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Child-care report card: Canada fails

December 11, 2008

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SOCIAL JUSTICE REPORTER

Canada ranks last in the first comparison of child care services in 25 developed countries, according to the United Nations Children's Fund.

The report card, to be released today, shows Canada failed on nine of 10 measures aimed at ensuring kids get the best start in life, including providing subsidized child care for 25 per cent of kids younger than 3 and spending 1 per cent of GDP on early childhood services.

Canada's poor showing represents a lost opportunity for economic growth at a time of economic uncertainty, suggests the report by UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy.

Building a system of high-quality early-childhood care and education creates jobs and allows parents to work and pay taxes.

"Investing in early child care and education is a key strategy to respond to current economic challenges and to



RICK MADONIK/TORONTO STAR

Laura Garrido, with her daughter Paola, 4, in their apartment, says she could work more if she had child care. (Dec. 10, 2008)

promote economic stimulus and recovery," UNICEF Canada said in a statement.

Ottawa must act by introducing "measurable standards, guidelines and appropriate funding for child care and solutions by July 2009," UNICEF Canada added.

Toronto mother Laura Garrido knows about lost opportunities.

The former hairdresser would love to be working full-time, but has been waiting since last spring for a subsidized child care spot for her 4-year-old daughter, Paola, who started kindergarten this fall.

"I have always worked, but my daughter is only in school for 2 1/2 hours a day. I have no one to care for her the rest of the time and child care is too expensive," she said yesterday.

With her husband's long hours in construction, Garrido makes do with the odd part-time shift at her local community centre. "I'm lucky to have that. But with child care I could do so much more," she added.

The report, entitled "The Child Care Transition," was sparked by new scientific understanding about the importance of early childhood at a time when an increasing majority of children in the world's richest countries are spending a large part of their day in child care, UNICEF says.

It notes high-quality child care has the potential to boost school success and enhance the cognitive, emotional and social development of children, as well as advance women's equality and mitigate the effects of poverty. However, poor-quality care, especially for infants, can do great harm, the report warns.

The benchmarks, which represent the first attempt to evaluate and compare early childhood services for children younger than 6, describe a set of minimum standards for protecting the rights of children in their most vulnerable, formative years, the report says.

The benchmarks, which UNICEF calls practical and achievable, deal with access to services, program quality, staff training, child care policy, parental leave, child poverty, child health and government spending.

Sweden achieved all benchmarks, while France and the remaining Scandinavian countries met at least eight. Most of Europe, Japan, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea met between four and six, while the United States met three.

Canada and Ireland met only one benchmark, the one that calls for half of staff in accredited early-education services to have proper post-secondary qualifications.

"This is a wake-up call for Canada," said Canadian child care expert Martha Friendly, who heads the Childcare Research and Resource Unit. "It shows there needs to be money in the federal budget and a commitment for Canada as a whole to begin developing a policy framework using the kind of research used in this report."

This is the second international report on child care in five years that has pointed to Canada's lack of action.