



The Mother's Voices Project

Final Report

New Brunswick Child Care Coalition



**NEW BRUNSWICK
CHILD CARE COALITION**

**COALITION DES SERVICES
DE GARDE À L'ENFANCE
DU NOUVEAU-BRUNSWICK**

The Mother's Voices Project Final Report

New Brunswick Child Care Coalition

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Introduction

Much research has been done to understand how child care affects children, families and society. The New Brunswick Child Care Coalition felt there was a lack of participatory research related to mother's experience and the social and economic consequences they experience related to child care. We wondered if mothers feel that government funding affects child care programs and services in their community. The goal of this project was to gather mother's voices – in an effort to learn about the relationship between how government funding is implemented and if mothers felt it was integral to their community's child care accessibility.

This is a report to demonstrate the results of our discussions with mothers across the province and to reflect their voices. While these results cannot be scientifically applied to our province as a whole, they give us an indication of what many mothers are thinking about the way governments fund child care.

This is a participatory project. That means that each mother that participated has been encouraged to share her perspective on the final report.

Context

The New Brunswick Child Care Coalition is a group of organizations & individuals that promote access to high quality, non-profit, and publicly funded child care programs, with trained and well-remunerated staff for all New Brunswick children who want or need it.

Following a Qualitative Research on Quality Child Care & Early Childhood Education, completed by Corporate Research Associates, Inc. in summer 2007, there was a clear indication that parents, particularly mothers, felt that the lack of access to child care programs caused them to be at an economic disadvantage. The Coalition took particular interest in their feedback indicating that women felt they were at an economic disadvantage due to the lack of a universal child care system. If mothers feel they are left to deal with the lack of accessible child care programs, it evidently means that mothers are taking the front seat in dealing with the family's work-family balance challenges. The purpose of this project was to tap into their expertise to learn about government child care funding through a participatory framework with mothers in their community.

Does the current child care funding model respond well to the needs of the community? We asked, and mothers had lots to say.

This project was completed in three phases which will be outlined in detail in the following paragraphs.

Research phase

The initial phase consisted in the research and development of child care funding models that would be used as examples within the workshop. It was decided to contract with a researcher who could identify 3 funding models that would demonstrate the reality of Canada's current child care funding models, but also to find other examples of funding models.

What we know is that government investment in child care continues to be directed mostly towards parent's pockets, and not into program funding or a national child care system. The current federal funding envelope for child care is 5.6 Billion dollars, yet 80% (\$4.5 billion) goes directly to parents to spend as they please, 9% (\$500 million) goes to provinces to spend on young children and families as they please, and only the remaining 11% (\$600 million) is theoretically dedicated to improving child care spaces and services¹. We wanted to know what mothers thought about this, and how they feel that the allocation of this money could affect child care services and programs in their community.

It was important for us that the research take into consideration the current context for child care in New Brunswick, but to also be adaptable to the communities we would eventually visit with the workshops. We wanted mothers to be able to apply the information in the workshop to their own community.

Three funding models were developed, that look at distinct ways that governments can invest their child care dollars, namely, fund the parent, fund the program, and fund the system. These three funding models sit along a continuum which passes from the most individualistic approach (public funds linked to parents), fund the parent, to the most systemic (public funds linked to programs or a system to support the programs).

Child care funding models

Fund the Parent

Child care funding is seen as a consumer good, and government funding is attached to individual parent's eligibility (Demand-side). This is a market-based approach where child care is seen as a product that must be purchased by parents. If parents are unable to afford the licensed child care programs, they are obligated to make other arrangements than licensed care, or to seek help from government subsidies (if they meet the eligibility criteria). This is a very individualistic approach to child care, where each family is seen as responsible for the financial burden of paying for childcare, and the social-

¹ http://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/Our_Schools_Ourself/OS_OS_95_Dallaire_Anderson.pdf

economic benefits of universal child care are not valued as much as the demands of the market. Services under this child care funding model are usually privately delivered, meaning non-profit and for-profit. Contemporary examples of this funding model are the Universal Child Care Benefit implemented by the Government of Canada in 2006, and the Government of New Brunswick's Day Care Assistance Program.

