

# The proactive class: How cities can help on the child-care front

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**Author:** Anderssen, Erin & Pearce, Tralee

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## AVAILABILITY

## EXCERPTS

This is the third in a Globe six-part series about building a better daycare system in Canada that examines just who is watching the kids, across the country and around the world. Join the conversation on Twitter: follow @globelife and use the hashtag #globedaycare

As it happens, the creative class has babies, too.

In 2004, when he published his bestselling *The Rise of the Creative Class*, University of Toronto urban scholar Richard Florida says that cities were neglecting talented young professionals – couples like Gillian and Chris Quigley, cosmopolitan twentysomethings who arrived a few years ago from London, keen to live in the heart of Vancouver.

But today, the Quigleys fall into a different demographic, one less focused on the artsy lofts and flashy nightlife that Prof. Florida's converts urged cities to build: They have started a family.

Now on parental leave from her job with a mining company, Ms. Quigley, 32, has discovered that downtown living has a gaping hole. In three months, she goes back to work, and she can't find child care for her daughter, Isla. Five months pregnant when she applied to the nonprofit centre near her office (as well as three others), she finds she is still far down the waiting list.

Vancouver and its suburbs simply don't have enough care for a burgeoning population. The shortage – along with some of the highest fees in the country – has sparked a campaign (led by child-care advocates and early childhood educators) for \$10-a-day care. The plan is patterned after the widely admired public program in Quebec, which is universal, heavily subsidized and increasingly reliant on centres staffed by trained early childhood educators.

B.C. Premier Christy Clark is no fan of the Quebec model, where everyone is equally supported. "I don't think it's fair," she says, "people who can afford it can find child care." Still, she concedes in a Globe interview that those who can't find affordable care might well include the middle class, "the ignored piece across the country." And that it's "important we do more for people at the lower end."

Whatever their incomes, eight in 10 Canadians are now urban dwellers (for B.C. and Ontario, the figure tops 86 per cent). The essential role of cities is often overlooked, even though the rapidly rising tension where child-care is the most expensive and in the shortest supply will only grow more urgent.

In fact, cities around the world "built without thinking about the fact that people age and then they form families, and then they have kids – and now what?" says Mildred Warner, a Cornell University specialist in multigenerational urban planning. "It was a false moment to have thought we could only focus on the worker [separate] from his family ... Why would you build a community that forced families to leave? This is the heart of your economy – don't chase them away."

Prof. Florida argues that this was never his intent; his theory, he says, argued for a "federation of neighbourhoods" that included families – a point made more clearly in a sequel – *Who's Your City?* – written a year later. Child care was always an "imperative," he says via e-mail. "The reason it is getting more salience now is there are more young families in cities who don't want to give up urban living for the suburbs. They are no longer willing to make the tradeoff."

Nor can cities afford to lose them. Research shows that families contribute more to the local economy than either singles or seniors. Last year, a Michigan State University study of 233 U.S. cities found that even in places that rate highly on measures promoted by Prof. Florida (on such factors as higher education and diversity), married adults with kids and high-school graduation rates had the most significant economic impact. And what do these big-spending families need? Good schools, eventually. But also affordable, accessible high-quality daycare.

In fact, European experience suggests that child care is an essential service and cities may be in the best position to deliver it – with proper funding from higher levels of government. For example, Sweden's top-ranked programs are managed at the municipal level, where it is easier to monitor demand and to oversee quality.

In Canada, only Ontario mandates that municipalities play a role, which includes providing some of the financing and managing the overall

budget, as well as the option of running daycares themselves.

About half of Ontario's cities do and, despite persistent shortages, Toronto has taken a lead, spending more money than the province requires.

But elsewhere in the country, "it's just not on the radar of most municipal officials," says Martha Friendly, executive director of the Toronto-based Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

Cities rely on provinces for funding, so money is a big issue, even if Cornell's Prof. Warner sees "a new economic-development opportunity that we have missed out on because we don't focus on child care." Without incentives or regulations, expanding in big cities is difficult. The price of land and rental space tends to price child care out of high-traffic areas. It is costly to make commercial space child-friendly, and companies haven't leaped to help deliver care to their employees.

