



March 17, 2006

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper  
Prime Minister of Canada  
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Dear Prime Minister Harper,

**Specialink** is the National Centre for Child Care Inclusion. For the past 15 years, we have put researchers, policy makers, parents, early childhood educators and directors in touch with the best inclusive practices on the frontlines of Canadian child care. Specialink's goal is to expand the quality and quantity of opportunities for inclusion in child care, recreation, education, and other community settings, to young children with special needs and their families.

On behalf of disability and inclusive child care advocates across Canada, **Specialink** is concerned that your government has cancelled the bi-lateral child care agreements. While we appreciate the important policy goal of offering families direct financial support to help raise their preschool children, the reality is that Canadian research shows that an estimated 10% of children have special needs that require some level of additional supports and/or consultation and training to assure their full participation in community based, “regular” programs. Canadian and international research confirms the extraordinary struggle their parents face in juggling work, family and child care. Their children with disabilities are frequently denied service by child care centres, preschools, family resource programs, and other community supports for young families, for a variety of reasons, including lack of trained staff, attitude and bias, inaccessible spaces, and lack of professional resource consultation (such as speech therapists, physiotherapists etc). As such, we had been encouraged that one of the previous government’s guiding principles for its early learning program was “universally inclusive” and that there was a commitment by signatories to public reporting through specific indicators and measures for inclusion of children with disabilities.

Now, we fear that without the leadership of the federal government on the rights of children with disabilities, congruent with our Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, any progress made towards more inclusive early learning and care opportunities for families raising children with special support needs will be lost. In the past weeks, there have been two Canadian media reports that describe the opportunities provided to

children with disabilities in high quality child care, and the barriers they will face with the cancellation of the childcare agreements and we respectfully draw these to your attention in the postscript to this letter.

We believe that we must prioritize investments in building an inclusive children's public policy agenda in order to meet the social development needs and aspirations of children with disabilities and their families. While we absolutely support the responsibility of the provinces and territories in the delivery of child care services and agree that a one-size-fits-all strategy will not work; disability crosscuts all income groups and is life-long. Our research shows that turning children away based on 'disability' still appears to be one of the accepted forms of discrimination in Canada.

We believe that building the capacity of communities is essential to meeting the needs of children and families and this is where the federal government must continue its leadership role in developing policy and as a funder. For example, while your community investment fund will offer a \$10,000 credit to businesses that establish programs, our research shows that \$20,000 per space per year is required for start up and operating costs for children with disabilities. We also suggest that governments set specific goals that mirror the incidence of disability in naturally occurring populations -i.e. 10% of spaces are designated for children with disabilities @ \$20,000 per space. We would also encourage your government to set aside specific dollars for capital investments for accessible programs. Since accessibility and physical structure are so closely related to both inclusion quality and global quality, all new centres must be purpose built to meet current standards, and older centres must be eligible for capital grants to increase accessibility.

The inclusion of children with disabilities in your goals for social policy for Canadian families must be meaningful and contribute to lasting, life-long patterns of inclusion. As such, we call upon you Mr. Harper, as Prime Minister of a Canada that includes those with disabilities, to honour the agreements made with the ten provinces that agreed on a shared role to support their citizens. Our position is not based on partisan politics but upon a most sincere and long lasting vision of an inclusive Canada that begins in the early years.

Please call upon us and our resources as you work towards the detailing of your plans for Canadian families.

Sincerely,

Dr. Sharon Hope Irwin  
Director

Debra Mayer, M.A.  
Project Manager

## Special needs day care lauded: Proud mom thrilled with son's progress

The Calgary Herald [Page: PS06] Wes Lafortune 02 Mar 2006

Eileen Dooley is a proud parent who just can't stop praising the Thornhill Child Care Centre where her son William, 4, attends day care.

"William didn't walk until he was two years old," she explains.

Eileen says since enrolling William in the Thornhill program in August 2003 the improvement in her son's abilities has been dramatic.

"He went from not talking and not walking to running," she says. "And now you can't keep him quiet."

Dooley says the non-profit Thornhill program stands out because it has long-term staff that are educated in child development and dedicated to the children's needs.

"They have low staff turnover, good education levels and the program is culturally diverse," she says.

Thornhill Childcare Centre offers day care to children 19 months to four years and then Early Childhood Services (ECS) for five-year-olds. In addition to the child care available at the centre, Thornhill operates day homes in the community.

Maureen Pepper, program supervisor at the centre, says parents can expect that their children will experience a "nurturing, secure environment."

She says the child-care centre has 85 children in its day care and another 21 children who attend the ECS program in the mornings.

Open to children with a diverse range of needs the Thornhill Centre has become known in the community for being able to support children with developmental delays, speech deficits and behavioural issues.

"We have access to occupational therapists, speech therapists and other professionals," says Pepper.

