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OPINION

EDITORIAL

Three new studies find child care is good for kids and the economy: Editorial

Canada ranks last in its spending on child care among 25 Organization of Economic Co-operation countries.

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Children enrolled in the University of Toronto Co-op Day Care play outside in September.

Tara Walton / Toronto Star

The Harper government's indifference to a national child care strategy is notorious, despite study after study touting the social and economic benefits.

In just the past week alone, three more studies make a case so compelling for a national, affordable and accessible child care program that it's difficult to believe even fiscal conservatives wouldn't jump at it.

But intent on bribing Canadians with their own money, the Harper government seems willfully blind to the benefits of a national program.

Instead, the government is increasing spending on so-called "family" tax breaks that are too small to help parents pay for child care — a \$1,000 tax deduction a year here, a \$160 taxable child benefit cheque a month there — but so expensive when put together that they are draining money that would be better spent building a national program.

[The new studies](#) underscore just how wrong-headed the Tory approach is:

The first, by the [Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada](#), argues that cost can't be an excuse not to expand access to child care.

It cites U.S. research that found preschool programs returned an investment of between \$4 and \$17 for every dollar spent on a program. A TD Bank study and others found that for every \$1 invested in child care in Canada, provincial and federal governments receive \$1.50 in increased tax revenues alone.

Still, despite the economic benefits and Canada's wealth, this country is tied for last place out of 25 states ranked by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in the quality and accessibility of its child care programs.

And that, the college emphasized, is putting the health and well-being of children at risk.

More than a quarter of Canadian children start kindergarten vulnerable in at least one area of development, the college says, something that can affect them for the rest of their lives.

Indeed, since Quebec implemented a universal child care program, students in that province have moved from below the national average on standardized tests to above the national average, the college notes.

A second report, [by the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development](#), points out there are other important benefits to early childhood education:

<bullet>It reduces inequalities that result from poverty and decreases the number of children in special education classes by identifying problems and intervening early.



<bullet>Better education helps to reduce skills shortages and spending on health and social services down the road.

<bullet>These in turn help to reduce income inequality and lead to a stronger society and economy.

It's no surprise, then, that the college of physicians and surgeons recommended that Ottawa increase funding for child care to 1 per cent of GDP to bring Canada in line with other OECD countries. Currently, spending stands at just 0.25 per cent.

A third study, by the [Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives](#), found Toronto parents face the highest child care fees in the country — \$1,676 a month for children under the age of 2 compared to just \$152 for parents in cities across Quebec. Cost isn't the only barrier to child care. Access is a huge stressor for families. While almost 75 per cent of mothers of young children are in the workforce, licensed spots exist for just 22 per cent of children under 5.

With the national parties already staking out their positions on child care, it's sure to be a major issue in next year's federal election. These three new studies should make the decision a no-brainer: A vote for a national child care program is one for the kids — and the economy.

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