**Alberta’s recent pilot project initiative to subsidize child care has potential to improve lifelong health of Albertans**

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Early childhood development is critical to health and well-being later in life. “Experiences in early childhood (defined as prenatal development to 8 years of age) … lay critical foundations for the entire life course” (CSDH, 2008). Thus, healthy early childhood development is of great concern for public health.

Early childhood experiences can impact a child’s development through programming, whereby future health happenings are encrypted into biology early in development (Davidson, 2015). Fetal and early childhood events can thus alter future health outcomes. Two hypotheses may explain the ability of early childhood experiences to predict future health outcomes—the Barker hypothesis and critical development junctures. According to the Barker hypothesis, low-birth weight, or limited infant growth and weight gain in the first few months following birth, predisposes children for future negative health outcomes. According to the idea of critical developmental junctures, certain biological events must be sequenced correctly and occur in the correct context, or they will never occur.

Positive early childhood experiences depend on factors such as the health of the mother when she conceived; the mother’s activity level, diet, and health-related behaviour during pregnancy; socioeconomic status; social interaction; exposure to violence; and multiple other factors. Many of these factors depend on how well the mother is supported by friends, family, and access to services such as health care and child care.

There is potential to improve the health of the Albertan population by offering support during this crucial time of early childhood. This support could include “ensuring that the outcomes from pregnancy are positive, the infant is provided with care, sustenance, and stimulation needed for healthy development, and the child in the early part of his or her life is appropriately supported and raised in conditions conducive to his or her long-term well-being,” (Davidson, 2015).

A recent study estimates that only 17 per cent of Canadian families have access to registered child care (Mikkonen and Raphael, 2010). High-quality early childhood education positively affects all children, but particularly those living in socioeconomically deprived circumstances. As one study found, “High-quality early childhood education targeted at high-risk groups from a very early age (one year or earlier) can result in significant positive cognitive and academic achievement outcomes as well as greater adult self-sufficiency … The most successful programs combine intensive high-quality preschool with some home visits to improve the home-learning environment” (Geddes, Haw, and Frank, 2010). Thus, there is potential for accessible child care programs to positively impact the health outcomes of Albertan children, and, subsequently, adults.

The APHA has a history of supporting accessible child care initiatives. For instance, in 1986, the APHA passed the following resolution: “Be it resolved that APHA recommend that CPHA urge the Department of National Health and Welfare to initiate the development of a shared program with the provincial and territorial governments to provide a system of child care that is comprehensive and accessible to all Canadians and that this system provide standards for care.”

Recently, the Government of Alberta has implemented a province-wide pilot program, Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Centres, which provides child care for children aged 0 to 6 years with maximum fees of $25 per day. This program has created ELCC Centres, which provide supports for children with diverse needs and implement an early learning care curriculum. Some ELCC Centres were set to become operational on May 1, 2017, with others opening throughout the duration of 2017. For more information about this program, click [here](https://www.alberta.ca/early-learning-child-care-centres.aspx). The Alberta government’s recent initiative to subsidize child care could better ensure high-quality early education, and capitalize on this opportunity to improve the health of Alberta’s population.

This child care pilot program has the potential to improve lifelong health outcome for Albertans, and could thus improve public health in the province.

Sources

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6. APHA Resolutions & AGM Meeting Minutes 1984-1999