Fund the Program

This funding model moves towards a planned development of child care services, as child care funding is directed towards a variety of individual programs. Child care funding is subdivided and allocated to a variety of programs with different focuses. Child care providers are required to apply for the funding for each program.

In this model, public spending is directed to specific programs, that meet the eligibility criteria, but development of services is market-driven. Not unlike the previous funding model, services are usually privately delivered (non-profit and for-profit). For example, The Province of Quebec uses this funding model for the delivery of services in their province.

Fund the System

Child care funding is channelled directly into a system to support programs for families. This child care funding model takes a "public-good" perspective on child care meaning that child care is not seen as a consumer good that must be purchased by the parent, but more as a public good made available to families through collective efforts. The social benefits of universal child care are recognized, thus government pays much or most of the costs. There can be parent fees in various forms. Most services are publicly-delivered and for-profit services are uncommon. Sweden is a very good example of this model of funding for child care. Their early childhood education system is comparable to the public school system and is often integrated in the schools.

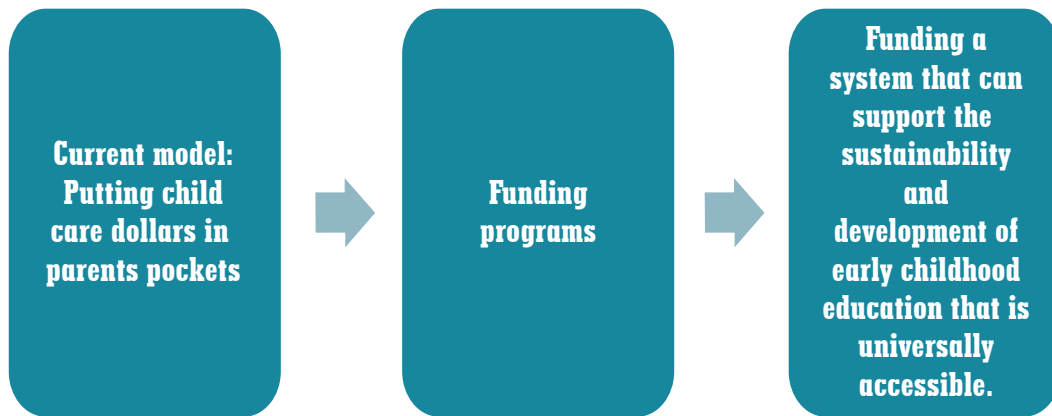
Child care funding in New Brunswick

In New Brunswick, child care funding reflects mostly the fund the parent model. As a whole, Canada also would reflect mostly the fund the parent model with some initiatives in the fund the program model.

A summary of the child care funding at the local (New Brunswick), national (Canada) and international (selected examples) level were also developed. This allowed participants to gain perspective on how child care funding models can take shape. In addition to the regional context provided about the child care funding models, concrete examples (in prose form) of what each model could resemble were developed. For example, Chan-

tal & Sophie's experience, recounts the struggles of 2 mothers, one who is at a significant economic disadvantage compared to the other, and the different elements that come into play when child care funding sits on the axe of "Fund the parent." Similar examples were written for each funding model.

Figure 1. Child Care Funding model continuum



The Mother's Voices Workshop

Workshop phase

Once the research phase was completed, we were ready to move to the workshop phase of the project. Our goal was to encourage mothers to think less about their frustrations and the current child care challenges, and more about how child care programs can be organized. We wanted mothers to dream about different possibilities. We structured the workshop to best limit the amount of discussion relating to the frustrations, so that we could spend more time working with the funding models. In meeting with the mothers from our first workshops in Dieppe and Fredericton, we realized that there needed to be more room for mothers to express their concerns in order to be able to move forward to working with the funding models. Following each workshop, the feedback received helped us continuously improve the workshops.

