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FOCUS ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Turning our Backs on Vulnerable Children and Youth

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Putting Kids to Work: The Deregulation of Child Labour in BC

By Graeme Moore, Helesia Luke and Bob Korth

New labour regulations position British Columbia as the most child labour-friendly jurisdiction in North America. The provincial government has dramatically reduced the standard for child protection and dropped BC's work-start age from 15 to 12 years. Under the new legislation, a child as young as 12 may wind up selling you a loaf of bread at 2 am in your local convenience store, picking up debris on a construction site or hocking goods door-to-door—all with the blessing of the provincial government.

At a time when more and more families are struggling with unemployment and poverty, Victoria is making it easier to hire children. The government's claim that mandatory fines on employers will protect kids fails to recognize the intense financial pressures on BC families. Encouraging child labour with less government oversight is a recipe for disaster.

Under the previous system, an employer was required to apply to the Employment Standards Branch Director for a permit to hire a child under the age of 15. This process allowed Branch employees to conduct work-site inspections and place restrictions on the type and hours of work. The Branch considered whether potential employment opportunities would have a negative impact on the child's education, health or safety. Branch officers could, and sometimes did, decline permits or impose conditions before issuing them. Moreover, parental and school consent was required before a child under 15 could legally work.



Through the permitting process, the provincial government had a direct role to play in protecting children and determining what work opportunities were safe and appropriate. In doing so, the government created a cautionary environment where children's rights were prioritized over business interests.

In defense of reducing child labour standards, Labour Minister Graham Bruce claims that many employers were breaking the law and hiring children under 15 without a permit anyway. This explanation uses some questionable logic: if many motorists disobey stop signs, is removing stop signs the solution to law-breaking?

Bill 37 ends over 50 years of direct government oversight of children in the workplace. Now, employers are only required to obtain a parent's consent, that's a parent—only one—to hire a child between the ages

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From the Editor

Perhaps it is the arrival of babies for a number of our BC Office staff—four baby girls in the past year and a half! Or perhaps it is just the confluence of research at this point in time. In any event, this issue of *BC Commentary* takes a closer look at children and youth in BC.

Too many recent policy changes in BC will have negative impacts on children and youth. Drawing on their recent CCPA policy brief, Helesia Luke and Graeme Moore (with Bob Korth) summarize the alarming changes to provincial employment standards that make BC North America's most "competitive" place to put kids as young as 12 to work. John Irwin glances behind the curtain at the Ministry of Children and Family Development, and how budget cuts are affecting BC's most vulnerable children.

We also consider what solutions we would like to see for children in BC. In our *2004 BC Solutions Budget*, we included a universal early

childhood education and care program. This issue takes an in depth look at the reasons why we need one. Clyde Hertzman, one of Canada's leading experts on early childhood development, summarizes the results of an early childhood development mapping project in Vancouver. In a companion piece, I take a look at the benefits and costs of putting in place an early childhood education and care program based on some innovative research from economists at the University of Toronto.

And we offer some interesting facts and figures about BC libraries—a key player in childhood literacy development.

As always, we welcome your feedback.

Marc Lee
Editor

Bill 37 violates the government's responsibility to younger citizens and puts its own agenda of deregulation before the health and safety of the most vulnerable members in our society.

of 12 and 14. It is the parents' responsibility, Bruce claims, to make sure their children are safe on the job. While most parents would never knowingly put their child in harm's way, it is also true that most parents do not have access to the in-depth knowledge and training needed to assess worksite safety.

A startling example of this occurred several years ago, when an employment officer visited a butcher shop to assess whether job-related tasks were safe for a young teenage boy. On the site, the officer discovered that while the boy could easily enter the walk-in freezer, he was not strong enough to operate the internal lever to exit the freezer. In this instance the boy's parents had already consented to his employment—highlighting the fact that many well-intentioned parents simply do not know what questions to ask and how to ensure their child is doing tasks suitable to ability and maturity. Now, BC parents are virtually on their own when it comes to protecting their child's best interests in the workplace.

