

# Reframing the Issue: Child Care Advocacy in Alberta

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the organization, strategies, and motivations of the contemporary child care movement in Alberta. The concept of framing is used to explore the ways in which child care advocates negotiate the gap between their desires for policy change and their knowledge of what advances are feasible given the political realities of the province. In particular, the article emphasizes advocates' use of gender-neutral, child-centred frames that focus on the developmental and economic benefits of child care, rather than feminist-informed frames that emphasize the need for public, universal child care. This has implications for the scope of policy reforms on the political agenda and for women's equality in Alberta.

## Résumé

Cet article s'intéresse à l'organisation, aux stratégies et aux mobiles du mouvement contemporain de la garde des enfants en Alberta. On utilise le concept d'élaboration afin d'explorer les méthodes employées par les militants de la garde d'enfants, pour négocier l'écart entre leur désir de changement de politique et leur connaissance sur les avancées qui sont faisables, compte tenu des réalités de la province. Cet article met particulièrement l'emphase sur l'utilisation des termes « élaborations de genres neutres » et « élaborations centrées sur les enfants » par les militants, afin de porter une attention particulière sur les avantages développementaux et économiques de la garde d'enfants, plutôt que sur des élaborations d'information

féministes, qui mettent l'emphase sur une garde d'enfant universelle et publique. Cela a un impact sur la place des réformes politiques et sur l'égalité des femmes en termes de priorités en Alberta.

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An important feature of child care as a political issue in Alberta is "the strong positions and hard lobbying/mobilizing efforts" it has provoked from groups and individuals who make demands regarding the role of government in child care (Langford 2011, 11). These advocates are an integral part of the political landscape of child care in Alberta, and their strategies and motivations, uncovered through interviews with prominent child care advocates, are the focus of this article. In particular, I draw on the concept of framing—defined as the mechanism whereby advocates attempt to attach a particular meaning to their demands—to make my argument, which takes into account both advocates' transformative goals and the strategic calculations necessary to make these goals seem politically appealing (Benford and Snow 2000; Dobrowolsky 2007). Framing helps make sense of the meaning that advocates attach to the issue of child care and how they structure their demands for change.

This study reveals that while virtually every child care advocate interviewed supported increased government investments in child care programs to ensure higher quality care for children, not all were willing to endorse a publicly funded child care system that ensures universal access for all families. While demands for publicly funded child care to ensure social equality for all families are still voiced by some advocates, these demands have become largely peripheral in terms of political influence. Tied to this trend is the shift away from a feminist framing of child care, which has focused on the role of universal child care in promoting women's

employment equality, to a child-centred frame that emphasizes the benefits for children's development and long-term economic savings that come from investing in higher quality child care services. As a result, demands for incremental changes to policy to increase the quality of care for children are highly visible, while the more transformative vision of high-quality, publicly funded, and universal child care is marginalized in the mainstream political discourse.

These trends can be at least partly attributed to the political opportunities, or the lack thereof, that structure the politics of child care in Alberta. In particular, the Alberta government's preference for private or market-based solutions to child care provision (Langford 2011,1) has discouraged some advocates, for pragmatic reasons, from advocating for publicly funded child care. Instead, these advocates focus on incremental changes to child care policy within the private child care model. In addition, since the Alberta political environment is generally unreceptive to the feminist movement (Harder 1996, 45–47), the feminist-informed framing of child care that emphasizes the state's responsibility to fund affordable, universally accessible child care to ensure women's employment equality is seen as politically unpalatable. As a result, many contemporary child care advocates in Alberta, in both the for-profit and the not-for-profit sectors, make demands for improved child care services on the basis of educational, early intervention, and economic benefits, rather than as a social and economic right to further gender equality. The concluding section of this article discusses the implications this gender-neutral framing has for child care and for women's equality in Alberta.

### **Methodology**

My analysis of the child care movement in Alberta draws on the data gleaned from twelve semi-structured interviews conducted with child care advocates across Alberta between August and December 2009. The advocates interviewed included child care professionals, union representatives, early childhood education faculty, and other members of organizations involved in child care advocacy. It is worth noting that while

they became involved in child care advocacy through different paths, the majority of the interviewees come from professional backgrounds and are engaged in advocacy through formal involvement in a specific organization. The interviewees were asked questions about the history and organization of the child care advocacy movement, their perceptions of the political environment in regards to child care, and their perceived influence on government decisions concerning child care. They also discussed their motivations and reasons for supporting greater government intervention in child care. All interviewees supplied their responses under the condition of anonymity.

