

# Children suffer when seniors rule at the ballot box

Politicians pander to older people, knowing they vote. Stressed young families are left to struggle. The result is a lot of vulnerable kids

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**O**ld people vote. Young people don't. So, in this year of federal and many provincial elections, promises will tend to be aimed at those reliable voters.

Even when politicians talk about family policy, it's rare that the promise is for immediate help for the families with young children who are most in need.

It's crass politics. Nearly 90 per cent of people over 65 voted in the last federal election and three-quarters voted in federal, provincial and municipal elections, according to the Statistics Canada General Social Survey.

Among 25- to 44-year-olds, fewer than 45 per cent voted in all three elections.

Efficient and expedient, this

pandering to older voters is doing long-term damage to our society and to our economy because these "boomer-centric" policies — as University of B.C. political scientist Paul Kershaw calls them — come at the expense of children under six.

He says ageist and "nostalgic" family policies, which belie the reality of modern families, have already done untold damage.

Twenty-nine per cent of B.C. kids arrive at kindergarten unable to meet the most basic developmental benchmarks, according to data collected by Kershaw and his colleagues at UBC's Human Learning Partnership.

That's nearly three times higher than the expected rate, given that some children develop more slowly than others.

The developmentally vulnerable arrive at school unable to do things like hold a pencil, climb stairs and focus on completing simple tasks. It's a serious enough problem that the B.C. government has set a target of

having vulnerability rates of less than 15 per cent by 2015. But right now, only seven per cent of B.C. neighbourhoods meet that.

What that means is that the majority of vulnerable children come from middle-class homes; many come from two-parent families.

Not only is each of these a potential personal tragedy — vulnerable children are more likely to commit crimes, have poor health as adults, fail in school and not be job-ready when or if they graduate from high school — it's a societal one.

It's a brain drain that Kershaw estimates will cost the provincial economy 20-per-cent growth over the next 60 years, or \$401.5 billion in current dollars. The important point is that this is preventable by shifting resources to families with very young children.

And it's fully justifiable since Canada has gone through a seismic shift since the late 1970s when baby boomers were

young adults.

Then, 56 per cent of the women worked. The average annual household income was \$72,620 and the average B.C. house price was \$202,635.

Today, 80 per cent of women work. Average household income has dropped nine per cent to \$65,940. And the average house price has risen 134 per cent to \$474,274. (The dollar figures have been adjusted in order to be comparable.)

The double bottom line is this. Today's young parents are cash-strapped and time-poor. It's hard for them. It's terrible for toddlers.

Kershaw and colleagues Clyde Hertzman, Lynell Anderson and Bill Warburton first proposed a bold, six-point plan in a 2009 report to the B.C. Business Council. It would cost \$2.02 a day per capita or \$3 billion annually in B.C. alone.

Half the money would go to ensure that parents have more time and resources to spend with their children; the other half would strengthen

community services.

Among the recommendations are: enriching parental leave and extending its duration to 18 months from 12, with additional months available to fathers; redefining full-time work to accommodate shorter annual working hours; and, providing the necessary resources for good quality, regulated child care.

The majority of Canadian children under six are in some kind of care — much of it is unregulated and poor quality.

"We have to decide whether that's important or not," says Kershaw. "But right now there are too many kids with stressed parents who are in places with poor quality care."

Providing more support for preschoolers and their parents will almost certainly require cutting programs and services aimed at older generations.

But there's enough evidence of the benefits of investing in human capital that 17 chief executive officers in B.C. — among them the YWCA, Odium

Brown, the United Way, Vancity, Pharmasave, Wesbild, Sierra Systems, the Surrey and Burnaby boards of trade — are calling for political leaders to address the lack of early childhood supports.

Still, this kind of change requires fearless leadership of the sort that was needed to build railways, schools, universities, bridges and highways in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the post-Second World War social safety net that includes disability insurance, the Canada Pension Plan and medicare system.

Young parents — even if they are time-starved — need to become politically active and demand that.

So do the rest of us. Our pensions and health care depend on it.

Yet right now, a third of preschoolers are at high risk of failure because we're failing them in their earliest and most vulnerable years.

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