Minister Bruce asserts that new regulations protect children. It is hard to imagine that any reasonable person would interpret these regulations as protections. Children between 12 and 14 can now work up to four hours per day on a school day. When added to school time, that turns into a ten-hour workday! On non-school days, children can work the equivalent of 35 hours a week—full-time by adult standards. In some circumstances the Branch may authorize an even longer workday.

Educators have been removed from the process, as children no longer need permission from school authorities to work. Even more troubling is that there are no prohibited occupations under the new system. Unlike our neighbours in Alberta and Washington, BC does not list jobs that are unsuitable for developing children, including operating machinery, or tasks that require strength or mature judgment.

Bill 37 puts children at risk as never before. It was enacted without consultation with many organizations and individuals who expressed serious concerns about loosening restrictions on hiring children. It violates the government's responsibility to younger citizens and puts its own agenda of deregulation before the health and safety of the most vulnerable members in our society. While the rest of the world is implementing United Nations covenants to place greater restrictions on child labour, BC is marching in the opposite direction.

*Graeme Moore worked for the BC Government's Employment Standards Branch for 21 years, and is currently an independent consultant on employment standards. Helesia Luke is a parent, small business owner and an advocate for children's rights. Bob Korth is Priest Associate at Christ Church Cathedral in Vancouver. Helesia and Graeme co-authored the recent CCPA report, **Who's Looking Out for Our Kids: Deregulating Child Labour Law in British Columbia**, available at www.policyalternatives.ca.*

Turning our Backs on Vulnerable Children and Youth

By John Irwin

There has been a flurry of recent changes—and cuts—to the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) and other provincial services for children and youth. Despite the Minister's reassurances that all is well, these policy changes will seriously impact the lives of BC's vulnerable children and youth, and their families. The cuts may result in abuse and harm to children going unreported or uninvestigated.



PHOTO: JOSHUA BERSON

They may also have fatal impacts. It is worth recalling the tragic death of Matthew Vaudreuil in the early 1990s, who died despite his family's many interactions with the child welfare system. Matthew lived in a very abusive environment, and died at the age of five.

This case led to the *Gove Inquiry into Child Protection in British Columbia*. In its 1995 report, the Gove Inquiry made a number of recommendations for the reform of child welfare in BC, including the creation of regional authorities with a mandate to manage the delivery of child welfare services.

Fast forward to 2004 and the planned reorganization of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). Inspired by the Gove Inquiry, the decentralization of services from MCFD to regional authorities and First Nations authorities was to rely on the capacity of community groups to provide child protection and other youth-related services.

This reorganization has now been put on the backburner until after the 2005 election, a victim of chaos at the Ministry due to budget cuts. MCFD is facing a budget cut of \$70 million in 2004/05, bringing the cumulative cut to \$162 million below 2001/02 levels. These budget cuts have resulted in the loss of 525 social workers, or an estimated 7,000 person-years of experience. Most were voluntary departures and early retirements, but the cumulative loss of experience and capacity is staggering in a field that has a high rate of turnover at the best of times.

The devolution of authority for child and youth services to local community-based authorities (similar to children's aid societies) might be appropriate in an environment where funding for child protection services and other preventative services was stable.

But to conduct a major restructuring during a significant round of budget cuts leaves children and youth who rely on these services, and the social workers who deliver them, with a serious lack of resources. Protecting and improving the lives of vulnerable children and youth costs money. The combined impact of budget cuts and restructuring leaves the service delivery system for vulnerable children and youth in disarray.

Other major policy changes taking place at MCFD are being driven by budget cuts. The Ministry is attempting to reduce the number of foster care cases by placing more children and youth into the care of their relatives or others, such as family friends—but at a much lower rate of compensation than foster care. Foster homes in BC are paid on a per child basis: for children under the age of eleven the current rate is \$702 per month; and for youth aged twelve to nineteen, \$806 per month. Relatives and others used to receive the full foster care rate, but this has been cut back to a maximum of \$450 per month.

It is a reasonable policy to place children and youth with relatives and others who are known to them, but to do so as a cost-cutting measure leaves these vulnerable children with less resources than were available to them under the foster care model. It may leave many children and youth living in poverty if their family foster caregivers do not have sufficient income.

