



Canadian Council on Social Development  
Conseil canadien de développement social

## **Who Benefits from Educational and Child Care Services and What Purpose do they Serve?**

*by Jocelyne Tougas*

**Discussion paper prepared for the CCSD's  
national conference on child care in Canada**



**CHILD CARE  
FOR A CHANGE!**  
SHAPING THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

**Winnipeg, November 12 – 14, 2004**



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“It takes a village to raise a child.”  
*Old African proverb*

To understand the present, it is necessary to go back to the past and set events in their historical context.

I am picturing a small group of humanoids moving across the savannah in the Great Lakes region of Africa. Men, armed with long sticks, standing guard at the sides and in the rear, while those in front lead the procession and pick out the safest path to take to their destination. The group is looking for a parcel of land where they can settle down for a few weeks for the harvest season, to give the women a chance to collect small fruits, roots and other grains that will be used in their meals and, especially, meet their basic food requirements. The men will use the time to hunt and make tools.

## ○ *The three- and four-year-olds ...*

The children who are big enough to walk move about within the group, spending a few minutes or maybe an hour or two with the grown-ups, then they go back to playing with each other. Occasionally, an adult who happens to be close to them will get them back in line with a sign of the head, a gesture or a shout. Sometimes they are treated to little surprises, such as the fun of digging out shells from the sand beside the lake, or finding out that with just the right blow against a rock, the shells open up, revealing gooey little creatures, but so delicious when swallowed raw!

## ○ *Infants and toddlers ...*

The children who are nursing and still too small to walk are carried by their mothers, but I picture other women and young girls, maybe even some of the men, giving them a break so that they can join the others in the “domestic” chores and community life, especially if they are still young and fit. Babies, when they are not sleeping, observe the universe around them from their mothers’ arms or those of another member of the community, and they are keenly sensitive to the activities and emotions of the group.

## ○ *Learning experiences ...*

The young girls pay close attention to the women because they will soon have to take on the same roles. They do so by caring for the babies, starting the fires, picking fruits, herbs and plants, and making concoctions to heal and bandage wounds. During these journeys, the young boys closely follow the chiefs, the ones who lead the party. They watch and listen to them. They try to understand the reasons for their decision to turn right and cross the swamp, rather than take the well-travelled path on the left. Even though they do not ask questions, they are nonetheless watching for answers in the adults’ gestures and behaviour. I expect that the stories told by the men and women at night around the campfire satisfy the children’s curiosity and answer their questions, and maybe even stir their imaginations further.

## ○ *The community ...*

The group finally reaches a rise. Protected from the wind by large trees and thick bushes, with a good view over the savannah, this is an ideal spot to stop and make camp. Everyone has a job. The

men secure the perimeter and, with the help of the women, set up shelters and organize the camp. The pickers, accompanied by the young girls and the children, explore the surroundings for much-sought-after plants. Other women prepare the food while the children – both boys and girls – crouch on the ground as they watch the comings and goings of the ants and marvel at the weights they carry on their backs.

This description brings to mind the following:

- The children are an integral part of the group, activities and community life, as is every other member of the group.
- The children also have their assigned jobs, which are important in the group's everyday life and its long-term survival.
- Depending on their activities and needs, some of the adults will interact with the children. Everyone has an important part to play.
- Observation and practice are used to help children learn to socialize, discover their environment, acquire the knowledge needed for them and the group to survive, work, play, marvel and become, at the end of it all, "responsible" adults.

### **Child care centres in today's environment**

Obviously, we no longer live in the savannah, at least not those of us who live in Quebec or the rest of Canada. Our survival, or whatever we call it, is different from that of our humanoid ancestors. The dangers that await us no longer come in the form of a woolly mammoth or a lack of food, but more from stress, or pollution and conflicts of all sorts. Yet this is the environment in which we have to raise our children and provide them with every opportunity to develop and grow, in the full knowledge that development and growth are only possible for those who belong to and identify with the group.

Only those who belong to and identify with the group can develop and achieve.

