

Ontario government loosens child-care rules, raising safety concerns ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The government is easing daycare age ratios for the province's youngest children — loosening restrictions that were introduced five years ago after a number of baby deaths.

The move raised alarms among child-care advocates as well as the opposition at Queen's Park, who say kids' safety is at stake.

"Any time you water down the ratios of children — and particularly toddlers, who need a lot of attention — you risk putting kids in a situation where they may not have the amount of adult supervision that they require," said NDP Leader Andrea Horwath.

"Let's not forget — we've had some horrifying situations happen in our province where private daycare providers that were not licensed were putting kids at risk, and where children actually died," she said.

"That should not be happening in our province and we should not be watering down any regulation that has to do with the safety of the most vulnerable amongst us, which is our children."

Under the Restoring Ontario's Competitiveness Act, the province plans to allow a home child-care operator to supervise three children under age 2 — up from the current two.

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"It feels like it's going in exactly the opposite direction than we should be going, as more and more people need child care and need to rely on the rules to keep kids safe," she said.

Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care said the sector is scrambling to understand the impact.

"They are deregulating. They are trying to do child care on the cheap," Ferns said. "They put it in this huge omnibus bill on the last day. It's cut and run."

Ferns was particularly alarmed about changes that would allow two caregivers to look after six babies, six other children as well as their own kids.

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Child-care expert Martha Friendly called the proposed changes "disgusting."

"Am I surprised? I am shocked," she said. "This is making regulated care less safe. No other government in Ontario has gutted child-care regulations in this way."

In a memo to operators, Education Minister Lisa Thompson said "the people of Ontario gave our government a clear mandate to make life easier for families all across this province.

"... I believe that a strong child care and early years system plays a key role in helping families raise their children. Quality programs allow parents to pursue their career goals while simultaneously giving their children benefits to help them better prepare for school and for life."

She said the changes will cut red tape, improve quality, and also help families better afford child care and give them more options.

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Thursday's announcement comes on the heels of the Ford government's move last summer to lift limits on for-profit child care.

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