Mother-participants arrived to tables scattered with play money. It was explained that we wanted them to spend the money on "child care funding" and that the power to allocate the dollars (for the evening of the workshop of course) was theirs. The workshops started with a brief introduction to the project and the Coalition, and opened with a simple ice-breaker.

Following the introduction, a short time was spent reflecting on the frustrations that mothers face as it relates to child care. As it was mentioned previously, we learned of the important aspect of allowing this space for mother's to express their frustrations. Following this segment of the workshop, we moved into a visioning exercise. This activity was used to segue, from the frustrations and unmet needs, to dreaming of what child care 'can' be. Mother-participants were challenged to vision a world where child care can be compared to other public goods, such as libraries, public playgrounds, and kindergarten classes, all of which - at points in history - were not seen as public goods, but become these due to the recognition of their importance. Following the visioning experience, mothers shared what their ideal child care situation would be (results of discussions will be discussed later in the report). The largest part of the workshop, however, was dedicated to looking at the child care funding model continuum that was developed for the workshops.

An introduction to the funding models was presented, and a discussion ensued with the help of printed material (which included tables, continuums and case studies), facilitated by the Coalition representative. At all points of the discussion, mother-participants were encouraged to ask questions and to use their community as a frame of reference when thinking about the different funding models.

Following the funding model discussions, the participant group was asked to collectively decide (not a consensus per se) on which funding model they felt would best meet the unmet needs for child care in their community.

To conclude the workshop, a mother-participant was nominated or elected to represent the group as the nominated mother. The role of the nominated mother is to act as a liaison between the group in the community and the coalition. They assist with the distribution of the report, and also with the sharing and gathering of feedback. Nominated mothers will be invited to participate in the public presentation of the project results in Fredericton.

Target Communities

In seeking the voice of Mothers across the province, we visited a variety of communities. All efforts were made to choose communities that would represent the variety of situations that exist in the province for New Brunswick parents. At each workshop, we heard something different, a different perspective, a different point of view on the funding models and what mothers felt needed to happen. But all the same, some frustrations were universal. There were a total of 7 workshops in 6 different communities. We visited Dieppe, Fredericton, Campbellton, Shédiac, St-Andrew's, and Moncton.

Common concerns to New Brunswick Mothers

The four most common barriers to the mothers we spoke with in accessing child care: cost, quality, lack of spaces and lack of infant care.

It became abundantly clear that certain issues were priorities to the mothers who participated in the workshops. Everywhere we went, we heard of mother's frustrations and challenges on these same circumstances. Although the workshops involved a diverse group of mothers, and while their experiences were unique, one thing remained; there are many commonalities for mothers on child care and their perceptions of the funding models.

In addition to the common challenges, there were other challenges that were brought forth from two or more communities such as:

- Early Childhood Education & Care for children with additional support needs.
- Complicated and difficult to access services and programs
- Inaccessible (no spaces)
- Lack of French services in a minority setting
- Long waiting lists that are poorly managed, or not managed at all
- Lack of flexibility
- Hours of operation that do not meet family's needs
- Part-time vs. full-time care
- Day care that does not respond to needs of seasonal workers
- Feeling uninformed and challenging to access information relating to services.

Community Highlights

In each community, there were experiences shared that came up more in one community than others. Below is a summary of the shared challenges that were brought up by mothers in each community.