Budget cuts at MCFD have also meant the loss of social equity programs. These programs provided youth outreach workers and 'hot lunch' programs for inner city schools. The Vancouver School Board lost \$2.9 million in funding for these programs in

The combined impact of budget cuts and restructuring leaves the service delivery system for vulnerable children and youth in disarray.

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Early Childhood Development: Lessons from Vancouver

By Clyde Hertzman

In Canada, over the past decade, the early childhood period (from age 0 to 5) has begun to make a transition from being a purely private matter, of concern only to families, to a time of life with a public profile. There is now an impressive body of evidence, from a wide range of sources, demonstrating that early child development affects health, well-being, and competence across the balance of the life course.



PHOTO: JOSHUA BERSON

Although the highest developmental risk is found in the poorest neighbourhoods of town, the largest number of children at risk is found more thinly spread across Vancouver's middle class neighbourhoods.

We now know that the chances for successful early physical, social/emotional, and cognitive/language development are strongly influenced by the day-to-day qualities of the environments where children grow up, live, and learn. The young child's brain is an 'environmental organ' just like the lungs or the skin, growing and developing according to the amount and quality of stimulation in the child's immediate environment. An engaged and supportive emotional environment conditions the developing brain in positive ways that, in turn, influence positively how the child will perceive and respond to stressful experiences for the balance of their life. A rich and responsive language environment allows a child to acquire language much more rapidly than an environment where little conversation takes place.

Inequalities in child development emerge over the first five years of life, according to family income, parental education, parenting style, neighbourhood safety and cohesion, neighbourhood socio-economic characteristics, and access to quality child care and developmental programs. In other words, family circumstances do not operate on their own. Children who grow up in safe and cohesive neighbourhoods do better, in general, than those from dangerous and socially fragmented neighbourhoods. Similarly, children from vulnerable family backgrounds who grow up in mixed income neighbourhoods tend to fare better than those who grow up in uniformly low-income neighbourhoods.

Despite our general knowledge of the importance of healthy child development, until recently we have had no way of monitoring how it unfolded in specific communities, or understanding how local circumstances could be changed to improve the life chances of children.

In order to enhance our understanding, we initiated a developmental assessment of all Vancouver kindergarten children within a school district using a statistical index we call the Early Development Instrument (EDI). The EDI measures readiness for school in three key domains of child development: language/cognitive, social/emotional, and physical. These are the domains that research evidence shows have a long-term impact on health, well-being, and school success.

The EDI is filled in by kindergarten teachers and draws on their knowledge of their children by the middle of the kindergarten year. Although it is completed for each individual child, data is interpreted at the group level (i.e. school or neighbourhood) in order to help communities assess how well they are doing in supporting young children and their families. The neighbourhoods were characterized in terms of their socio-demographic status, developmental risk circumstances, and de facto access to services and facilities that are meant to assist child development.

Although the highest developmental risk is found in the poorest neighbourhoods of town, the largest number of children at risk is found more thinly spread across Vancouver's middle class neighbourhoods. In real numbers, approximately 20% of the vulnerable children living in Vancouver lived in the three 'high risk' neighbourhoods, while the other 80% of vulnerable children were spread across the other 20 neighbourhoods in town.

Thus, if the purpose of an early child development strategy is to increase resilience, decrease vulnerability, and reduce social inequality, then a strategy to provide universal access to the conditions that support healthy child development is needed. There

is room for improvement in the environments in which most children grow up, right across the socio-economic spectrum, and not just in those walks of life traditionally considered “high risk.”

Another important finding is that children whose family backgrounds might put them at risk, but who live in mixed-income neighborhoods, tend to be protected compared to their counterparts in low socio-economic segregated neighbourhoods. In other words, it seems that mixed neighbourhoods lead to lower levels of developmental vulnerability than economically segregated poor neighbourhoods.

In Vancouver, we have shown that as much as 60% of the variation between schools in basic competency tests at Grade 4 can be explained by a combination of kindergarten vulnerability rates, using the EDI and the socio-economic status of the school’s catchment area. The proportion of children who enter school vulnerable on one or more dimensions of development is a powerful determinant of a school’s success in assisting children to achieve their basic competencies.