### **The Politics of Child Care**

Child care is a complex issue, inextricably tied to questions of women's equality, motherhood, labour, and employment issues, and to issues of early childhood development and child poverty. The framing of the child care question in liberal welfare states across time has been "breathtakingly malleable" (Prentice 2009, 687), with different actors choosing to represent child care in very different ways. Child care advocacy in Alberta today is part of a long history of evolving political struggles over the meaning and purpose of child care services at both the provincial and federal levels.

In the 1960s and 1970s, child care in Canada was politicized in terms of women's employment equality (Mahon 2000). The 1967 Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW) was one of the first and undoubtedly one of the most visible manifestations of feminist demands for the public provision of child care in Canada. The National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), formed in 1971 with the goal of pressuring the government to implement the recommendations of the RCSW, made the expansion of child care services an important part of its platform throughout the 1970s and worked closely with child care organizations to achieve these goals. The second-wave feminists involved in NAC argued that publicly funded, universal, and accessible child care would remove the barriers that prevented

women from participating equally and fairly in public life (Timpson 2001).

Beginning in the 1980s, however, some child care advocates in Canada, most notably child care providers, began to distance themselves from these feminist arguments with respect to publicly funded child care. They instead justified their demands for increased government investments in child care by concentrating on the role of child care in children's learning and development, rather than on women's employment opportunities and gender equality. Even some feminists began to doubt whether child care was a women's issue; as Adamson et al. (1988) note, particularly in reference to the NAC, the women's movement had "mixed feelings... about day-care: was it a part of the women's movement, or was it a separate movement of parents?" (47). According to Timpson (2001), while they "shared a general concern about women's employment equality, child care advocates were increasingly focused on the need to bring about a universal, quality child care service *for children*" (208). As a result, in response to the shift in government policy in the 1980s towards programs for children in need, many child care advocates in Canada began to ally themselves with movements focused on child poverty instead of with women's rights organizations, in an attempt to emphasize the benefits of child care for children (Newman and White 2006). Additionally, Collier (2012) notes that the trend towards a gender-neutral, child-centred framing of child care in the 1980s and into the 1990s was affected by other external factors, namely the neo-liberal trend towards cuts to welfare state programs and the increasing delegitimization of the feminist movement by federal and provincial governments. In an attempt to make the funding of child care more politically palatable, then, advocates attempted to distance the issue of child care from the feminist movement. Evidence suggests that since the turn of the twenty-first century, Canadian governments have begun to pay more attention to the issue of investment in social programs such as child care. However, the feminist motivation for investment in child care has largely remained

absent from political discourse (Collier 2012; Jenson 2001).

In Alberta, a strong and united movement for public child care existed in the 1960s and 1970s, led by social workers and other professionals, with strong ties to women's groups and other social service and voluntary organizations. Like organizations at the national level during this period, these groups were involved in "challenging dominant cultural views of women's roles in society and of community responsibilities to young children" by explicitly lobbying for the establishment of publicly funded daycare centres, with high standards of care, to support women's equality (Langford 2001, 66). Groups such as the Women's Liberation Group at the University of Calgary and the Alberta Association for Young Children were actively involved in public protests and other advocacy activities characterized by a "tremendous optimism and communitarian philosophy" (Langford 2011, 79) that spoke to their commitment to a child care system that ensured equality for children, families, and women.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, however, advocates who supported the vision of publicly funded, quality child care in Alberta were increasingly marginalized in political decision making. This shift was driven partly by the neo-liberal reforms that affected most liberal welfare states and that had a marked impact in Alberta. The trend towards neo-liberalism increasingly marginalized the voices of those who sought greater government involvement in services such as child care (Langford 2011; Collier 2012). In addition, both commercial child care operators, who argued against public funding for child care centres, and the pro-family movement, which claimed that child care is the responsibility of the family and that children should be cared for in their own homes, gained influence with the Alberta government in this period (Langford 2011). This contributed to the fragmentation and marginalization of many of the groups that had previously united behind the cause of publicly funded, quality child care. For example, the Alberta Association for Young Children, one of the most influential groups in the quality child care movement of the 1960s and 1970s, became increasingly

peripheral to the political process around child care policy and, by the end of the 1990s, ceased to exist.

