

Julia Lipscombe: Affordable child-care funding announcement good news for working parents ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

This week, the federal and provincial governments announced they were committing more money to affordable child care.

More specifically, on Thursday, federal cabinet minister and Edmonton-Mill Woods MP Amarjeet Sohi unveiled a three-year bilateral agreement that commits \$136 million to early learning and child care in Alberta.

I can think of few better causes for governments who claim to be both progressive and committed to families.

A few weeks ago, I had to have those awkward conversations with Indy's daycare. Come June 1, we would be sending him to a new centre.

These were heartbreaking chats to have. I loved Indy's teachers and the staff and his downtown daycare. They're kind and attentive. They love and care for my child. They are genuinely happy to see him in the morning. They provide two healthy snacks and a healthy lunch every day. They take him outside twice per day. They track his development and teach him songs and skills.

The problem with this place? We could barely afford it.

When Indy was about 10 months old, I started looking for daycare in Westmount. There weren't any spots. The only other neighbourhood that made sense for us was downtown, near my work. The daycare we found was about \$1,900 per month for five days a week.

That was out of the question. So we paid \$1,100 monthly for him to attend three days a week, and my husband Jesse looks after him the other two days. It's a big stress on us, since my husband isn't exactly "off" those days. Instead, Indy comes along to meetings, or Jesse tries to work while our little boy toddles around. We've had help from our friends and, mostly, Jesse's wonderful mom, but it's been stressful and a source of tension.

For example:

Shouldn't I stay home twice a week instead? Jesse earns more than I do. On the other hand, shouldn't Jesse continue to stay home? Because my pay cheque comes reliably on the same day every two weeks. (Plus, something tells me it wouldn't be as cute if I brought Indy along to meetings and work appointments. The novelty of Dad doing it means he can get away with it more than I could.)

And so, when a new daycare opened two blocks from our house, we had to jump at the opportunity. We'll spend just shy of \$1,000 a month and he'll be able to go five days per week.

That, we can handle.

But it's still a lot. And the cost of daycare here in Edmonton — though less than Toronto and Vancouver where folks pay up to \$24,000 a year and more — is still prohibitive for many.

I often wonder how a single parent could possibly afford rent and day care in Edmonton, because on my current salary alone — without my husband's — it would be pretty well impossible.

According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the average cost for an infant in daycare in Edmonton is \$990. So, yeah, that's less than Toronto (\$1,758), but it's a hell of a lot more than Montreal (\$168), where daycare is subsidized by the government.

Currently, in Ontario, debate is ongoing about universal child care, after Premier Kathleen Wynne made a campaign promise to provide free daycare for kids two-and-a-half years and older. That's a radical move for Ontario, where rural daycare fees aren't cheap, either. But it would be life-changing for families — especially those with two more kids who aren't in school yet.

Subsidizing child care is an expensive line item for any government. But the fact is, many families in Alberta rely on two salaries. And if child care is unaffordable, who loses out? Largely mothers, who bear the brunt of family duties. On the flip side, mothers working outside of the home have been increasingly important to the health of our economy over the past several decades.

The government of Alberta's affordable child care pilot program is a good start. They announced back in December that they'd be expanding their \$25/day child care initiative to 100 centres across the province from 22.

And Thursday's bilateral announcement is encouraging, too. Child care shouldn't just be for privileged people like me and Jesse — folks who can afford \$1,000 a month. If we're committed to equality, if we're committed to women working outside the home, and if we're committed to families, affordable child care should be for everyone.

-reprinted from Edmonton Journal

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