At present, schools are society’s principal child development agencies. However, school mandates do not start at birth, and the notion of ‘education’ is often interpreted much more narrowly than ‘development’. Although Vancouver has a rich variety of child care centres and child development programs, funding levels are low, neighbourhood accessibility is variable, capacities and population coverage are often impossible to determine, and the mix of programs is ad hoc. Current spending per child in British Columbia on all child care and development programs for the 0-5 age range is less than one-fifth what it is on public education starting at age 6.

Our analysis shows that licensed child care has the largest developmental benefits for children of the least well-educated parents. Yet, in Vancouver, licensed child care is concentrated in areas where the parent population is well educated, and hard to find in the areas where parents have the least education. Equalizing access to quality care child needs to be one of the cornerstones of an effective early child development strategy.

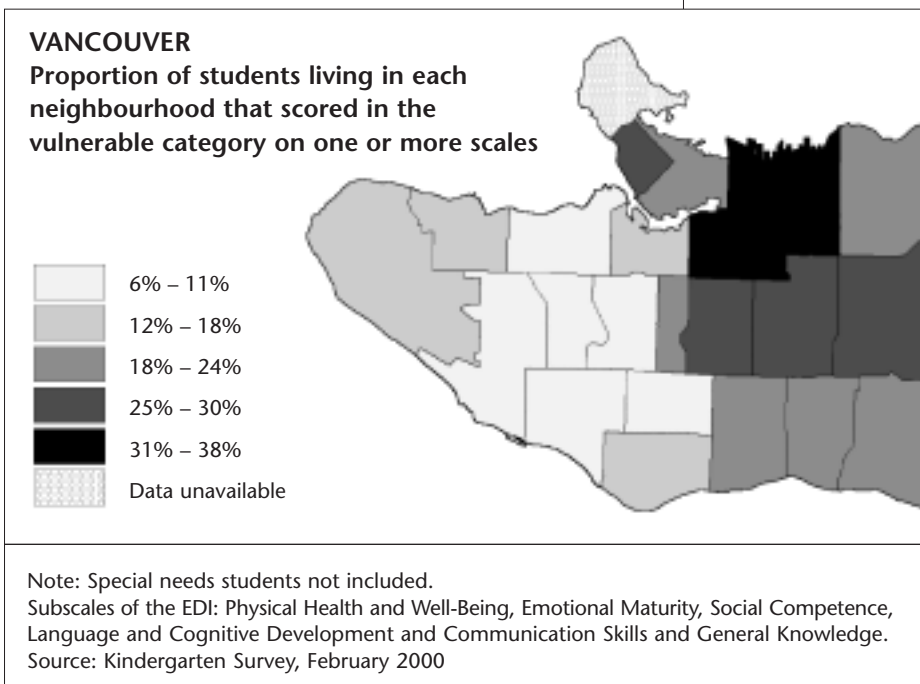
The good news is that the resources needed to adequately fund early child development are already coming available. The fraction

of the Canadian population age 0-18 will decline from 25% to 21% over the ten years 2001-2011. All we would need to do is hold spending on education and development among the entire 0-18 group constant as a share of GDP, as though their share of the population were not declining, and assign the surplus to the 0-5 age group. By the middle of the next decade, spending on children 0-5 would gradually approach the same level as school age children, giving us time to phase-in sensible approaches to early child development. This plan would not foreclose funding increases to the K-12 system.

Turning schools into centres for human development, from the time of birth onward, is the sort of intelligent use of public resources that we need. Indeed, some school boards are already doing precisely this—using freed-up classroom space to offer expanded early childhood development programming. Creating a long-term plan to reap these benefits would be a marked departure in planning for our federal and provincial governments. But it would not be unprecedented. The funding plan to ensure that the Canada Pension Plan remains solvent, as our population ages, is really no different. If our seniors deserve this level of planning, why not our children?

Clyde Hertzman is Professor of Health Care and Epidemiology at the University of British Columbia, and a Research Associate of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. This piece is drawn from a forthcoming policy brief to be published by the CCPA. The full report is available at www.earlylearning.ubc.ca.