### **Child Care Advocates in Alberta**

How does the contemporary child care advocacy movement fit into this story? While the movement for quality child care is still very much a part of the political landscape in Alberta, the nature and organization of the advocacy movement has changed in some important ways. Among the most influential child care advocates in Alberta today are early childhood professionals. Since 1985, these child care providers, including representatives from both the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors, have worked together with varying degrees of success to advocate for better child care in the province. A loose coalition of child care organizations, including the Early Childhood Professional Association (ECPA), came together in 1985 to share information and discuss child care issues; the group became known as the Alberta Child Care Network (often referred to simply as Network). As many advocates pointed out, with the establishment of Network, not-for-profit and for-profit child care providers came together to discuss child care in the province for the first time. The bitter divisions between these two groups of providers were not immediately reconciled, but for many, the interactions were seen as a positive step in uniting the voices of child care providers (Interviews 2009).

Despite their differences, one issue on which the divergent interests in Network could agree was that the introduction of the accreditation program in 2003 was beneficial for all providers who sought to provide quality child care. Accreditation is a “voluntary process by which early childhood programs demonstrate that they meet defined child care standards” (Beach et al. 2009), standards which are higher than the basic requirements set out by licensing regulations. Centres are given funding and increased staff wage enhancements in order to reach accreditation standards, which are monitored by the arms-length Association for the Accreditation of Early Learning and Care Services. Network advocates were instrumental in the develop-

ment of these standards. Working together on accreditation provided the impetus for the ECPA and Network to morph into the Alberta Child Care Association (ACCA), a non-profit organization with an individual membership base and its own bylaws.

Child care advocates, however, hold differing opinions on these developments and the effectiveness of the ACCA’s advocacy work. One early childhood educator argued that the formation of the ACCA was “the route that we had thought they should go for many years” (Interviews 2009). Supporters of the ACCA point to benefits, such as its close working relationship with the Department of Children’s Services (currently encompassed in the Department of Human Services), and argue that the association allows for a united voice of child care providers across the profit and not-for-profit sectors. There are others, however, who regret the direction the ACCA has taken, arguing that “they’re perceived ...as being in the back pocket of government” or that the focus of the association is “just ...professional issues, internal issues, but they’ll never publicly speak out” (Interviews 2009).

One of the most significant concerns among many early childhood educators is the strength of the for-profit lobby within the ACCA. As long as for-profit providers are involved, critics suggest, it is unlikely that the provincial government will be sufficiently pressured to increase public funding to ensure universal access to child care. Issues such as increased quality and better wages for educators are problems on which both for-profit and non-profit advocates can agree, but for-profit providers are much less willing to express demands for a public, universal child care system. At the same time, many advocates who otherwise believe in a public child care system have opted to set aside their calls for such a system and instead focus on advocating for change within the framework of the private child care model (Interviews 2009). These advocates stated that, while they would prefer a public, universal child care system, the strength of the for-profit lobby in the province and the Alberta government’s antipathy to a public system are strong enough that they believe the wisest

strategy is to seek incremental changes within the private child care model, focusing on standards of care for children rather than on accessibility for all families (Interviews 2009).

Besides early childhood professionals, a number of other groups are also vocal on the child care issue, including Public Interest Alberta (PIA). Soon after the group's formation in 2004, PIA created a child care "task force," bringing together a range of advocates to work towards improved child care services. Their first major campaign was launched in 2005 and sought to pressure the Alberta government to sign on to the federal government's proposed national Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (Interviews 2009). Compared to the ACCA, members of the PIA task force are much more explicit in their public criticism of the Alberta government and openly voice the need for publicly funded daycare and the professionalization of the child care workforce. They use tactics such as press releases and press conferences, demonstrations, postcard and letter-writing campaigns, conferences and events, and the public exposure of government correspondence and documents through Freedom of Information and Privacy requests to put pressure on the government and raise public awareness about the need for better child care services. Unions are also involved in child care advocacy in Alberta, including the Alberta Division of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE Alberta), the Alberta Union of Public Employees (AUPE), and the Alberta Federation of Labour. In Alberta, unions and PIA have worked together to advocate for better child care given that they share similar positions and goals: mainly that transformative improvements around public funding and standards are required to address the problems with Alberta child care (Interviews 2009).

While child care advocates who work in PIA and in unions are much less "cozy" with the government than the ACCA, they still struggle with the issue of how to balance their desire for change with their recognition of the political barriers present in Alberta. Many feel strongly that child care in Alberta will only be transformed to a publicly funded, universal system under different political leadership,

citing the conservative ideology of the government as a barrier to change (Interviews 2009). Like all child care advocates, the more outspoken critics in unions and PIA struggle with the issue of having some direct influence on incremental changes, while still being critical of government policies that they feel are inadequate. Inevitably, advocates disagree about the best way to negotiate this dilemma. While one interviewee suggested that groups like PIA should be "careful not to fall in the trap of being silenced because of the relationship with the government," another maintained that "in the absence of a large opposition and meaningful debate, the only other way that you can effect political change is to work from the inside...identifying key potential allies" (Interviews 2009).

