

Desperate parents forced into 'grey market' of unlicensed daycare ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

This is the fourth 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 @globelifeand use the hashtag #globedaycare

A shortage of government-regulated space is among Canada's most pressing child-care problems.

Across the country, families are forced to rely on the "grey market" – leaving their children with caregivers who may not even have first-aid training, paying whatever is asked, and hoping for the best.

Too often, what results is just the opposite. In July, a two-year-old girl died in an unlicensed daycare in Vaughan, Ont., that had 27 children when allowed only five. In May, a home daycare operator in Coquitlam, B.C., was sentenced to 18 months in jail after an 11-month-old boy, left in a car seat, strangled to death in the straps. He was one of six children in the woman's care when she should have had just two.

Last December, an Ottawa jury recommended that a registry of unlicensed homes be created after an inquest heard how two-year-old Jeremie Audette drowned in a backyard pool during a "play date" for 31 children arranged by five caregivers.

How many families rely on informal care – the kind not subject to safety standards of provincial inspections – isn't clear. But Canada only has enough regulated centre-based spots for about one-fifth of children under the age of five. Martha Friendly, executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit in Toronto, says "based on all we know, most kids with employed or studying mothers are in some kind of unregulated child care." In 2004, an Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study estimated the figure was more than half – "perhaps 60 per cent."

With the vast majority of mothers now working outside the home and waiting lists for public care and government subsidies growing ever longer, parents have few choices, says B.C. child-care expert Jane Beach. "Even programs you can't imagine anyone would use, when the government tries to shut them down, parents are so desperate, they rally behind the care provider."

When authorities in New Brunswick cracked down on an unlicensed home daycare outside Moncton a few months ago, they were enforcing the only safety regulation on the books for such operations: how many children they can accept.

Someone must have lodged a complaint. Even so, parents weren't grateful. They were irate at suddenly being stuck for child care in a community that already had long waiting lists.

"We understand where the ratio comes from – you don't want to have 25 kids in a house," says Marie Haché, a mother of two in Dieppe, the rapidly expanding twin city of Moncton where the daycare was located. "But all the parents were satisfied with the service."

Caregivers with more than five children must cut their extra charges loose or face closure, so Ms. Haché, a dietician, was given 10 days to find somewhere else.

There are no doubt many excellent unlicensed caregivers, but aside from word of mouth, parents have no way to identify them. Even when they do their best due diligence, says Alain Audette, Jeremie's father, "You don't really know who is looking after your kids."

Parents also tend to be poor judges of quality. Canadian research has shown that they can be swayed if a daycare's waiting room is clean, or its meals are nutritious or simply if their child seems happy. Even in licensed facilities, a 2012 Quebec study found that parents knew little about daily activities or the level of staff training.

But if parents don't know what is going on after they kiss their children goodbye, who does? The answer isn't always reassuring – even for care that is regulated. Inspections focus on minimum health and safety standards, not how children actually spend their day. For example, reports by auditors-general have criticized Manitoba, Quebec and the Northwest Territories for how often inspections happen, and for poor followup when problems are noted.

Here and abroad, the highest marks for quality go to care that is delivered at a centre – particularly one that is non-profit, with all resources invested into the program, and a staff trained in early childhood education (ECE), following a curriculum. These centres often have parent-led boards of directors and can become natural places for families to congregate.

Trained ECEs don't "plop children in front of the television," says Eduarda Sousa, executive director of the Association of Early Childhood Educators in Ontario.

In a high-quality centre, parents shouldn't see their kids doing pre-cut art projects, or fill-in-the-blank worksheets, explains Kerry McCuaig, a researcher at the University of Toronto's Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development. Learning happens through self-directed play at activity centres. "Even young children can take in very complex ideas and concepts, provided it's grounded in their own experience," she says.

Playing with toys in water, with gentle input from an educator, teaches children about volume and stability, she adds, knowledge that school can build on later. This free-range play also boosts emotional and social skills, because children have to co-operate – an important lesson, considering Canada's trend toward smaller families.

But to expand regulated child care, Canada would have to overcome its current shortage of certified educators – a problem compounded by their low pay and high turnover.

In her hunt for new daycare spots, Ms. Haché says she tried 15 licensed centres in Dieppe and Moncton, only to find the wait too long or the cost too high. Next, seeking decent unlicensed care, she visited four homes before finding one that followed the ratio. But "the basement smelled like something was dead – I wouldn't even leave my dog there," she says.

Finally, a friend recommended someone who now looks after her children at home. "Not ideal," she says, but the best she can do – a too-common refrain.

Related link: The daycare project ^[2]

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