

Why longer parental leave may not shorten wait times for P.E.I. daycares ^[1]

New rules allowing for 18-months leave take effect Dec. 3, but how many Islanders can take advantage of it?

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New rules allowing for 18-months parental leave aren't likely to shorten the long wait-list for infant spaces at many Island daycares, says P.E.I.'s director of early childhood development.

Carolyn Simpson says when the extended-leave option becomes available in December, she's doubtful many Island parents will be able to take advantage of it.

"Could this offset infant spaces? That's really hard to know because so many of our families do work seasonally, do shift work, and might not be able to take advantage of the 18 months," she said. "So it won't alleviate pressures for parents to find child care for their infants, I don't expect."

Starting Dec. 3, parents of a newborn or a newly adopted child will have the choice to spread their employment insurance benefits over the normal 12-month period, or an extended 18 months.

"How many Island families will be financially in a position to take what would be 12 months of parental leave income and stretch that over 18 months? You're receiving less money for a longer period of time," Simpson said

'Hard to take the extra 6 months off'

Affordability is one reason Jenna Arsenault says she wouldn't consider taking the extended leave. The mother of two says she's keen to get back to work as a teacher as soon as her 12-month parental leave is finished.

"I think it would be hard to take the extra six months off with less income," said Arsenault.

She says she'd also worry about her career development if she was off for 18 months.

"A lot of things change in your teaching career in a year and a half. So many things change in the classroom," she said. "I could be out of the loop a little bit. It'll be nice to get back into the swing of things."

The federal government estimates up to 20,000 parents may use the new extended parental leave option.

Simpson points out that even if Island parents do take 18 months off with their children, then look to enroll them in daycare when they return to work, they'll still need to find an infant space.

"On P.E.I., we define infants as up to 22 months," she said. "There'd still be that four-month block where parents may require infant care."

More money for infant spaces

The province will monitor how many Island parents take advantage of the 18-month parental leave over the next year or so, and assess what impact that has on the demand for child care, Simpson said.

"We have to go through the cycle to see what's the uptake, and then how can P.E.I. begin to respond?," she said. "It'll either be fairly status quo as it is right now. Or maybe two years from now, we have another conversation and parents have utilized that 18 months, and there may not be as great a need for infant spaces. We just don't know."

Regardless, the provincial government is moving ahead with its plan to pump an additional \$10.5 million into child care over the next three years.

Part of that money — handed down by the federal government — will fund 200 additional infant and pre-school child care spaces in the province.

Simpson says more specifics on how the province plans to create those additional spaces will be unveiled early in the new year.

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