

Ontario budget puts focus on children's well-being ^[1]

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The government is also putting \$200 million in new operating funds that will create 24,000 additional daycare spaces this year — 16,000 of them subsidized for low- to moderate-income families.

From pharmacare to daycare to child welfare, Ontario kids got a lot of attention in the provincial budget.

The Liberals are pledging a further \$49 million for children's mental health and wellness, mainly through school-based programs.

Those funds, spread over three years, are to "improve students' cognitive, emotional, social and physical development through equity and inclusive education, safe and accepting schools, healthy schools and positive mental health," Ontario budget documents said.

Some 70 per cent of adults who suffer from mental health issues report their troubles began when they were young.

The \$134 million promised for child welfare will be spent over the next four years. The funds come as the government revamps the Child, Youth and Family Services Act, which it has promised will give kids in provincial care more of a say in the decisions that affect them.

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Experts say they are cautiously optimistic about the announcement, part of the government's plan for 100,000 new spaces over the next five years.

"I think that putting money into the subsidy systems, where wait lists are so long, is the right thing to do in the short term," said Martha Friendly, executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

"This will not only help parents, but centres with vacancies they can't fill."

However, she added "everything we know shows that individual subsidies are not the solution to fixing child care, so I'm really glad they are committing to a broader affordability plan."

In Toronto, about 15,400 children are waiting for daycare subsidies while more than 4,000 spaces sit vacant because parents can't afford fees that top \$20,000 a year for young children.

Friendly said she looks forward to hearing about other aspects of the five-year plan, expected to be released later in May.

"I'm hopeful that that will really be something that we can work with," she said. "(I'm) enthusiastic about getting started."

Riverdale-area mother Shiralee Hudson Hill and her husband, who pay more than \$30,000 a year in child care fees for their daughters Cressida, 4 and Imogen, 1, are also anxious to hear about the government's broader affordability plan.

"When I look at what was released today, I'm not really seeing anything that will help my family and many of my friends," said Hudson Hill, 40, an AGO exhibition planner. "Middle-class families are being kneecapped by these massive daycare fees."

Hudson Hill also welcomes the government's plan to beef up children's mental health services through new school-based programs.

"Mental health is an issue that has touched so many families and in some cases, tragically," she said. "The sooner we can address those issues with professional help in schools, the better."

Hudson Hill, whose mother was a teacher, said this was a role that used to be played by the school nurse and guidance counsellors, positions that were gutted during the Conservative Mike Harris government in the mid-1990s. "I see this as an important reinvestment, updated for the times."

The province is also moving ahead with hubs — or one-stop shops — for teens and young adults needing mental health help or support for addictions, setting up nine across Ontario.

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