

Barrie family keeps kids home after 'struggle' to pay daycare bills

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EXCERPTS

Two professionals, one unaffordable daycare bill.

Barrie's Liam and Jena Murphy already had their hands full and pocketbooks emptied trying to pay for daycare for their now six-year-old son Ethan. Then life happened, and twin boys came along.

"We were both working full-time," Liam said, sitting in the family's living room as Ethan flipped through Pokemon trading cards nearby. "When we talked about family planning, we decided once he was out of daycare, we'd start trying again."

Isaac and Oliver entered the world about two years ago. Once Jena's maternity leave ended, the family had to make some major life adjustments. Both Liam and Jena had careers — he worked as a nurse and she is employed in an office — but he was, coincidentally, laid off and, when they ran the numbers, it didn't make sense to seek another full-time job.

So for now, Liam stays home with the kids and hopes to pick up part-time work in the fall.

"I had a good job but we still found it difficult to pay for daycare, just with one child," Jena said. "My mother-in-law watched Ethan and we put him in daycare part-time. When mat leave ended, we looked at nannies. We were heartbroken to have to pull them from daycare. But it didn't make sense — (Liam) would have been working to pay for daycare and travel."

While Liam loves spending time with his kids, he wants a career, and assurance his twins will be prepared to enter the elementary school system in a few years.

The system seems stacked against the Murphy family.

"It's upsetting," Liam said. "When I pictured my life, I pictured working the job I trained for and am passionate about. There's a feeling of being held back in my career just because of daycare. How are we, as two people who have post-secondary education (and) good careers, struggling to make daycare payments? Why is there no support for us? We're paying into the system, why can't it turn around and help us? Financially, it's not even a conversation. We want stability. We want to work."

Ontario's child care model is so far behind, according to Professor Yvonne Bohr of La Marsh Centre for Child and Youth Research at York University. With the mountains of research data showing the importance of providing quality care for children from 0 to 4 years of age, it leaves her wondering why the government hasn't until this year, taken steps toward a universal child-care model.

"What we have is not in line with what we know," she added. "Those early years are just as important as Kindergarten so day care should be an extension of the school system, absolutely."

The current child-care model isn't working because it's not affordable for all families, low wages make it difficult to attract and retain professional child care employees and the sector lacks regulation.

Cognitive and emotional learning go hand-in-hand in the early years meaning stable social interactions with a trusted adult encourages learning and professionally trained staff can help guide and prepare children for the school years.

But some children miss out on the nurturing of that early development because there isn't available, affordable space at licensed day cares. If quality of care isn't defined or regulated or professional development isn't offered to staff to keep up with current best practices, children head into school on an uneven playing field.

"There is actual evidence and economic research that shows child care is worth the investment," Bohr said. "Children who are professionally cared for in the early years have better mental health, lower incarceration rates, require less poverty support and contribute more to the economy."

In June, Child Care Minister Indira Naidoo-Harris unveiled a seven pillar plan including 100,000 more licensed child-care spaces, subsidy funds and no parent paying more than 20 per cent of their income on care. The plan would also offer 20,000 more early childhood educators, wage increases and professional development opportunities, defining of quality child care, inclusion plan, annual tracking of system performance and public education on available child-care options.

But experts say it's not enough and that the five-year plan could potentially be abolished should the Liberal government not be re-elected next year.

The day-care sector is currently facing a recruitment and retention crisis, according to Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario's Lyndsay Macdonald. The child-care sector has become one that is difficult to afford to remain working in.

"Many of these early childhood educators go to work and can't afford child care for their own children," she added, pointing out that the AECEO's current campaign is advocating for fair wages.

The median pay for Ontario ECEs is \$17.20 per hour but 24 per cent are below that at \$15 per hour. Those who have managed to obtain employment with a school board are making \$26 per hour, full benefits, a pension, work fewer hours in a day and get summers off.

"This disparity makes it difficult to recruit and retain educated child-care workers and when turnover is high, the quality of care decreases," she said. "Learning happens through care and consistent relationships. If there is turnover there is no consistency."

While she applauds the government for releasing a five-year action plan for child care, she says it falls short. More funding is needed to fill the gaps that have grown so large because 100,000 new licensed child-care spaces are moot without trained staff and parents who can afford those spaces.

"You know the system is broken when parents are forced to choose between work and staying home to care for their children," she added. "The funding announcements are a step in the right direction but much, much more is needed. Parents, children and the child-care sector deserve better."

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