She adds that next door to the facility is the Thornhill Recreation Centre, which allows the child-care centre to offer additional programming by using the library and gymnasium.

"It's excellent quality child care," says Pepper.

Thornhill Child Care Centre is one of just 16 child-care centres in Calgary accredited by the Alberta Association for the Accreditation of Early Learning and Child Care Services.

Different than licensing, accreditation is a voluntary process that looks at issues of quality beyond the standards of health, safety and developmental needs required by Child and Family Services Authorities for regulated and approved child-care programs.

The AECLS states that an accredited child-care centre offers "standards of high quality and recognized achievement."

Things to look for at a child care centre according to the AECLS include:

- The program has an open-door policy and welcomes families to visit.
- Children are cared for by adults who are trained in early childhood education.
- Children can choose from a variety of open-ended play experiences that support varying skills and interests.
- The service promotes literacy.
- Rules, limits, and consequences are geared to the children's level of development and explained to children in language they understand.

For more information about the AECLS accreditation program or to find out which centre are accredited in your area call 1-877-552-2227 or visit [www.abccaccred.ca](http://www.abccaccred.ca)

## **Mother worried day-care changes will cause problems for autistic son**

Nancy King, Cape Breton Post [Page: A3] 28 Feb 2006

When two-year-old Brandyn Brunet began attending day care he was "in his own world" - he couldn't speak and wouldn't play with other children. Now age five, Brandyn, who has autism, is able to initiate play with other children, better cope with new environments and make the transition from one task to another, all of which his mother Nicole, 27, attributes to his experience in the special needs program at Town Day Care in Glace Bay.

"They got his speech going, he plays with other children now, at first he didn't know how to do that, he would be withdrawn," Brunet says. "I'd say his progress thanks to day care went from zero to 80 per cent. He still has a challenge but they got him mobile, they got him social with other children and other adults."

For children with autism, routine and consistency are paramount, and without that they can begin to lose any progress they've made, Brunet says.

"If I lose this, I'm going to have to start right from scratch again, he'll be withdrawn again," she says. "These are the people who are helping Brandyn become his own independent person. I don't have the training, I can only do so much as a parent."

Losing access to day-care services such as special needs programs is very much a possibility with Prime Minister Stephen Harper's pledge to tear up federal-provincial funding agreements next year, argues Sharon Hope Irwin, director of SpeciaLink, the national centre for child care inclusion.

Harper instead plans to move forward with \$1,200 annual grants for each child under age six and \$250 million in tax credits for employers and non-profit agencies to provide new spaces. Most premiers have said they have concerns with Harper's plan, although Pat Binns of P.E.I. and New Brunswick's Bernard Lord approve of the grant system.

What was important about the agreements signed between the provinces and territories and Ottawa wasn't only the money involved - in Nova Scotia's case it represented \$137 million over five years - but also

because it was linked to four principles, including being universally inclusive of children with special needs, Hope Irwin says. That gave parents hope that their children would soon enjoy better access to programs.

"This was the first time that our federal-provincial-territorial governments agreed to such a linkage," she says. "We don't have anything in child care that's comparable to the legislation that requires schools to include kids with special needs, it's all on the basis of decisions by admissions committees."

In Cape Breton there is currently limited access to special needs child-care programs, Hope Irwin notes. By attending day care, children with special needs gain from being surrounded by typical kids and improve their language and social skills. Individual program plans are also developed to focus on the child's specific needs, she adds.

"Some centres have been doing a great job for a long time but many centres don't have the training capacity, the skill capacity, and often even the physical capacity, some of the rooms are on the second floor, that really doesn't work for kids with physical disabilities," Hope Irwin says.

"Because of high turnover in child-care centres and lack of recognition in pay, there are very few people who are trained in the additional services for working well with children with special needs. But in the last few years, more centres in Cape Breton have agreed to include some kids with special needs."

While Harper's plan will see some funds for community groups and businesses to provide additional spaces, Hope Irwin describes that amount of money as being much smaller and not tied to principles such as quality or inclusion.

"As parents have often said, when the going gets rough, our kids with special needs are the first ones to lose their spaces, are the first ones to lose their services," she says.

Brunet says she doesn't believe Harper's plan will help her family. Her younger son Andrew, almost four, also attends Town Day Care and Brandyn will continue to rely on its after-school program even after he moves on to Grade Primary this fall.

"I feel betrayed," she says. "It's just going to worsen my situation."

Brunet, who in addition to being a single mother is also a student at the Nova Scotia Community College, says that without access to the special needs day-care program she wouldn't be able to further her education and improve life for her and her sons.

"I wouldn't have a full-time provider for them," she says. "I feel comfortable, as well, with the day care, I don't have to worry about them because I know I get a call if there's something wrong . . . When you hire people you always have that doubt in the back of your mind, but with the day-care atmosphere you don't have to worry about that."