Just like our ancestors who found a way to raise children and provide for the group's survival by sharing their many responsibilities, families today turn to the different resources available in the community – such as families, friends, community services, and government programs – to help them reconcile their many responsibilities.

### **Functions of child care services**

These resources include educational services and child care centres which can take on different forms, depending on the area in which they are provided, the funds invested in them, and the entities responsible for the resources. But regardless of their form, today's child care centres seem to have specific functions – functions which existed in the savannah thousands of years ago.

#### *o Educational function*

Children who go to good child care centres (the concept of quality will be addressed below) acquire knowledge and skills they will need to survive, develop and grow in the present and into the future. This educational function prepares children for school. Through play and interactions with others, it lays the foundations for their learning, integration with the group, scholastic success, and eventually, their full participation in community life.

○ *Practical function*

Child care centres also serve by looking after children while their parents or tutors are not around. Thus, they must adapt, to a certain extent, to the practical requirements of families and the community in terms of their proximity, flexible schedules, affordability, accessibility, diversification, and the like.

○ *Social and cultural function*

Child care centres are a venue for the transmission of social and cultural values. The centres continue and complement values taught in the home. They are the places where children are exposed to and influenced by others' values, where children consolidate their value system, acquire their own visions of the world, learn to socialize and function as part of a group.

○ *Economic function*

Child care centres are a place of employment for thousands of people in Quebec and the rest of Canada, and they constitute an essential resource which enables parents to participate in the labour market, study, pursue professional development opportunities, and participate in community life – all of which contributes to society's wealth and the community's economic prosperity.

○ *Democratic and civic function*

Because child care centres take in all children, regardless of gender, ethnic origin, religion, abilities, family composition or financial situation, they serve an important democratic and civic function – a function in which equal opportunity and justice for all are daily realities, where being part of the group is reflected in the activities carried out together and with shared objectives, and where the search for the common good takes individual well-being into account.

## **The art of adapting and happiness**

Together, these functions should enable children and the parents who use child care centres, the adults who work there, and the entire community to successfully adapt to the environment, that is, to endure over time and be happy. That is the ultimate goal of child care centres.

## **How we adapt**

For our humanoid ancestors, their ability to adapt was reflected in their ability to survive as a group and develop as a human species in a given environment. This meant understanding that human beings cannot live alone and isolated. In this sense, children were taught from infancy that all members of the group depended on one another. Every one of them had to acquire the knowledge and skills that would ensure the group's long-term survival. Individual development and growth only meant something when applied to the successful adaptation of the group as a whole. "Happiness" was a full belly, shelter and communion among members of the group.

In reality, things have not changed much since those days. Today, successful adaptation to one's environment still means having enough resources to survive, that is, to eat as much as we need, have lodging, clothing and medical care. And this can only happen if the group and its members are in a symbiotic relationship. Thus, we have to grow up and become adults in the knowledge that our place in the universe is every bit as important as that of stars, butterflies, atoms

Identifying and using the resources around us helps us to develop individually and collectively.

and other human beings. It means being conscious of belonging to a close and extended community – family, city, country, world – and of playing an essential and unique role in those communities. It also means being able to identify and use the resources around us to help us develop individually and collectively, but also to enable us to contribute to the group to which we belong and enhance its ability to support all of its members.

### **Colliding and conflicting functions**

Sometimes, the different child care service functions, by their very nature and objectives, collide and conflict.

For instance, in order to fulfil their practical function, either in terms of minimizing car travel, being close to parents' workplaces or taking advantage of the employer's financial contributions, a child care centre may choose to locate in an industrial zone, or in an area where the physical surroundings of cement, highways and jackhammers are hardly conducive to creating a calm, safe or healthy environment for the children.

There are also cases where child care centres focus on their social and cultural function, and embrace sectarian values that are inconsistent with inclusiveness and community spirit, which conflicts with their democratic and civic function. Other child care centres, designed around their educational functions, might lean towards an academic environment to the detriment of an educational approach based on play and active learning.

