

Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain
Speaking notes, Learning to Care Conference
Toronto, October 23, 2012

Less than a month after the inaugural conference for the Fraser Mustard Institute for Human Development, we are together again under the same theme -- how research, policy and practice -- across disciplines -- inform one another.

Behind the IHD, and its prototype the Atkinson Centre, is an understanding that human development is complex – it doesn't belong to any one discipline. And just as we have spent the last two days advising policy makers to breakdown the silos that hinder the delivery of early education -- academics need to heed that same advice and build cross sector understanding to improve their own work.

Fraser had a concept that effective learning was circular – not that it went in circles – but that 'knowledge sharing' is not a one way, or even a two way street, but a continuous circle of learning, innovation and improvement.

It is also without hierarchies. The neuroscientists' contribution is not above the applied psychologist's or the MD's. And this is particularly true when we draw the links between science and policymaking – which in itself, is a science.

The findings from small random control studies do not necessarily hold when scaled up to population levels. The scientist may be able to control the environment of her lab rats but children and families are not as malleable.

When we developed the Early Years studies we relied on the best evidence available to inform our recommendations. In Early Years 3, we advocate for publicly funded early education for every child from age 2 – available, high quality, voluntary – and linked to public education.

Why 2-years-old? – We are aware of the tremendous development that takes place between conception and 24 months. However from age two the research is unambiguous -- high quality early education is advantageous for all children, and the earlier children regularly participate, the better.

For children under two, the benefits of a group program are not as clear. Programs for this age group are also very, very expensive to deliver well.

For our youngest children we recommend a different policy mix -- improved parental leave, better work/life flexibility and related family supports. And where desired, good – very, very good -- child care.

The service response for this age group is also thick. We have paid parental leave, pre- and post-natal care, home visiting and parent/child drop-in play groups. There could be more. They could be delivered better and they could be better resourced.

It is during the preschool years that children are most neglected by public policy – unless they have a problem.

I appreciate that for scientists there are few grant opportunities to study things that work well. We are oriented towards deficits and how to fix them. But this does influence our views of children.

They are too often portrayed as chattels of their families; clients of our agencies; the beneficiaries of protective measures; objects of social experiments or capital for economic growth; rather than full human beings with a capacity to communicate and contribute.

We slot then onto bar charts by their socio-economic circumstances, and zero in those doing very poorly or excelling, often ignoring the kids who are 'alright'.

A more recent discourse, influenced by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, argues for a child rights agenda as the firmest platform for developing early childhood policy.

A child rights agenda is a relatively new concept for Canadians, requiring a paradigm shift in both public and professional attitudes.

Respecting young children's rights challenges the deficit model of interventions where children are identified by their problems and singled out for treatment. Rather the focus is on the child's assets.

Parents are integrated into programs out of respect for the intimate knowledge they bring of their child. Communities are involved and celebrated for their values, traditions and sustainability.

We do need the knowledge that science brings and we do need to measure – when you want change, you measure. When you don't -- you cripple Statistics Canada. Measurement tells us if policy is working.

But many factors go into policy making in addition to scientific evidence. Successful policy making must take into consideration pragmatism, social values, election cycles and economic circumstances.

From a policy perspective, early education can, and should, provide multiple dividends – liberating women to take part in the paid workforce, reducing family poverty, promoting social inclusion – and giving kids nice places to be – which is also a valid policy goal.

Sometimes we get so engrossed in finding the perfect science to fit the policy we may miss big opportunities.

A few weeks ago the new president of a major emerging democracy brought together the top scientists and foundations working on early childhood health and development. “I have \$10-billion to improve outcomes for children,” she told them. “What should I do?” She went around the table and each participant said a version of: ‘we don’t know – the findings are not conclusive’. The only thing they could agree on was the need for more research. They walked out of the room and the money went elsewhere -- where the experts could agree.

If scientists find it hard to be definitive so does the voluntary sector. Early in the Obama administration, funders and organizations were brought to the White House to advise on what the government’s priority should be for young children. The meeting evidently broke down as the 0-3 year old advocates battled the preschool backers. As a result children got neither.

Doing nothing was not an unreasonable option for these political leaders. There are many pressing agendas competing for attention. If governments are going to take on big and new projects they need to know that at least the advocates have their back.

That is why in Early Years Study 3 we coalesced around the demand to extend education's benefits down to include preschoolers.

Multiple studies tell us that good quality early education can change the lives of young children and their families.

And the experts have told us what goes into good early education:

- First and foremost - good educators – well trained and well supported
- A play-based curriculum to help children soar
- Monitoring to improve quality

All supported by a sound policy framework, backed by ongoing research and evaluation and the ample lessons of others who have gone before us.

We don't know everything; yet we have everything we need to make a good start. And a good start is the first step to a better future for all Canada's children.