### **Negotiating Political Realities: Framing Child Care in Alberta**

Evidence suggests that the changes in the political context of Alberta over time have affected the strategies of child care advocates. In particular, the political marginalization of the feminist movement in Alberta has made it problematic for advocates to rely on feminist-based arguments for child care. Many advocates have attempted to distance the child care issue from claims for gender equality because, as long as child care is considered a "women's issue," it remains low on the list of government priorities (Harder 1996, 45–47). Resistance to the women's movement is also consistent with the neo-liberal tendency of politicians to be resistant to *all* forms of advocacy, which is achieved by labelling many advocacy organizations as "special interests" (Brodie 2008). Many advocates described having encountered this kind of rhetoric in their political advocacy work (Interviews 2009).

Other characteristics of the political context have influenced child care advocacy in Alberta. A government preference for market-based solutions to issues like child care has meant that arguments for public child care are often considered irrelevant. As well, the for-profit child care lobby has gained influence in Alberta. As a result, many child care advocates who believe in the value of a non-profit, public system have largely aban-

done this focus in favour of working alongside private operators to achieve goals other than the establishment of a public system (Interviews 2009). These advocates have become convinced that the establishment of a public child care system in Alberta is highly unlikely and that those who continue to call for such a system will continue to be shut out of the policy-making process.

These contextual factors have affected the way that advocates frame their demands for change. While there is variability in the tactics advocates use to voice their child care demands, virtually all child advocates in Alberta currently rely on frames that emphasize the developmental and economic benefits of child care, in an attempt to make their demands more politically appealing. Advocates frequently draw on recent research on the benefits of child care for early education and brain development (see Mustard 2008; Hansen and Hawkes 2009) in order to support this argument. Prentice (2009) argues that frames are successful when they line up with our societal expectations (689), suggesting that the child-centred frame has been relatively successful at putting child care on the political agenda because of the public's receptiveness to policies and programs that benefit children. As Jenson (2001) points out, "the most popular and politically legitimate social spending in Canada is that most associated with a children's agenda" (120). Arguments in favour of investing in children appeal to people's emotions and good sense on a basic level; they play on the idea that children are a vulnerable resource that is at the same time full of potential. The notion of "children's rights" as a legitimate justification for increased investment in child care services was a common thread throughout many interviews (Interviews 2009). As well as being politically and publicly appealing, the child-centred argument also constitutes common ground for for-profit and non-profit child care providers, who are able to pool their advocacy resources around this issue (Interviews 2009).

In addition, many advocates draw on what Prentice (2009) calls the economic framing of child care, emphasizing the benefits that investing in child care would bring to

the Alberta economy. Drawing on research into the economic advantages of investing in child care (see, for example, Cleveland and Krashinsky 1998), advocates argue that not only is a larger labour force mobilized when parents are able to access child care, but the early intervention and education services associated with quality child care also mean savings for the health, justice, and education systems down the road (Interviews 2009). This economic frame holds the potential to mobilize wider interest in child care and creates a sense that child care services are an investment in the future. In addition, like the arguments that emphasize the early education and developmental benefits of child care, the economic frame provides common ground for for-profit and non-profit providers, who agree on the benefits that quality child care brings to the economy. This frame also fits well with the entrepreneurial culture of Alberta and has a basic appeal in terms of profits and growth.

Alongside these dominant frames on the child care question, a minority of advocates assert that publicly funded, universal child care services are a social right and a means to further gender equality (Interviews 2009). Framing child care in terms of social justice or gender equality, however, is often seen to be incompatible with the conservative, free-market ideology of the Alberta government or with the interests of the strong for-profit lobby in the province. Some advocates continue to emphasize this frame, recognizing that it is a necessary component in lobbying for a public child care system, but it tends to be combined with arguments about children's development and economic benefits, and therefore loses its dominance within the conversation about reforms to the child care system.