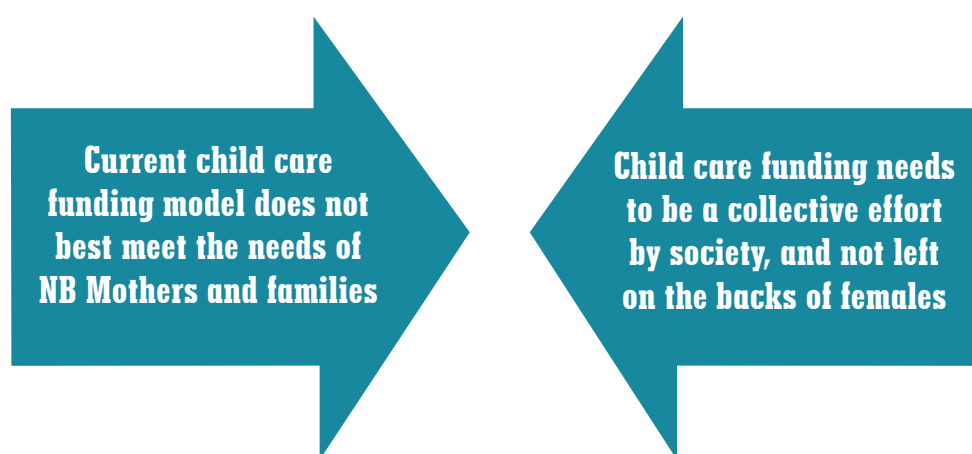
Figure 2. Community Highlights

Fredericton (Lone Mothers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proximity of available licensed space • Little support for lone-mothers during periods of transition. (Social Assistance to workforce)
Dieppe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of education based programs • High staff turnover rates affecting quality of programs • Not enough parental involvement
Shediac	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Day Cares lack flexibility (parents who commute, shiftwork, snowdays, sick days, etc.) • Not enough infant care
Campbellton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child care providers refusing part-time and special needs care. • No flexibility for seasonal workers.
St-Andrew's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost outweighs the wages some mothers can earn, leaving them in a difficult position. • Lack of outdoors time. • Lack of accessibility isolates mothers from their community.
Moncton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understaffed child care providers can cause security risks, and less than quality programs. • Complex situation for parents of special needs children. High & unreasonable costs, narrow flexibility, difficulty finding resources and even refusal of services for their child when a space is open.
Fredericton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty gaining access to information about government services, such as subsidies and programs. • Mothers new to Canada have difficulty gaining support, and are often the most isolated due to limited social networks.

New Brunswick mothers on child care funding

Mothers who participated in the workshops shared a diversity of opinions and perspectives relating to the child care funding models. Upon analyzing the results and the information shared by mothers from the 7 workshops, two findings were clear. Most mothers feel that the current funding model does not best meet the needs of parents in their community and that there is a need to shift from the current funding model, fund the parent and move towards collective child care funding models, such as fund the program or fund the system.

Figure 3. Funding model findings – All Participant Communities



Most mothers felt that child care funding needs to change as it does not meet the needs of their community.

Child care funding: In “Mother” words

Dieppe

Our pilot workshop was held in Dieppe, a primarily francophone community which has seen significant growth in the last 10 years, counting for over 20,000 inhabitants. Dieppe faces new and interesting challenges as the population continues to increase due to an urbanization of rural francophone communities. This workshop was held at a non-profit child care center in Dieppe. Following a discussion on the child care funding models during the workshop, the mother-participants felt that the community of Dieppe could benefit from a shift from the current funding model, fund the parent, and move towards the fund the system model. Some benefits that were discussed were less stress for parents, standardized services and consistency, providing economic security for women and men, increased fiscal revenues (allowing mothers to enter the workforce increased her economic

security and also the tax she will pay as an earner), having services available in all areas, even in rural areas where population is lower, and having access to a publicly funded space for children no matter what age.

The disadvantages were also discussed. Mother-participants mentioned that taxes could increase and that with standardization, child care providers could stand to lose their individuality of services.

Fredericton

The second community visited was Fredericton. It is a city where French and English are commonly spoken, counting for about 80,000 residents.

The workshop in Fredericton was held in a non-profit child care centre. In discussing child care funding models, the mother-participants spoke strongly in favour as they did in Dieppe of shifting the focus from the fund the parent model, towards the fund the system model.

