



FROM WHERE I SIT

# What Should it Mean to be a Child in Canada?

**by Charles E. Pascal**

Special Advisor on early learning to the Premier of Ontario & Executive Director of the Atkinson Charitable Foundation

Released in June 2009, *With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario*, is an Ontario government-commissioned report written by our author, Charles E. Pascal, to advise on the best means of implementing full day learning for 4-and 5-year-olds. It is comprised of three documents: the main report; A Summary of the Evidence, which reviews the research that informed the report; and, *Every Child, Every Opportunity*, the curriculum for the new Early Learning Program. A brochure is also available. All documents are online in French and English at [www.ontario.ca/earlylearning](http://www.ontario.ca/earlylearning)

It seems like yesterday. Fourteen years passing like a speck cannot interfere with the indelible memory of walking my 18 month old to the front door of her very first out of the home learning centre. Wobbly walk, very hesitant holding my hand, squeezing my hand harder as I prepared to hand over my little girl to these strangers, two early childhood educators. A few tears, hers visible, mine suppressed until I was out of sight. It was about the morning of day three on our way to the “day care” that she broke my clasp and ran to the front door of the centre, excited about her home away from home. And then there was that difficult end of the day pick-up trying to

**“Forty years later, to paraphrase Dickens, we live with the tale of two pathways. When it comes to support for Canada’s children, it is the best of times, it is the worst of times...”**



PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY OF CANADA © HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN IN RIGHT OF CANADA, 2008

pry her away from her play, learning beside other kids, still a few months shy of actually playing *with* other kids. This was the beginning of a joyful and confident lifelong learner that remains evident today.

While the evidence about the importance of highly skilled early learning practitioners on the development of young children is clear, my respect for the transformational talents of a capable early childhood educator is grounded in my role as a parent . My respect for and need for early childhood educators as partners to support the development of my children actually began forty years ago with the birth of my eldest daughter. I was a freshly minted young professor with a research interest in learning, co-parenting anew with a partner also pursuing a professional career. It was obvious that our “village”

wasn't ready and able to support us in raising our child. So a few other profs and I founded a “family centre”. Still stands



today, still flourishes, still provides a safe and healthy place of learning all because we were fortunate to hire a remarkable early childhood educator who asked us all to answer a simple but powerful question: “What should it mean to be a child in this centre?”

Forty years later, to paraphrase Dickens, we live with the tale of two pathways. When it comes to support for Canada’s children, it is the best of times, it is the worst of times...

Here’s the disturbing news first, because I am pathological optimist always wanting to “end” a moment of reflection with hope. Our investment in early childhood education at .25 percent of GDP according to prestigious Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development puts us last among the top 20 developed countries. The artificial divide between child care and education remains far too prevalent across our nation, with fragmented policies and structures that prevent the kind of progress necessary to improve the quality, accessibility, affordability for children, parents, guardians and governments alike. This divide, or “hardening of the categories”, remains an obstacle to the further development of a coherent well-supported workforce of early learning professionals—teachers and early childhood educators -- with a common understanding of what it should mean to be a child and a common and organic curriculum informed by this understanding. I still witness so many elected officials use fiscal challenges as an excuse to avoid investing in early childhood education, hoping we might forget that other excuses were offered when times were better.

But I am encouraged by signs of progress. We are able to witness provinces investing in comprehensive changes for the better, moving to eliminate the divide, acting on what we have known for far too long...that quality child care is about learning and great education is caring, and attending to plans that focus on a pre-natal to 12 year old continuum. I can walk into an elementary school and see the magic of early childhood educators and teachers working as a team engaged in reciprocal mentoring to ensure that the curiosity and discovery learning of their young charges are only matched by their own enthusiasm about learning from the kids. Key in this is the growing importance of the wonderful gifts of early child development knowledge and skills with both kids and parents that well-trained ECE’s can bring to the team approach necessary for a truly transformational change. I have witnessed the development of wonderful play-based curriculum in several

different provinces, curriculum and pedagogy that dramatically impacts on the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development of our children.

Most important, I have seen a remarkable rise in the diversity of leaders---the parent, the banker, the labor leader, the politician—who understand the importance of investing in the early years. And I have witnessed up close the vision and courage of a premier and his government as they move forward during tough economic times, knowing that an investment today will yield more resilience in dealing with tough times down the road.

In my view, there can be no better measure of the progress of our society, our nation, than how well we support the youngest of our young through a shared and consistent commitment about the needs of all of Canada’s children. But our Federalism’s balance seems to have shifted increasingly into a remarkably decentralized non-nation. Like a teeter totter with a decentralized block of cement dropped on one end, our nation seems up in the air. While we still have some glue left that seems to define what it means to be a Canadian, the obvious binder being universal health care, we need more... much more. High quality early childhood education which is a very key determinant of health, one that can dramatically reduce health care expenditures, should be the stuff of getting our nation moving to a more cohesive and balanced society.

We had a promising start with a previous federal government that fostered a national conversation about the early years culminating in first principles to loosely guide our national progress, supported by money to encourage provinces. All provinces and territories signed on -- a remarkable opportunity to pursue a common national understanding of the rights of our children and how best to support their development.

But with breathtaking short-sightedness and ideology trumping evidence, this opportunity was cut short...at least for the moment.

Somehow, sooner rather than later, we need space and place to continue that conversation, to pursue that ever-elusive common understanding. And early childhood educators and teachers who are attuned to needs of young children by training or nature or experience, need to play a key role in this nation building process in order to move the clock forward more quickly to a time when we no longer ask what it should mean, but what it does mean to be a child in Canada.

**“In my view, there can be no better measure of the progress of our society, our nation, than how well we support the youngest of our young...”**