### **Reframing the Issue: Implications and Consequences**

Scholars and advocates have raised some important concerns about the use of the gender-neutral framing of child care that focuses only on the benefits of child care for children and the economy. For one, the focus on early education for children emphasizes equality of opportunity for children in the fu-

ture, rather than focusing on the current conditions of their family and home lives. Those who espouse a child-centred perspective hope that “children are not made to suffer for the conditions that their parents’ lives—and their choices and their actions—impose on them” (Jenson 2001, 120), rather than emphasizing the need for broad and universal programs that achieve equity across gender, class, and race for parents as well as children. If the policy focus rests entirely on early childhood education or development, it is unlikely that the needs of working parents will be taken into account (Dobrowolsky and Jenson 2004). Developments in Alberta child care reflect this; policies such as wage enhancements granted to child care workers or staff qualification standards are important for increasing the quality of early education, but such policies are not necessarily attentive to the “care” element, the need for parents to be able to find and access affordable child care in order for them to attend to other pursuits. One interviewee stated: “Sometimes one of the challenges is that people are ready to talk about early childhood development but they don’t want to talk about child care...there [are] all kinds of people who now are getting into the act and talking about early childhood development, but they wouldn’t include child care as a piece of that” (Interviews 2009).

The economic framing of child care is also a cause for concern for scholars and some advocates. As Prentice (2009) points out, such justifications can play into the hands of the for-profit, market-based lobby. One advocate did express concerns about this, pointing out that emphasizing only the economic benefits of child care does not necessarily address the problems associated with the market model (Interviews 2009). The argument that early intervention through child care services brings about long-term economic gains is not necessarily a strong justification for a full-time child care system. It could be argued that part-time or targeted services are just as effective in providing the early intervention and educational services that help to identify developmental problems in children in order to save on long-term costs.

The move towards economic or child-centred framing of the child care question may also have important implications for women’s equality in Alberta. Cheryl Collier (2012), in her examination of gender-neutral frames used in child care and anti-violence advocacy in Ontario and British Columbia, notes that “there is a real danger to any shift away from gender equality in the anti-violence and child-care policy debates” (298), simply because policy gains can be non-feminist. Without a feminist framing of the child care issue, governments are not compelled to consider the implications of policy for women’s experiences of discrimination. In other words, if women’s equality is not part of the justifications for advocates’ arguments for improved child care services, then it is unlikely that decision makers will take the specific needs and perspectives of women or feminists into account when creating child care policy. By focusing on the early education and developmental benefits of child care, the idea of children’s rights is brought to the forefront, while the rights and interests of women and mothers are downplayed (Dobrowolsky and Jenson 2004; Michel 2000).

Collier (2012) also notes that gender-neutral framing of child care policy can result in policy changes that are limited in scope and short-lived. In Alberta, the move away from the transformative, feminist-informed vision of publicly funded and high-quality child care articulated in the 1960s and 1970s has arguably restricted the spectrum of policy achievements by changing the focus to short-term, incremental changes, such as increased wage enhancements for child care staff or adjustments to staff-child ratios. This trend has been compounded by the influence of for-profit child care providers in the advocacy community and the decision of some advocates to seek changes to policy only within the market-based child care model. While the potential for incremental changes may be increased by uniting the voices of for-profit child care providers with other child care advocates and by using gender-neutral framing of child care, this shift has kept publicly funded, universal child care off the political agenda. Advocates who continue to make demands for public child care are

marginalized in the political process. The reframing of child care to focus on benefits for the economy and children's development has therefore affected the scope of possible reforms to child care in Alberta.

### Conclusion

Child care advocates in Alberta confront a specific set of political circumstances. Although not all individual advocates confront these circumstances in the same way, the interview data collected for this study suggests that all advocates make strategic decisions about how to construct their demands for child care given the realities of the system within which they work. The political environment has created disincentives for advocating for public child care, or for tying these demands to the idea that child care is necessary to ensure gender equality. As a result of these barriers, many child care advocates in Alberta have attempted to portray child care as a *children's* issue, as a service that is necessary because of the direct benefits it provides to children and therefore, the general health of the economy and society. Advocates have reframed the child care issue from one of gender equality to one of children's rights and economic benefits as a way of making child care more politically palatable.

This reframing reflects advocates' awareness of the political opportunities that are available when child care is framed in different ways. By distancing themselves from feminist arguments and focusing on child care's benefits for children and for the economy, advocates are actively working to bridge the space between their desire for change in child care policy and their awareness of the opportunities that are afforded or blocked by the political opportunity structure. However, this gender-neutral framing has also meant that for advocates who believe in a publicly funded, universal child care system, the "measures eventually adopted [by governments]...may be a vastly watered down version of what advocates want" (White 2001, 111). The compromises and trade-offs advocates engage in when framing the child care issue therefore carry implications for the possibility of transformative policy reforms in Alberta.

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