Equalizing access to quality care child needs to be one of the cornerstones of an effective early child development strategy.



Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Education

By Marc Lee

Unlike most European countries, Canada does not have a coherent public system for early childhood education and care (ECEC). Despite growing support for the concept at the federal and provincial levels, from academics, child care advocates and families, the perceived cost of embarking on a major new social program, in the context of federal and provincial downsizing, has proven to be a key barrier.



PHOTO: JOSHUA BERSON

The benefits of a public child care program outweigh costs by a factor of two to one.

Canada has taken some baby steps. Through a variety of measures—including kindergarten and publicly-funded, regulated child care, plus tax credits for child care expenses—federal and provincial governments currently spend about \$4 billion a year on ECEC (although Quebec has a disproportionate share of this spending). But the resulting patchwork of services varies greatly across provinces, has a wide range of service quality, and is predominantly a user-pay system.

A number of researchers agree that the cost of a high-quality, fully-developed, universal ECEC system would be about \$10 billion for Canada as a whole. That is, an additional \$6 billion per year would be required, and in the context of a more coherent national policy framework. For BC, this would be about \$1.3 billion per year in total (the province currently spends \$173 million on subsidies for low-income parents).

But looking at costs considers only one side of the ledger. Education and health care both cost a lot of public money (much more than what is being recommended for ECEC). But we fund them publicly because of the tremendous social and economic benefits that arise from doing so—benefits that greatly exceed those under a private or “free market” model.

The same is true for early childhood education and care. While it is almost cliché to state that the early years are the most important for a child’s development, we collectively have not been willing to make this financial investment for our children, even though the benefits would be significant.

Research suggests that the establishment of a high-quality publicly-funded system for pre-schoolers would have immense benefits for their development

prospects in key areas such as social interaction with other children, language and cognitive development, physical development and establishing relationships with adults that are not immediate family. While children from all socio-economic backgrounds would benefit, such a system would make a huge difference in the lives of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A second benefit relates to the labour market participation of mothers. An ECEC program would enable more mothers to enter the labour market and would enable those currently working part-time to work full-time. This means higher family incomes, stronger family resilience to economic shocks, and greater financial independence and social inclusion

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Annual Benefits and Costs of a National Child Care Program for Two to Five Year Olds

Costs of Program	Millions of Dollars
Gross cost of child care for 2-5 year olds	7,910
Subtract: 20% parental contribution (scaled to income)	1,581
Subtract: Current government expenditure on child care	1,000
Net Cost of Program	5,329
Benefits of Program	
Total Child Development Benefits	4,308
Gains from increased part-time employment	2,080
Gains from increased full-time employment	4,160
Total Child Development and Labour Force Benefits	10,548
Net Benefit of ECEC Program	5,219

Source: Cleveland, Gordon and Michael Krashinsky. 1998. *The Benefits and Costs of Good Child Care: The Economic Rationale for Public Investment in Young Children*. Study for the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada.

Did you know?

Libraries are a cornerstone of our social fabric, contributing to more supportive, equitable and safe communities. In particular, they are a key component of early childhood development and family literacy — public libraries are a free, universally accessible¹ public service that addresses the critical 0-5 year development period.

- BC's 70 public libraries (with a total of 234 branches) serve 98 per cent of the province's population.
- In 2002, BC's 4 million residents borrowed 49,390,138 items from their local public libraries.
- In Vancouver, "juvenile" circulation (borrowing by children aged 14 and under) accounted for nearly one third — 30.65 per cent — of overall circulation in 2003. In the Fraser Valley Regional Library, it accounted for 29.9 per cent of total circulation. And in Fort St. John, 38 percent.²
- Of Vancouver Public Library's users, children aged 0-4 are among the most active borrowers. In 2003, they borrowed an average 53 books, videos or other items each. Children aged 5-9 borrowed an average of 40 items each. In contrast, 25-29 years olds averaged 6 items.
- BC public libraries use extensive programming and outreach to increase the number of kids exposed to books and reading at an early age. In 2003, Vancouver Public Library's 4,328 juvenile programs — parent and child story times, author readings, book clubs, outreach to drop-in centres and daycares — were attended by 148,149 children. The Fraser Valley Regional Library offered 2,432 children's programs, attended by 94,320 kids.

