

Child care and early childhood education: It's a journey, not a race... but why am I so exhausted? ^[1]

Moving beyond baby steps: Building a child care plan for today's families Vol. 24, N.4 (#120)

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Source: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Our Schools Ourselves

Format: Book / booklet

Publication Date: 28 May 2017

AVAILABILITY

Full chapter PDF ^[2]

INTRODUCTION

Child care — in theory and practice — has signposted my life for well over a decade. Our journey started in 2004 when, newly pregnant with my daughter, we called every child care centre in Ottawa to try and secure a space for when she would require it when she turned one (which means we were planning 18 months ahead).

In 2005-2006, when she was born and for the first year of her life, I took six months of work to care for her at home, and my partner took the second six months (thanks to progressive, unionized workplaces and our respective collective agreements). When she was 11 months old we secured a child care space within walking distance from our house... and I can assure you, the we-won-the-lottery-esque relief in our home was palpable.

In the summer of 2006 our 13-month-old daughter entered the infant program at a unionized, parent-run neighbourhood daycare co-op. Within two weeks of playing with the other children she was crawling. Within three more she was walking. Her vocabulary, already impressive, grew exponentially. And while the direct benefits to her were and continue to be obvious and immense, as a family we also gained enormously from the experience, professionalism, care, love and support provided by the many caregivers who worked with her (and us) through infant, toddler, preschool and kindergarten programs.

In spring 2009, with our daughter in JK — not yet full-day in Ottawa, so she split her time between the daycare and public school — I began work on an issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* devoted to child care and early childhood education (and in which my first experiences with child care featured prominently). I was also pregnant with my second child. The four-and-a-half years between our kids speaks directly to two issues: the cost of child care, and student loan repayments. With the student loan paid off, we could afford to have another child — or, more accurately, we could afford the child care fees for two kids simultaneously, in addition to the mortgage and other monthly bills.

Late that year, our son was born. Once again, we split the year of parental leave. This time, of course, we had to incorporate the back-and-forth to school and daycare for our eldest into the daily commute(s). But when it came time to arrange for daycare (our family was grandfathered so we didn't have to go back on the waiting list) no spot was available. We managed to find six months of temporary homecare with a very capable, experienced woman in the neighbourhood who also walked kids to and from the local school. And then, at the age of 18 months, our little boy entered the toddler program downstairs from his sister who was enrolled in SK. While there were two different drop-offs, at least we had a central pickup that was more-or-less on the way home from work.

But the following year we were thrust into the split-shift drop-off/pick-up calculus so many parents have to navigate: for the next three years I was responsible for drop-offs, my partner (on his bike, with the bike trailer and then the tandem bike) for daycare pickup while I got groceries and made dinner, and we took turns with homework help and story time. Our schedule was balanced — barely. Doctor's appointments, colds, work events or inclement weather could throw off everything without warning — and frequently did. Fortunately, both of our workplaces have family-friendly policies so if we had to work from home or bring a child in for an hour or two we could accommodate it. But don't ask me how we managed — car-less and in the winter — the year I broke my leg and was housebound for two months.

This year, 2014-15, was the first when both kids were at the same school and our son was in full-day kindergarten which had just started in Ottawa. We had one location for drop-off and pick-up which — bonus! — was on the way to and from work. (I have literally had entire conversations with parents about how much time and joy this one simple thing adds to their lives, particularly for those who do not own a car.) And with only pre- and post-school care to have to pay for, our child care expenses were significantly reduced.

But that stage was short-lived: our neighbourhood catchment school has recently been changed, thanks to a board-wide accommodation review, to one significantly less convenient from a commute perspective (we do not qualify for busing) so this fall arrangements for our youngest will have to change for after-school care. And, on a more emotional note, earlier this summer we gave notice that our eldest, now 10, will no longer be enrolled in the daycare or the satellite programs it oversees, including the Extended Day Program at her grade school.

After nine years, over 40 full- and part-time caregivers, extracurricular activities, carefully-prepared meals, arts-and-crafts, sign language, day trips and satellite programs with her school, she has graduated from the daycare that taught us all so much.

Our decade-long child care journey (longer, of course, if you count the pre-birth time spent trying to find a space — and I do!) is coming to an end. But in my recap here, what's also come back to me amidst the memories of the warmth, support and gratitude is the emotional rollercoaster: the wave of panic about whether we could find a space before going back to work, followed by the relief at finding a space, followed by the overwhelming shock at the cost of the space, followed by the rejigging of the household budget to manage the shock more effectively, followed by a bit of a plateau... until the second child. Then repeat: panic, relief, panic...and a prolonged state of tentative existence where anything — a cold, a snowstorm, a meeting — could upset the delicate balance we'd managed to achieve.

And that's for a middle-income couple with steady, unionized employment and benefits, in a well established downtown neighbourhood.

We are a dual-income household.

Our kids do not have special needs.

We are not precariously employed.

We are not socioeconomically or racially marginalized.

We do not live in a rural community.

While car-less, we have access to public transportation.

We have flexible, child-friendly, unionized, accommodating workplaces.

We could take time off at fully topped-up pay to be with our kids for the first 12 months.

We work (mostly) regular hours.

We are walking- (or biking- or, in the winter, sledding-) distance from our public school and our day care, both of which are excellent.

In other words, in a country that does not adequately prioritize the care and well-being of its youngest and most vulnerable, my family— as a result of our luck, location, and privilege — can manage, with some mishaps, to navigate the patchwork, piecemeal, punitively-priced market-based child care system that does exist, without devastating hardship.

But come on. That's an excruciatingly low-water mark for one of the wealthiest countries in the world — and one that should (and indeed does) know better.

This issue of Our Schools/Our Selves is an update to Beyond Child's Play (spring 2009), but it is also an opportunity to take stock of where we are currently in the child care debates, and where we need to be, in the lead-up to and looking beyond a national election that is very much about how we care for our children and how we support families in that task. It brings together key researchers, activists and analysts to provide a thoughtful, nuanced, accessible overview of the key issues in the effort to build a national child care program that responds to and meets the needs of kids from coast to coast to coast; that is affordable, inclusive, anti-oppressive, accountable and high quality; that values the tremendous work of caregivers; that is flexible and responsive to parent and community needs; that is stable, adequately-funded, and helps to build vibrant, equitable, empowered, compassionate, cohesive communities.

I am indebted to Martha Friendly, who was instrumental in helping to pull together this remarkable group of authors; Jamie Kass and Shellie Bird for their support; the contributors who so generously gave of their time and expertise, and Nancy Reid for her artistry and vision in helping to shape this collection and make it a reality.

-reprinted from Our Schools Ourselves

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