

Finding a safe daycare a 'challenge' for B.C. parents, says childcare expert ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

The death of a 15-month-old toddler at an unlicensed Vancouver daycare has renewed concerns over how parents can find a safe and secure child-care provider.

Vancouver Coastal Health repeatedly investigated the daycare provider where Macallan Saini, also known as "Baby Mac," died in January, documents show.

On three occasions, the health authority discovered overcrowding in the daycare, which operated under different names and at various locations.

VCH asked the operator to reduce the number of children. She complied but later closed the daycare and reopened in a different location.

Shelly Sheppard, Baby Mac's mother, says she pursued every check possible before placing her child in the daycare, which, unbeknownst to VCH, was still falsely advertising itself as licensed.

"These kinds of records, they're not easily accessible," she said, referring to records detailing the overcrowding violations, which took four months to obtain through a freedom-of-information request.

Unlicensed operators can only look after a maximum of two children, other than their own and can be fined up to \$10,000 a day for violations.

Vetting daycares

Pam Preston, executive director of Vancouver's Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre, agrees it's tough for parents to vet unlicensed daycares, especially operators who evade regulations by changing names and moving locations.

"What can be more confusing is when [parents] visit some of the centres, they look quite professional on the outside," Preston told Early Edition guest host Stephen Quinn.

VCH posts inspection reports online for licensed child care centres, but there's no such data for unlicensed providers.

There are steps, however, that families can take to scope out credible daycares, Preston said.

Parents can ask operators for first-aid certificates and a criminal record check. The operator's liability insurance should also be scrutinized, Preston said.

"If anything does happen to a child, and you end up having to care for a disabled child for life, that provider's insurance would be on the line for that."

Flexible drop-in hours

Other measures include walking through the operator's home for safety hazards, inquiring about their training and getting references from other parents.

Operators should also allow parents to check on their child at any time of day, Preston said, a process known in childcare as gradual entry.

Preston said she pulled out her daughter two weeks into a new daycare - and forfeited the deposit - after the operator made uncomfortable remarks about the timing of her visits.

"That is a huge red flag, when you're only allowed to drop off before 9 a.m., pick up after 5 p.m. and please, no unannounced visits."

The best daycares will involve the parents in their child's day, Preston said. That includes taking photos of the kids and regularly debriefing

parents about their activities.

If opting for an unlicensed daycare, parents should check whether the operator is registered with a local child care resource-and-referral program, Preston said.

Those operators must adhere to criteria set out by the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

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