Some child care centres, in an effort to ensure continuity of service, a consistent educational program and the children's integration, refuse to accept children on an occasional or part-time basis. And others, in order to keep their fees affordable and thereby foster access to families that are less well-off, end up forcing the teachers to subsidize the services by paying them low wages.

### **When compromise is not possible**

These examples, only a few among dozens, are enough to show that there are countless opportunities for conflict among the functions assigned to child care centres. They are not easy – in fact, sometimes impossible – to reconcile. In those cases, child care centres must be able to defend their choices with a clear vision of their ultimate objective – which is to teach children, and the adults in their lives, how to successfully adapt to their environment, survive and be happy.

That is how we teach children to make the best of circumstances that might not be ideal, and still enable them to grow and find happiness. Thus, as a group, we learn to “make do” and take “what's there” and turn it into something great and constructive.

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| Building <i>resilience</i> in every member of the group. |
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### **The important issue of quality**

In order to create an environment in which everything that makes up life –including its joys and pleasures, but also its difficulties – helps build *resilience* in each member of the group, child care centres have to be endowed with very specific qualities and characteristics.

Numerous studies have looked at the conditions and factors that foster quality child centres. In *You Bet I Care!*, a study in which I participated with colleagues Gillian Doherty, Donna Lero, Hillel Goelman and Annette LaGrange, we looked at everything from the point of view of structural quality, the quality of the adults' work environment, the contextual dimensions of quality, and the quality of the experience.

- **Structural quality** refers to the factors that are readily observed, such as the size of the group of children under care, the adult/child ratio, the presence of indoor and outdoor play areas and their setup, the level of general education, the specialization required of the staff, etc. These aspects are easily subject to government regulation and controls.
- **Quality of the adults' work environment** includes wages and benefits, working conditions, outreach among colleagues, and access to facilities, resources and professional development opportunities. These aspects exist in other workplaces and are being handled by some well-organized groups.
- **The contextual dimensions of quality** pertain to factors that have an impact, particularly on the level of staff satisfaction, the integration of the child care centres into the community, and the options available for improving quality. These dimensions are associated with the internal characteristics of child care centres per se, such as their particular mode of governance (not-for-profit vs. for-profit), their administrative structure, their policies and practices, and their external characteristics, such as parents' requirements, demand for services in the community, available community infrastructure and resources, existing regulations, and the societal objectives of child care centres.
- **The quality of the experience** has to do with the day-to-day experiences of the children who attend the child care service. Among other things, it depends on the quality of interactions among the adults and children, positive exchanges among the children, a well-managed physical environment that is safe and adapted to the different needs of the children and adults working there, and the quality of the educational program or project in effect (the activities and services provided). Several research instruments have been developed to assess the different levels of quality in terms of these aspects.

### Concrete developments

To a certain extent, and even if not quite perfect, child care centres and certain governments in Canada can be said to have made concrete progress in introducing conditions that promote the quality of care and programs provided to children. In Quebec in particular, but also in other provinces and territories, efforts have been made to improve staff wages and increase benefits, tighten specialized training

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requirements, introduce educational programs, increase basic funding and grants provided to child care centres, and promote the profession, all of which, when taken together, should raise quality over time. At least there is good reason to believe so based on studies in the field.

Thus, one could conclude that we are on the right track, and that it is just a matter of persistence in demanding and fighting for stronger regulations and increased funding from governments for child

care centres, which is what many child care associations, training establishments, social justice organizations, unions and associations representing the sector's labour force are doing. This would enable us to achieve adult/child ratios that are more conducive to interaction, reduce group sizes for the children, acquire better-paid and qualified staff, and set up safer physical environments that are better adapted to the different age groups and special clients.

### **A path for the future: The community**

A great deal of emphasis is placed on the quality of child care centres – and with good reason. I am convinced that only in a healthy and developmentally stimulating environment will children be able to successfully adapt to their environment, learn the art of living and the art of living happily, and become responsible and united adults. Is this not the ultimate goal of the human effort?

