



Liz Martin

A Decade of Day Care in Canada

Women & Children Last

LAURA CLIMENKO JOHNSON

Au Canada, durant les années 70, les mères d'enfants d'âge pré-scolaire ont fait de plus en plus partie de la main-d'oeuvre. Le nombre de places dans les garderies s'est accru durant la première partie de la décennie mais cette formule a pris une direction contraire et en 1977, le nombre de places a diminué. Les réductions de service sont le résultat de la crise budgétaire et de la politique du gouvernement conservateur basée sur la prémisse que la femme doit rester à la maison.

The Rising Need for Group Day Care

Throughout the Seventies, Canadian women entered the labour force in droves. Married and single, with and without children, young and old, women left the home for the work world. Perhaps one of the most significant demographic changes during the decade was the vastly increased labour force participation of mothers of young children. A survey conducted in Toronto in the mid-Seventies found that more than half of the mothers of pre-school age children were working or studying outside the home. These women came from two-parent families in which both parents worked, as well as from single-parent families which depended on the earnings of one wage earner. One result of this upsurge in the numbers of working mothers is the corresponding rise in the need for supplementary day care for the children of working parents.

There are two major forms of day care in Canada: group day care and private, unsupervised 'family' care. Group care consists of a program in a provincially licensed facility, staffed by day care workers. Family day care, in its most common form, is provided by a woman in her own home for children from neighbouring families. Most family day care is unregulated and not covered by standards of care or basic health and safety standards. A relatively small number of family day care arrangements are supervised by government or social agencies.

Group day care is the more expensive of the two forms because it involves capital costs for facilities and equipment, as well as salary costs for the staff. Private home day care is the 'bargain' in terms of costs to users because it is based on the undervalued labour of women in their own homes.

Recent research on the day care preferences of working parents in Toronto shows that the great majority would prefer to place their children in licensed group day care facilities. They feel that group care provides their children with educational and creative play experiences, besides offering opportunities for socialization with other children and adults. In addition, a day care centre can give parents and children a stability and reliability not easily matched by the sitter down the street, who is unable to provide the service when she is ill or out of town. Another advantage of quality group day care is that it provides an opportunity for early identification and assessment of learning and other disabilities.

Despite the strong parental preference for group care, the vast majority of the

children of working parents in Canada receive care in private, unsupervised arrangements. Group care is out of bounds for most working parents for a number of reasons. In most cases, parents simply cannot afford to pay the fees. Group day care rates for children of pre-school age are currently in the range of \$50 per week, with many centres charging significantly higher rates. Infant care is still more costly. Government subsidies are scarce. In addition to financial barriers to group care, many parents cannot find space in centres located near their homes or places of work. Further, many parents cannot find room in the centres of their choice. Other parents, constrained by jobs that require shift work or work during irregular hours, cannot find day care centres to accommodate their needs. According to 1978 figures, less than ten per cent of the children of Canadian working parents are in group day care programs.

Recent research on the nature and quality of care in private, unsupervised day care arrangements paints a grim picture of custodial care, where creative, educational experiences seem to be few and far between. In fact, the 'program' in these arrangements tends to be structured around the housekeeping responsibilities of the caregivers rather than the developmental needs of young children. In addition, there are some cases—admittedly a minority—in which children are placed at risk by inadequate care. Some children, for example, have little or no exposure to such activities as crafts, music, active play or cooking. Others have no opportunity for outdoor play. Still other pre-school children suffer harsh discipline—occasionally physical punishment—from their caregivers.

Trends in Group Day Care Through the Seventies

Quality day care is obviously a service which is crucial for women if they are to attain equality of opportunity in the workplace. Day care is also a service that can benefit children during those first years of life which are so important for their future development. It is thus important to trace trends in the provision of day care services for Canadian children through the decade. Unfortunately, the trends present a bleak picture.

In the summer of 1971, the federal government initiated a national survey to provide an inventory of day care spaces. This survey was to be repeated annually, in order to 'serve as a baseline from which to compare future growth in day care and to evaluate the impact of any new initiative of the federal government in the day

care field.' The published results of these annual day care surveys indicate that during the first half of the decade, day care services showed a strong and increasing growth rate. Despite the continued surge in the numbers of working mothers, the rate of growth of day care services peaked in the mid-Seventies and then slowed down. The slower rate of growth continued through 1976, but by 1977 the national day care survey showed an absolute decline in the number of day care spaces available to children of working parents.

Clearly, the demand for quality, affordable day care has not diminished over the decade. The labour force participation rate of women in Canada has been climbing. Statistics Canada figures indicate that between 1968 and 1978, the participation rate of women in the childbearing ages 25 to 44 increased from 36.4 per cent to 58.7 per cent. Among the group of married women in Canada with children under six, the participation rate increased from 35.3 per cent in 1976 to 36.6 per cent in 1977.

Despite the more positive trend of the early Seventies, it would seem that the responsibility for the care of young children has been shifted back to the parents.

While the Seventies has seen a change in society's attitudes towards the female work role, there has been no lasting change in attitudes toward society's role in supporting parental child caring responsibilities. The losers are the children, who are wasting their formative years in unstimulating, sometimes dangerous child care arrangements.

Recent Trends in Supervised Family Day Care Spaces

The recent decline in group day care spaces has not occurred for supervised family day care arrangements in Canada. These arrangements, in which a caregiver provides care in her own home for a small number of children under the supervision of a government or social agency, have increased since 1974. Although the total number of such arrangements still accounts for a small proportion of the total number of supervised day care spaces in Canada, it would appear that these in-home arrangements are growing at the expense of formal group day care programs.

Discussion

Group day care programs are the victim of government restraints on spending in the social services. At a time of fiscal crisis and resulting high unemployment, day care cutbacks serve to push women back into the home, ensuring they do not 'take away men's jobs.' In addition to this general climate of fiscal restraint, we hear

conservatively-minded policy-makers speak of the 'reprivatization' of day care programs. The implication of such statements is that children should be cared for by women at home. The financial cutbacks and the regressive attitudes that accompany them have drastic implications for the position of women, children and families in our society.

From the viewpoint of parental access to day care, these trends mean that parents' choices are clearly limited. At the same time that parental preferences indicate a demand for a greatly expanded supply of group day care facilities, the number of group spaces is shrinking. This has serious implications for parents' (especially a mother's) ability to fulfill both their work and family roles.

The trend toward increasing in-home arrangements reinforces the traditional role of the female as child care provider. While many Canadian families are striving for a more egalitarian allocation of child caring responsibilities, and while group day care programs include both female and male program staff, virtually all supervised and unsupervised family day care programs use female providers. In addition to reinforcing sex-role stereotypes, this pattern also serves to keep large numbers of women in their homes at low levels of remuneration.

The recent trend toward decreasing numbers of group day care spaces also gravely affects the position of children in our society. The point has been made repeatedly that in the absence of adequate public spending for supplementary child care, children will receive low quality, custodial-type care. The failure of governments to allocate financial resources to day care services indicates a view that young children are the responsibility of their own parents, not of the larger society. According to this model, if individual parents do not have the resources to provide for high quality, developmentally based programs for the children, the children must pay the penalty. And of course, the poorer the children, the poorer the care.

During 1979, the International Year of the Child, it was frequently said that our children are the resources of Canada's future. If the government really has a stake in these resources, it should be providing programs to ensure that our children's formative years are not spent in barren, custodial environments.

The footnotes to this article have been omitted because of space constraints. For more information contact Laura Climenko Johnson, 374 Sackville St., Toronto M4X 1S5