They said that having a child care system would allow them to work outside of the home, pursue an education, have the peace of mind – knowing their children are well cared for while they are at work or studying, increase the overall well-being of the family, decrease stress, decrease the overwhelming costs associated with child care for families. Mothers who participated feel that having a system that is in place to meet the needs of the community allows for more flexibility and is able to better meet needs in terms of language and culture. In addition, one mother shared that mothers who are lone parents can find themselves in a very difficult situation when something unexpected happens such as a hospitalization, and no partner to stay with the children. A more systemic approach to child care, for her, means that lone parents could be better equipped to deal with urgencies as they arise.

One mother also explained that income support programs such as the Universal Child Care Benefit is important to her, and that she feels it allows her to make choices as it relates to her child.

Shédiac

A rural tourist community, Shédiac is a francophone community that counts for slightly fewer than 6000 inhabitants. There are many parents who commute to Moncton but also a large number of seasonal workers. Mothers who participated in the Shédiac workshop brought some new perspectives to the discussion on child care funding. First, many of them brought to light that they were not even aware that their Universal Child Care Benefit was taxable, and such, questioned whether it was the best investment of our "child care dollars" which essentially do not go towards sustainable development of child care

services that meet the needs of Shédiac. Some asked whether the money invested in the Universal Child Care Benefit could be better spent, and admittedly, they use their cheque to provide for the needs of their families, and not always does the Universal Child Care Benefit money go towards the actual child care fees.

Shédiac mothers felt that in order to best meet the unmet needs of their community, more money needs to be invested directly into programs. They also felt that investment into programs will allow them to better access child care in their community, and as a result, be in a more financially secure position – and providing their children with a great start with early childhood education.

Campbellton

Campbellton is a town in rural Northern New Brunswick. The Population in 2006 was 7834 inhabitants. The workshop in Campbellton was offered in French, to mothers who had varying employment situations, and who lived different circumstances as it relates to child care. Though their experiences were different, one commonality remained. According to Campbellton mothers who participated in the workshop, child care needs are not being met in their community under our current funding model. Some explained they had been refused child care because they sought a part-time space, and it was more profitable for the child care provider to fill the spot with a full-time child rather than accommodating the family with a part-time space. This is particularly challenging for families where parents work seasonally. In addition, mothers in Campbellton questioned the efficiency of the Universal Child Care Benefit, an initiative that reflects the fund the parent model. One mother asked if the money spent on giving parents each 100 (taxable) dollars per month really was worth it. The group quickly began discussing if that money was spent on developing a system rather than individual payments to parents, they may see some improvement to the overall challenges parents face in Campbellton. Further, the participants recognized the difficulty in removing such a payment once parents have become accustomed to receiving it. They expressed that if a shift were to take place, the Universal Child Care Benefit would need to be phased out gradually, and new strategies implemented to make child care more accessible and not more of a burden without the partial assistance they received through the Universal Child Care Benefit. The participants acknowledged that many parents may not react positively to the change at first, but that when they see real results from systematic planning for child care, they could see the value in the change.

Another suggestion was to extend the maternity leave to 2 years to cover the time frame that so many parents struggle to find child care for their 12 month infants, and rather than disperse “child care funding” directly to parents, spend the dollars on creating a system which could see the creation of spaces for children of the ages 3, 4 and 5.

This group of mothers felt that we need to think collectively about child care, because the benefits to our society as a whole from giving children a good start are far reaching. They feel that program funding for child care needs to happen, and where the money goes for child care makes a difference in lowering fees and raising access.

Fredericton – Partnership with YMCA

A second workshop was held in Fredericton at the YMCA. A dynamic group of 21 lone-mothers, who all have unique circumstances, but one thing in common, they are lone-mothers who experience unique challenges as it relates to child care. Though all mothers experience challenges the current state of child care, lone-mothers feel even more pressure, as they do not have a partner to share in the responsibilities. So if their child care arrangements are not suitable, it is they who are left to pick up the pieces – and often – without many options.

A fruitful discussion on the child care funding models resulted in this group of mothers collectively stating that child care dollars should be spent on a system that is inclusive for all. When the Quebec model was discussed, they felt that this would better meet their needs. Specifically, having a maximum daily cost was one element that they felt would make child care easier and more accessible to them.

