

What Toronto can learn about childcare from Japan ^[1]

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Public Works looks at public space, urban design, and city-building innovations from around the world, and considers what Toronto might learn from them.

International Women's Day is marked on one day, but gender shapes decision-making every day of the year. In Yokohama, Japan, personal priorities and economic objectives came together to transform municipal childcare and help mothers rejoin the workforce.

In 2010, Yokohama had the longest waitlist for childcare of any city in Japan. With 1,522 children unable to secure a space at a licensed provider, Fumiko Hayashi, mayor of Japan's second-largest city, set a target to eliminate the waitlist within three years.

The strategy involved identifying new sites for childcare centres, improving communication with parents, and adjusting services to meet the needs of families. The city partnered with property owners and non-profit agencies to integrate childcare centres into commercial buildings and introduced new requirements for childcare on university campuses.

But increasing access to childcare went beyond bricks and mortar facilities. The city launched a "nursery concierge" service to share information with parents. In contrast to the rigid, Monday-to-Friday approach common in other Japanese cities, Yokohama also pioneered flexible childcare, ranging from extended hours to support only some days of the week.

The results are dramatic: Yokohama achieved its goal of slashing the waitlist within three years, and more than 160 new childcare facilities were built between 2010 and 2014, opening up 12,000 spots for local children.

The push for new childcare centres also inspired creative uses of space. One nursery is built under a highway overpass, while others incorporate rooftop playgrounds to enable outdoor activities even in dense, downtown neighbourhoods.

The rapid turnaround is a testament to both local leadership and cooperation between different levels of government. Hayashi is the first woman to hold the office of mayor in Yokohama. When she was elected in 2009, she made investing in childcare a priority, drawing on her own experiences as a woman in executive positions at BMW, Nissan, and supermarket chain Daiei. Re-elected in 2013, Hayashi has doubled municipal spending on childcare during her time as mayor.

Hayashi's commitment to childcare in Yokohama has earned national attention because it's an approach that benefits not just children but also women and the economy more broadly. Japan consistently lags in gender equity and more than half of women do not return to work after having children.

The World Economic Forum's 2016 Global Gender Gap Index ranks Japan 111 out of 144 countries, between Nepal and Cambodia. However, based on the success of Yokohama, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe outlined a plan to create 400,000 new childcare spaces across the country by 2018. This target supports a larger economic objective to increase the proportion of women who return to work after becoming mothers to 55 per cent by 2020.

As number 35 on the World Economic Forum's index, Canada ranks higher than Japan in terms of gender equity, but childcare remains a challenge for countless families in Toronto.

There are more than 990 licensed childcare centres operating in Toronto in addition to regulated homecare providers. Children's Services at the City of Toronto also operates more than 50 early learning centres, with two more set to open this month.

Despite this network of services, demand far exceeds supply. Once you factor in affordability and the working conditions of early childhood educators, it's clear that Toronto is facing a childcare crisis.

According to Children's Service's Service Plan 2015-2019 [PDF] there are 64,700 licensed childcare spaces available in Toronto. With a total population of 346,320 children from birth to 12 years old living in the city that means existing services meet the needs of only 19 per cent of children.

Moreover, the availability of childcare changes by age group. While the Service Plan indicates that as of January 2015 there were licensed childcare spaces for half of preschoolers (ages 2.5 to 5 years), the system provided spaces for only one third of toddlers (ages 18 to 30 months) and just one out of every 13 infants under 18 months.

The plan acknowledges the extent of the problem, stating, “Increasing both the physical space and the number of fee subsidies available is critical.” In this context, Yokohama demonstrates how partnerships can provide physical space for childcare, while support from other levels of government is essential to control the costs carried by families.

On International Women’s Day, ensuring access to affordable childcare is a key component of achieving gender equity, in both Canada and Japan. Yokohama proves that municipal leadership can set a national precedent and improve outcomes across generations: the city’s investment not only supports the education of its youngest citizens but also enables their mothers to return to work.

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Region: International [3]

Tags: affordability [4]

access [5]

waitlist [6]

early childhood education and care [7]

space shortages [8]

public policy [9]

investment in social services [10]

child care workforce [11]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/17/03/what-toronto-can-learn-about-childcare-japan> [2]

<https://torontoist.com/2017/03/toronto-can-learn-childcare-japan/> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/international> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/affordability> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/access> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/waitlist> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/early-childhood-education-and-care> [8]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/space-shortages> [9] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/public-policy> [10]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/investment-social-services> [11] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-care-workforce>