### **Interdependence**

These days, unlike our humanoid ancestors, we sometimes have to build these environments from scratch in order to expose children to a diverse and broad range of experiences. Knowing how to do it and doing it well are essential. And getting children to make the connection and transition between this manufactured environment and that of the real world is also essential. Back in the days of the savannah, the *real world* took care of making the connections for the children and other members of the group. A failed hunt meant that the group would go hungry. A long drought meant that the group would be thirsty. Inter-group conflicts meant that humans died.

Now, there is also hunger, violence and death. Through our membership in the group, we are all affected, whether or not we are hungry, victims of violence or touched by the death of a loved one. Children must be made aware of these realities and of our interdependence. To this end, we must create “savannahs” and environments in which children can cultivate the art of reflection and introspection, the art of observation, extrapolation and reasoning, and places where they will learn to feel what others feel.

### **Other paths**

It would never occur to me to question the efforts and demands made in Quebec and the rest of Canada in connection with improved quality of child care centres. Without doubt, we must continue on this path. However, I wonder whether other aspects of child care centres, which have nothing to do with specialized training for educators, ratios or working conditions, but that have everything to do with the ability to teach children how to survive and be happy, are missing from the picture.

Could it be that other aspects of child care centres – aspects that have nothing to do with specialized training for educators, ratios or working conditions, but have everything to do with the ability to teach children how to survive and be happy – are missing from the picture?

Generations of researchers continue to ponder the same set of factors to explain the quality of child care centres, with the obvious and praiseworthy goal of improving them. The centres are subject to scrutiny, dissection and all manner of learned analysis to determine, for instance, whether two years of college study in early childhood education are enough, or if a Bachelor's degree should be required, whether it is better to have groups with children of different ages, or whether children

should be grouped by age, if one teacher should stay with the group the whole time, or whether it is better to change them around.

These are all important aspects, of course, but should we not look at others as well? Could we not take some new paths and try to determine whether other factors might have a stronger impact on the experiences of children in child care? We might find that these other factors are at least as important, if not more so, in teaching children to survive and be happy in today’s world.

**Importance of “social and cultural” and “democratic and civic” functions**

The child care centres described above help give children and the adults who surround, protect, educate and love them the means to develop, grow and find themselves individually and collectively. The research strongly emphasizes the educational, practical and economic functions of child care centres. Over time, an outstanding body of knowledge has been collected about those factors which support and strengthen these three important functions. And there is no doubt that we could amass more.

It is time to look more closely at the conditions and factors that support and strengthen the “social and cultural” and “democratic and civic” functions of child care centres.

However, I think it is time to look more closely and seriously at the conditions and factors that support and strengthen the “social and cultural” and “democratic and civic” functions of child care centres, even if they are more difficult to define and more delicate to outline.

We could start with the social and cultural function. In the description earlier, I pointed out that child care centres provide an opportunity for the transmission and reinforcement of values. Children expand their range of experiences by moving from the lap of their family to that of the larger child care service, where their values come together with those of many other children and educators – and sometimes into conflict. These values produce emotional reactions in humans and dictate their behaviour. Thus, in a child care centre, children come face to face with all manner of emotions and behaviours, either because they experience them personally or they observe them in others.

**The prerequisites**

Are we committed to checking the values and survival strategies of the people who work with our young children?

We spend a great deal of time, resources and energy determining the type and level of education or specialized training required to work in child care. We also have an idea about the qualities that educators should have, such as a love for

children, imagination, creativity and dynamism. But are we committed to checking the values and survival strategies of the people who work with our young children, people whose mission it is to teach them to adapt to the world to which they belong?

We do so systematically in other fields where workers intervene directly in the lives of others. For example, to become a doctor – aside from the lengthy and specialized training – applicants must undergo qualification tests to determine whether they have the “human” qualities required to carry out their important social function and care for people with all the necessary compassion and commitment. To become a police officer, you must undergo a battery of tests before you can be admitted to the college. We want to ensure that those applying to the profession have a

psychological profile and values that will enable them to intervene with their fellow citizens with honesty, justice and respect, without regard for the person's individual circumstances.