Lillooet Library focuses on outreach to First Nations children

The Lillooet Public Library focuses on outreach and children's programming for the Northern St'at'imc Nation families who make up half the library's service population.

Its programs include a partnership with the Lillooet Indian Friendship Centre for its annual Summer Reading Club program, offering a buddy reading system and author visits. Through the partnership, the library also runs a crafts and stories program for pre-schoolers, and a summer writing and reading program at the friendship centre where kids write and illustrate their own biographies. The library circulates blue-boxes full of pre-school materials between nearby reserves. And a St'at'imc language translation has been added to the English text in the baby book given to all newborns.

To its credit, the provincial government has maintained funding for BC's public libraries and special programs, like the BC Summer Reading Club, in the face of cuts to other public services.

¹ First Nations reserves and unorganized territories do not have public libraries.

² Provincial juvenile circulation and programming statistics are not available. These statistics were provided by each library individually.



PHOTO: JESSIE SMITH

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the last provincial budget. These cuts come on top of a decade of under-funding of K-12 education, with declining real per student funding levels (see “Who’s Cutting Classes” in the Winter 2004 *BC Commentary*). BC’s schools have also lost community workers and teacher’s assistants for developmentally-delayed children and youth. School boards have little capacity to make up for the loss of social equity programs.

In addition, MCFD has cut the number of youth beds and youth shelters. There has also been a reduction in the funds available for social workers to contract services, such as homecare workers, child care workers and other assistance, for families with vulnerable children and youth. Child protection social workers have been left with less discretionary front-line support resources.

The number of children and youth in care dropped by 12.9% from June of 2001 to September 2003 (from 10,748 to 9,377). On the surface this may seem like a positive outcome. But in the context of cuts, it raises questions about whether the drop is a result of less need for child protection, or if having fewer social workers results in less intervention and fewer children and youth being placed in care.

The full suit of policies that will negatively impact children and youth goes beyond those cuts at MCFD:

- The two-year independence test before youth can receive welfare;
- Cuts to welfare benefits, especially for single parents;
- Changes to the Employment Standards Act, such as the reduction of the minimum paid workday from four hours to two;
- Restricted access to training and education;
- The \$6 per hour “training” wage; and
- Deregulation of child labour.

BC’s vulnerable children and youth are facing tough times when the cumulative impact of these budget cuts and policy changes are considered. Unfortunately, when it comes to child policy, we reap what we sow. The consequences of the government’s “penny wise, pound foolish” measures will likely be felt for years to come.

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of women. It also facilitates enhanced promotion and career-development prospects, and increased job experience, over the course of a woman’s career.

A 1998 study by University of Toronto economists Gordon Cleveland and Michael Krashinsky put some numbers to these costs and benefits. Their numbers are based on a comprehensive and high quality, national child care program aimed at 2-5 year olds (not a full ECEC program for ages 0-12). Costs of the program and benefits to both children and parents are laid out in the Table.

Overall, Cleveland and Krashinsky find that benefits outweigh costs by a factor of two to one. The net cost of their public child care program—assuming a 20% parental contribution and \$1 billion of existing tax expenditures for child care shifted into the new program—is \$5.3 billion. This assumes that some families will still choose to have a stay-at-home parent, but would use the program part-time.

But the benefits are even more substantial. The gain to children amounts to \$4.3 billion. This includes the social gains from lower high school drop-out rates, reduced grade repetition, and higher lifetime earnings. The gain for parents adds another \$6.2 billion due to increased labour force participation and higher incomes for mothers of young children.

The total benefit is \$10.5 billion (this does not count the benefit of new employment for child care workers, nor does it factor in reduced future needs for social assistance and other programs). It would be hard to find another investment with such a large payback.

The key is that the benefits do not strictly accrue to parents but are spread across society as a whole. These “positive externalities,” as economists call them, are the main justification for funding ECEC on a universal, public basis.

Marc Lee is an economist with the BC office of the CCPA, and the Editor of BC Commentary.

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