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## Harper killing key chance for kids

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In this week's Throne Speech, Prime Minister Stephen **Harper** made clear his intention to scrap the Liberal program for early childhood development and replace it by providing \$100 a month to families for each child under the age of 6.

This would be a terrible mistake, not only for the life chances of Canada's youngest children, but also for the future productivity and social well being of Canada. It is a poor use of the roughly \$2 billion a year the Conservatives say their program would cost.

Not only that, **Harper's** plan is socially inequitable, delivering the biggest benefit to high-income families where one spouse stays at home and much less of a benefit to single mothers with modest incomes. So, it is not even fair.

**Harper's** view is that he is giving Canadians "choice" and besides, he says, he will fund more daycare spaces. But this shows confusion over what early childhood development and parenting centres are all about.

Before he proceeds, **Harper** should talk to some people who really understand the issue. One such person is James Heckman, a University of Chicago economist and winner of the Nobel Prize in economics.

Heckman's research has led him to become a strong advocate of programs to provide the right early childhood environment for learning, health and behaviour, which set the trajectories for adult life.

Early childhood development, Heckman argues, "is a rare public policy that promotes fairness and social justice and at the same time promotes productivity in the economy and in society at large." This is because it significantly raises the life chances of youngsters while improving the skills, health and behaviour of the adult population.

"Skill begets skill. Learning begets learning," Heckman argues. "The earlier the seed is planted and watered, the faster and larger it grows."

Moreover, he contends, "early interventions have much higher returns than other later interventions, such as reduced pupil-teacher ratios, public job training, convict rehabilitation programs, tuition subsidies or expenditure on police."

**Harper** should also consider talking to Bank of Canada Governor David Dodge, another strong advocate of early childhood development who is strongly persuaded that investments made in the earliest years of life have the highest payoffs for individuals and society.

For youngsters, Dodge says, "the research clearly demonstrates that some form of early childhood development outside the home makes a very important contribution to the development of the child" and, combined with good

parenting, significantly increases the chances that youngsters are "ready to learn" when they enter the school system. This raises the odds of a population able to function in a knowledge society.

**Harper** could also talk to Fraser Mustard, Canada's long-time champion of early childhood development and parenting centres. The Ron Mannix family in Calgary, through its Carthy and Norlien Foundations, recently established the Fraser Mustard Chair in Childhood Development at the University of Calgary in recognition of his domestic and international role in early childhood development.

In a paper recently published by the Brookings Institution in Washington, Mustard underlines the fact that early childhood development is vital because it focuses on the sensory stimuli that influence the development of the brain in the period when it is most plastic. It represents the greatest single opportunity to improve life chances for children.

"For any society interested in the future quality of its population, it must have some assessment of how well it is fulfilling its responsibility for the rights of the child to be optimally prepared for adult life," Mustard says. This is what early childhood development is really about.

If **Harper** needs more people to talk to, he can meet with top executives of blue-ribbon U.S. corporations who belong to the Committee for Economic Development in Washington. It seeks to extend early childhood development nationwide in the United States.

Or he could speak to senior economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. "As economists, we are trained to be skeptical of policies that interfere with market forces," Rob Grunewald and Art Rolnick say. "But when it comes to early childhood education, we're confident that this is one policy with a high public return."

This is **Harper's** best chance to show that he can learn on the job, and avoid a serious mistake that could seriously diminish the life chances of many Canadian youngsters - and impede the future innovative capacity of Canada, a capacity that comes from a highly skilled workforce able to succeed in the knowledge society.

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