At this point in time – and the marked shortage of qualified educators needed to meet growing demands for child care centres and comply with the regulations is one of several explanations – the governments of Quebec and Canada are launching a range of initiatives to encourage people to choose a career in the field of child care. In addition to the wage-subsidy programs, public education campaigns and certification programs, there are labour market reintegration programs which lead to accelerated training and different financial assistance measures. These are certainly worthy and effective efforts, but the delicate issue of pre-selection comes up with all of its sensitivity and complexity.

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You might say that we are checking out the educational and pedagogical values of our educators and through training and other means, ensuring that they share and promote those of child care. But are we assessing and determining whether these people are well-adapted to their environment, whether they know how to survive and be happy? Moreover, are we creating an environment in the child care centre that will be able to enhance the skills to adapt, survive and be happy, not only among the children but also among the educators?

### **Social recognition**

In my 25 years of work in the child care sector as a director of child care centre associations, as researcher, consultant and translator, I have had the opportunity to meet hundreds of workers in this field, to carefully analyze their proposals and opinions about their profession, and to read numerous studies about their contributions to the profession. At times, it shows up front and centre; at other times, only between the lines, but there is always a deep feeling of impotence, frustration,

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dissatisfaction and fatigue that offsets the educators' pleasure and passion for their work with children. I am certainly in favour of educators loving children and finding their main motivation in these interactions, but this love for children is not enough to make the educators happy in their work.

Some say that if their working conditions improved, so would the situation. But educators submit that what is missing, aside from good wages, is society's recognition of the importance of their work. Educators do not feel that they have an important place in the group, nor are they seen as essential to survival.

They feel excluded. This leads to profound dissatisfaction, and great sadness. They feel physically and mentally exhausted. Their relationships with their colleagues suffer, as do those with the children. And what about their relationships with their loved ones? Despite poor wages, they are trying to reduce their work week, and sometimes they just give in to exhaustion.

How can they teach children the art of living and the art of living happily when they have yet to master the fundamentals? How can they recreate an environment in which children will know that they are part of a larger group and have a key role to play, if the educators themselves do not have this feeling of belonging and responsibility? All things considered, it would appear that child care centres are failing at their functions with regard to these workers in difficulty. The centres do not provide them with the tools needed to successfully adapt to their environment.

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### **The strength of the group**

I would even be quite confident in extrapolating and stating that workers who experience this dissatisfaction and frustration likely felt them before joining the child care centre, and take them with them wherever they go.

I would ask the following questions: What are the preconditions and preliminary factors of this malaise and inability to successfully adapt to one's environment? Can they be identified? Can we determine which people are the most likely to be afflicted? Can we take measures to help them heal before allowing them to become our children's educators? Can we set up mechanisms in our child care centres to address these issues? Can we adopt policies that will strengthen the feeling of belonging to the community and the feeling of responsibility towards one another? Can we find ways to counter the fractious effects of isolation or the feelings of separation?

Despite all the fancy words and best educational programs, when the adults who share in the everyday lives of children are stressed, impatient and sad, children see only the fire. The image is of adults who are unable to benefit from their environment, that is, draw on the wealth of the group and community to survive. It reflects a group that abandons its own and leaves them to fend for themselves. The children run the risk of deciding that this is life. And as they grow up, they, in turn, will increasingly distance themselves from the others and become strangers. They will no longer see their identification and belonging to the group as the foundation of their survival as individuals.

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On the savannah, the one who is alone will die. Individuals survived and the group persevered over time through the strength of the group and with the solidarity of its members. These days, it is still the one who is alone who will die. In the home, of course, but also at the child care centre, one must acquire the certainty that one is not alone and learn how not to exclude others. These are the foundations that shape us into human beings with empathy and with compassion for others. And this is the only way we will survive as a human species.