St-Andrew's-by-the-sea

The mothers from St-Andrew's that participated in the workshops feel that the government has an important role to play in the development of child care in their community. They are very concerned with how much burden is placed on parents for child care. Much time was spent discussing the far reaching and proven benefits of child care, and the devastating consequences that can happen when parents don't have what they need. Mothers in St-Andrew's spoke about how their community has a unique dynamic, in that many workers are seasonal employees in the tourist industry, or who work outside of the community and commute. The mothers who participated felt that if funding was directed towards programs rather than directly to parents, their community might be better equipped to deal with the unique challenges they face related to child care programs and services. Mothers who participated expressed having been forced to choose to stay home, when they are very capable and willing to work. They do not feel this is right. One mother added that it is not even necessarily feasible for her to stay home with the children, and that working would allow her family to have less stress over money, but that staying home was the lesser of two evils, as the child care costs are astronomical for her family of 3 children.

Analysis Phase

The third phase of the project consisted in compiling mothers feedback into a report format and validating the results with them.

While it was evident that mothers who participated in the workshop felt there would be many and varied benefits to funding child care collectively, the benefits do not stop there. It would be difficult to argue against the long reaching and wide spread benefits to society as a whole from providing good quality, affordable, child care to all who want to use it or need it. Mothers who participated in the workshops certainly recognized this.

This demonstrates a disparity between what parents, specifically mothers are saying about child care funding, and what child care decision makers are saying mothers are saying. The mothers that we spoke with might not see everything exactly the same, but as it is demonstrated in this report, one thing remains clear: moving towards a systemic approach from our current funding model is something that they feel can improve access to child care programs, and increase their well-being. While we can't speak for all mothers in New Brunswick through the results of this project, it was clear that funding has an important part to play in the child care accessibility equation, and the mothers we spoke with know that. Other studies, however, have drawn parallels to these results. A poll completed by Environics², demonstrated that 77% of Canadians consider the lack of affordable child care to be a serious problem. Also, a 2006 poll showed that three-quarters of Canadians support a national child care program³. Another recently conducted survey by Today's Parent⁴, suggests that parents, for the most part, are unsatisfied with their child care arrangements as it relates to the cost. The cost of services just happens to be one of the biggest barriers for parents, as we saw in our discussions in the Mother's Voices Project.

A Mother Voice

One participant spoke about how few choices mothers who are heads of lone parent families really have. Being on a low-income isn't a choice she would have made. But her life took an unexpected path and now she is left to deal with the issues she has with child care mostly on her own. Having time to herself is important for her as a mother and an individual. This becomes somewhat of a luxury to a lone parent, she explained. She expressed a feeling of isolation which is a real issue for women as it relates lone-parent's ability to access child care programs.

² http://www.ccaac.ca/pdf/resources/polls/2008EnvironicsReport_Attitudes_toward_child_care.pdf

³ http://www.ccaac.ca/pdf/resources/Reports/Poll_Fact_Sheet.pdf

⁴ Hoffman, John (2010). Child Care Costs Across Canada, Today's Parent, March 15.

Conclusion

If mothers feel that a funding model based on collective responsibility is what we need to strive for, we need to take a look at the failures of our current funding model. The New Brunswick Child Care Coalition sees mothers as experts on child care and the arrangements needed by families in order to balance the work-family dynamic. We feel that the workshops conducted in this project allowed a space for mothers to share this expertise, and as a result, we gained a better understanding of the importance of child care services and program funding. It is, and will always be our hope that decision makers will recognize this expertise, and consider it in their planning for future child care decisions.

Figure 4. Summary of findings



A suggestion by the participants of this project: recognize the value of giving children a good start – the social and economic benefits - by doing so; our funding model could be adjusted to match the value we place on these important years and the development we can provide our children through Early Childhood Education, and to ease the burden on families.