

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY UNIVERSALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY?

A growing body of research confirms that access to quality child care provides benefits across all social and economic classes. Effective universal systems work to eliminate a range of social, ability-based, cultural, geographic, and other barriers to equitable access and participation. Universal programs and services are available for anyone in the community who needs or wants to use them. Universal systems are publicly funded and are paid for through the tax system. The earlier we invest in our children, the longer we all reap the benefits.

In the June 2004 federal election, the federal Liberal Party made a commitment to develop a pan-Canadian child care system based on four principles – **Quality, Universality, Accessibility** and **Developmentally appropriate programming**. This set of principles is referred to as QUAD.

These principles, along with the principle of **Inclusion**, are cornerstones of the child care community's agenda. To ensure that these principles provide the foundation for developing a new child care system, we need to clearly understand what they mean. This is one of a series of fact sheets that briefly explains the principles.

UNIVERSALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

Universal systems are publicly funded systems that entitle access for all. At a minimum, universal systems provide access for all without discrimination based on income or other criteria. Effective universal systems also work to eliminate a range of social, ability-based, cultural, geographic, and other barriers to equitable access and participation.

By definition, universal systems are publicly funded and paid for through the tax system. In Canada we have universal systems where we agree that it is more effective to pool our resources and fund services together than it is to pay for them individually.

Public parks, libraries, fire halls, schools, hospitals, and streets are examples of publicly funded, universal systems paid for primarily through the tax system. While none of these systems are perfect – we expect that they will be there for anyone in the community who needs or wants to use them.

However, this is not the case for child care. Other than in Quebec, child care in Canada is primarily a user-fee

system where individual families pay fees directly to their child care providers. Some public funding exists, but it is 'targeted' and mainly delivered through provincial and territorial subsidy programs. While these subsidy programs are implemented in slightly different ways, all of them are based on a 'market commodity approach'. This approach accepts that child care is a user fee system and directs limited public funding to assist some families who are disadvantaged in the child care market. As a result, all subsidy systems have income, employment and/or ability-based eligibility criteria that restrict and limit access.

Research over the last 30 years in Canada and elsewhere clearly demonstrate that this approach does not work. In spite of a range of attempts to 'fix' targeted, subsidy systems, we do not have:

- an adequate supply of quality child care.
- equitable access to the child care that does exist.
- public policy that entitles children equal access to child care.

A commitment to universality requires a fundamental system shift away from this user fee and subsidy system to a system that is publicly funded through the tax system.

As in Quebec and universal child care systems around the world, this will require:

- adequate public funding that provides a stable and primary source of operating funds for child care services.
- a significant reduction in parent fees resulting in a minimal, capped parent fee with support still available for families who can't afford even this fee.
- a long-term commitment to grow the system so that there is adequate capacity.

WHY DO WE SUPPORT UNIVERSALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY?

There are a number of reasons why a publicly funded, universal child care program is the right way to go. In brief, the key reasons are:

- A growing body of research confirms that quality child care provides benefits across all social and economic classes. These benefits accrue to children, families and society as a whole. As compared to other market goods, the consumers of child care are not the only beneficiaries, yet the broader public good can only be maximized if equitable access is achieved.
- An overwhelming and growing majority of mothers with young children are in the paid labour force. Their children are and will continue to be in some form of non-parental care. Positive population health outcomes can only be achieved if we ensure quality child care experiences for all of these children.
- Universal systems build community cohesion. When all families and children benefit equally, there is a high level of public support and ownership of the system. On the other hand, targeted

systems lead to stigmatization and lower levels of overall public support as middle income families are expected to help pay for services that they cannot access.

- User fees and subsidies create two-tiered systems. In a market-based system, higher income families will always be able to pay more, and therefore demand more than those receiving a targeted subsidy. Increases in subsidy levels generally leads to increases in user fees for all families who do not qualify for targeted subsidies.
- Criteria used to identify and direct public funds to 'at risk' children and families will always miss the mark in one or more ways. Income eligibility thresholds place families whose income falls just above the 'cutoff line' at a particular disadvantage. Even targeted systems based on neighbourhood characteristics ignore the reality that, while there are higher concentrations of 'at risk' children in low income neighbourhoods, larger total numbers of 'at risk' children live in middle and high income neighbourhoods.

Finally, our response to the argument that if we only have limited resources, we should direct them to those 'most in need' rather than to those who can afford to pay is:

- Universal systems that are publicly funded through the tax system address this concern. Higher income families do pay more, but they pay it through their taxes rather than at the door of the child care centre.
- Families are at their lowest earning power when their children are young. When they most need child care, they are least likely to be able to afford it. Later on, as their earning power increases, their tax contributions will increase accordingly.
- Children's development is time sensitive and cannot wait until their families can afford quality care.
- The earlier we invest in our children, the longer we all reap the benefits.