### **Harmonization and linkages**

That brings me to the democratic and civic function of child care centres. I believe this holds the key to harmonization and its many functions. These centres will be able to provide children and their families, educators and society generally with the tools we need to survive and to successfully adapt to our environment by basing themselves firmly on this function.

The democratic and civic function has the power to strengthen the values that underlie, promote and incarnate social justice, compassion and the common good, not only among children, but also among all the players affected by the child care centre: the children's families, their educators, professional and community resources, and the public at large.

When human beings – whether children or adults – rely on these values in making their decisions, individual and collective interests can be reconciled in a lasting manner. Essentially, they learn to

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put themselves in the other person's shoes, to feel what the other feels, and to project themselves into the future and into the other person's skin so that they can consider the consequences of their actions on their own life and that of others. This is the exercise that leads to the real solutions.

If this function were really integrated and alive in a child care centre, it would help attenuate in the short term and eliminate over the long term confrontations about the multiple and varying roles of child care centres. We should give ourselves the means to thoroughly analyze and extract the principles and conditions. We should check whether child care centres are applying them, and measure the importance they attach to these principles and conditions. Finally, we should introduce mechanisms with which to strengthen them, just as we do, for example, with the education function.

If the democratic and civic function of a child care centre were fully applied, the choice of moving to an industrialized area that is unsafe for children would not come up, since from the outset, we would not have created areas that are unsafe for humans. Nor would a child care centre adopt sectarian values because the search for the common good runs counter to sectarianism. We would know that we have to adopt holistic strategies, adapted to the different learning methods and living conditions of the children, because we would know that all people have specific characteristics that strengthen the group and ensure its survival over time.

Child care centres would link up with the other services and programs in the community, since it is only in that way that they can facilitate the transitions, ensure the continuity of services, and reflect a shared vision. Finally, we would treat all members of the group – children and adults – as well as the group itself as equally important, since the individual cannot exist without the group, nor can the group exist without the individual.

### **Dream catcher**

To illustrate this and the interrelationships among its different parts, I use the analogy of a dream catcher. Imagine a big circle made up of the children, educators, parents and other players in the community. A ball of string is tossed to a child. The child holds onto a piece of the string, then tosses the ball to his friend sitting in front of him. His friend also holds onto a piece of the string and she tosses the ball to a teacher, who then tosses it to another child, and so on. The outcome is a complex web of strings interconnected with one another. This is the child care centre.

The same image could apply to the family, society, the country. The important thing is to understand the interrelationships among the many components, and especially, to recognize that dropping one piece of the string unravels the whole thing.

## Conclusion

The question at the outset was: Who benefits from educational and child care services, and what purpose do they serve? In my answer, you will have noticed that I believe centres are *equally* at the service of the children, families, educators, the community, and members of society overall. They are there to support the group and ensure the survival of people and the community. In this sense, they must reconcile the interests of all parties and equip the parties to successfully adapt to their environment. They can achieve this by basing decisions and actions on the common good, and by asking themselves whether the decisions made today are good for future generations.

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When it comes to determining the purpose of child care centres, I think that fundamentally, it is to ensure the survival of our species because they are a place of learning and transmitters of knowledge, skills and values. Child care centres are not alone in this regard; families, schools and the community also play this role. And if child care centres fail to carry out these functions as they should, their members will be unable to successfully adapt to their environment, regardless of whether this is the immediate environment of the child care centre or the larger environment of the community.

And if the family, school or community also fails to teach children how to treat others with empathy and compassion, how to manage their spaces with respect and intelligence, how to be sensitive in their relationships, how to anticipate the future with hope, and how to act with regard for the common good, then the human species would not survive.

Everything is intrinsically related and it is *this* concept of the universe that we must transmit to our children. In order to do so, we must be aware ourselves and be messengers. Educators in child care centres must be fully imprinted with this concept and convey it through their attitudes and behaviours. Sensing that one is part of the other and understanding the other can produce tremendous joy and profound happiness because it means that one feels understood and that one is not alone in the world.

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