could, but when you actually see how we're doing in comparison to countries which we would think we were equal to in terms of caring for our children and educational programs, it's a shock," she says.

The research is a snapshot of a global shift to child care outside the home, according to the researchers, who are based at UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy. Approximately 80 per cent of the rich world's children between the ages of three and six are now in some form of early-childhood education and care, writes the author, Peter Adamson. And for those under the age of three, the proportion using child care is now approximately 25 per cent for the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development as a whole and more than 50 per cent in some countries.

While some countries have engaged with the issue, the author writes, "In others, the mass movement towards out-of-home child care is proceeding in an ad hoc way, with minimal assurances of quality."

And as research builds on the benefits of early-childhood education both to children in the moment and for economies in the long run, the UNICEF researchers argue that governments should consider spending more money to reach these 10 benchmarks.

"Cost-benefit analyses of early childhood interventions have shown, in different settings, that the returns of early-childhood education and care can be as high as \$8 for every \$1 invested," says the report.

While the researchers admit that the data does not measure the quality of early-education services or child care and may not include programs that support parents in caring for children, they argue that establishing the benchmarks outlined in the report would be a step toward monitoring the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted by the United Nations in 1990 and signed by Canada.

Ms. Davis says she hopes the international attention leads to action.

"It's an absolute call for governments, non-governmental organizations and early childhood experts to sit down and come up with an early-childhood strategy for Canada. We can't delay it any longer."

### **The standards, and who meets them**

#### **Some minimum standards for early-childhood services:**

Entitlement to paid parental leave of at least one year at 50 per cent of salary

A national plan with priority for disadvantaged children

Subsidized and regulated child care for 25 per cent of children under 3

Subsidized and regulated child care for 80 per cent of children aged 4

Accredited training for 80 per cent of child-care staff

Staff-to-children ratio of 1:15 in groups of under 25

Public funding for children under 6 of 1 per cent of GDP

#### **The top five and bottom five affluent countries in meeting early-childhood standards:**

Sweden: 10

Iceland: 9

Denmark: 8

Finland: 8

France: 8

Switzerland: 3

United States: 3

Australia: 2

Canada: 1

Ireland: 1

*Source: Unicef*