The best facilities are built from the ground up, something cities have started to realize. Vancouver councillor Andrea Reimer says the city has created half of its licensed group spaces by giving incentives to developers who include a daycare in their design plan. For example, the 42-storey Shaw Tower has, as well as offices and condos, a regulated, non-profit child-care centre.

Nearby New Westminster has adopted similar measures, loosening regulations for centres in apartment buildings, and financing child-care grants through parking fees.

In California, meanwhile, municipalities have planned child-care centres around transit expansions. An added environmental benefit: Parents with convenient child care are more likely to use public transit.

But there is only so much cities can do without additional money. And as Ms Reimer points out, "the easy part is building centres" – operating them, and doing it well, is more costly, and complicated.

For now, though, spaces are the big push: In May, Vancouver announced it was using a \$5-million budget surplus to create 500 more of them. Ms. Reimer says that growing at this rate – about 5 per cent for every three-year council term – Vancouver's supply will catch up with demand some time in the next century.

That leaves Ms. Quigley in search-mode.

Her frustration has led her to contact the city, call the Premier's office and meet with her member of the legislature this month. How much good it will do, she can't say. But she is unwilling to pack up and move just to find care.

"I want Isla to grow up in an urban environment, with a mix of people and cultural events."

Music to Prof. Florida's ears.

## THE CHILD-CARE SITUATION IN CANADA'S MAJOR CITIES

**OTTAWA:** The nation's capital is one of the few cities to have a central registration list for child-care centres, although how well it works has been the subject of debate. Some centres still use their own lists, and registered families aren't identified by how quickly they need care, a problem the city hopes to ease with a new system. There are 10,290 families on the list. Fees vary, but the daily cost for city-operated care is \$69 for an infant, \$56 for a toddler and \$40 for a preschooler. Fees for privately operated centres and unlicensed care can be much higher. "Families still feel very isolated," says Kim Hiscott, executive director of the downtown Andrew Fleck Child Care Services.

**CALGARY:** The municipal government doesn't track wait lists, or even have a handle on the range of fees being charged. The University of Calgary Child Care Centre has 370 children waiting, while the list for a coveted spot at one of three local YMCA centres can stretch longer than two years, location depending. The Y charges a flat rate of \$925 a month for care, although online reports by parents put overall city daycare costs between \$1,000 and \$1,500. At for-profit centres, fees can be even higher – approaching \$1,800 a month for a toddler, and more for an infant. Margaret Ferriss, director of the YMCA's Eau Claire centre, says demand in Calgary is highest for infant care, up to 19 months of age, and for school-aged kids. "They fill up pretty fast and there aren't a lot of spaces."

**WINNIPEG:** Manitoba is one of three provinces to set maximum fees, so Winnipeg parents lucky enough to get one of the provincially funded spots pay the lowest fees, after Quebec: \$30 a day for infants, \$20 for a preschooler and less than half of that for school-aged care. (Licensed home-based care is slightly cheaper.) But the supply is short: There are currently 6,510 city families needing a regulated spot right now, and the list is growing. At least the city can plan for demand, thanks to Manitoba's centralized online waiting list. Still, getting a spot doesn't guarantee children can keep it as they age. "Parents take a deep breath when they get that space and think their worries are over, and they're not," says Pat Wedge, executive director of the Manitoba Child Care Association. "Parents actually struggle with child care right through to age 12."

**VANCOUVER:** Vancouver has some of the highest rates in the country – and they are rising. Today, according to Westcoast Child Care Resources, the average monthly fee for a toddler is just under \$1,200. (More for an infant, around \$820 for a preschooler.) But many parents pay much more. For poor families, the maximum subsidy for a toddler space is only \$635 – which means they still have come up with, on average, another \$560. Even those who can afford it have a hard time getting spaces in their neighbourhoods – wait lists can be as long as three years.

**TORONTO:** The city earns kudos from advocates for its investment in child care, but even so, Toronto has only enough regulated spaces for about 20 per cent of children under 9. It also has enough funding for only 28 per cent of its low-income children. As of July, there were nearly 19,000 low-income families on the list for a subsidized spot. Otherwise, the price is hefty: between \$62 and \$95 a day for an infant, and \$36 and \$65 for a toddler.

**Related link:** The daycare project <sup>[2]</sup>

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

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