



Between two Poles

A frank discussion about daycare

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Two of us were jogging one summery Ottawa Saturday morning. We didn't know each other well – the others in my new running group had bailed. But we knew we shared Eastern European roots – Polish, to be precise. Speaking in broad strokes, we agreed Poles are more direct than Canadians. So it's no great surprise that we embarked on a discussion of work that went beyond the usual "What do you do?"

After the initial description of my workplace, where we do family and marriage research directed toward creating good public policy, I gave her an example, saying my organization is against state-funded daycare. We are not against all daycare all the time, but rather against a *state-funded* system.

She asked why.

I stated the purported benefits of daycare for our very youngest—kids between one and three—are not clear. Spending government money on one type of care sanctions that form of care for parents, who then "choose" it—whether or not they wanted it in the first place.

Really? Why would parents choose something they don't want?

An offer parents can't refuse

Because of finances, I said, and in part, because state-funded daycare now has the stamp of state approval. Not only is one type of care sanctioned over the others because it is paid for, but parents are inundated with information about why it is the very best thing. Parents learn at every turn that their children will learn more, be better socialized and be better prepared for their futures.

If a private daycare provider advertised such benefits, people would rightly question the claims precisely because the provider stands to make money when a parent signs their child up. But when government advertises, Canadians are less likely to ask whether the talking points are true.

Couldn't I trust parents to make their own decisions?

Yes, I can. But free or cheap things change our behaviour regardless of the issue. I prefer Second Cup to Starbucks but if Starbucks is offering free samples, I will drink it. Money incentivizes.

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If a parent is struggling to make ends meet, the offer of "free" or low-cost daycare is hard to resist, especially when financial support isn't offered in any other form.

That means it's not a choice at all.

It is not fair to assume a low income parent wants government care. Many prefer relative care, or other kinds of care—appreciating the family connections more than government funding.

Poor quality

Claims of a perfect system for every child aside—a monopoly is a monopoly. For example, telecommunications companies offer one kind of service and if you want something different, you need to choose a competitor.

If only the government is allowed to provide daycare, it will all be government care, to state the obvious. In short, there is no way to avoid the one-size-fits-all system, which can't possibly suit all families, or all children.

Once the family budget depends on "free" care, when a child comes along with special needs that are not met by your average daycare, parents are nevertheless stuck with that option. Unfortunately, giving childcare over to government means we create a monopoly – one that's not able to adapt to the needs of individual families or children, and has no incentive to do so.

Putting children in low-cost care is a course that is easy to dive into, but hard to reverse when it's not working.

A worthy discussion

At this point, I was ready to call it quits, while she, the fitter Canadian of Eastern European extraction, jogged on. I didn't sense any hard feelings. We shall jog again regardless of opinions on daycare funding.

Yet I realized this kind of conversation is rare. The childcare issue tends to bring out moments of aggressive and illogical emotion. Thankfully, my running partner never suggested that I actually harbour anti-woman sentiments, or any such nonsense of the variety politicians bandy about with regularity. She simply asked reasonable questions.

Ironically, in a world increasingly fixated on diversity, we shy away from diverse discussions. A fear of offending keeps all but the boldest of us from engaging in well-meaning conversations to learn.

We might ask ourselves why this is the case. It shouldn't only be opposite Poles (or should I say Polar opposites?) who get to have all the fun.

Andrea Mrozek is Executive Director of the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. She has Czech and Polish roots, but somehow attributes her outspokenness to the Poles.

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