

B.C. family wins child care lottery, another 'stuck in the middle' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Susan Tran from Vancouver and Edith MacHattie from Port Moody are like many Metro Vancouver middle class parents. Both are married with multiple children, and both they and their spouses are juggling full-time jobs.

"If we don't follow a schedule, there's no way I'm going to survive," Tran says, describing her five-year-old son Jack and three-year-old twins Max and Charlie as "high energy."

"It takes a ton of energy every single day," MacHattie echoes, adding that her four-year-old daughter Aurora is "interested in everything, and wants to do it herself," while 19-month-old Theo is "a ray of sunshine."

While both Tran and MacHattie make the daily afternoon drive home from daycare around 4 or 4:30 p.m. with backpacks stowed in the back, their children supplied with snacks and safely strapped in, their monthly child care bills couldn't be more different.

"We have two kids in daycare and we pay \$360 a month," MacHattie and her wife Heather Kelley tell me at their dining room table. "We completely won the lottery."

But Susan Tran and her husband, Jason Lyle, say they won't feel like jackpot winners until their eldest Jack starts kindergarten in East Vancouver in the fall.

Coughing up the cash for all three for full-time daycare at the non-profit Kitsilano Area Child Care Society, they say, is nothing short of painful.

"We pay just under \$4000 a month," Lyle says, revealing the precise figure as \$3,950.

"When you say that number," I ask them, "Do you want to laugh? Do you want to cry?"

"No," says Tran, matter-of-fact. "It makes you ill."

'I just want to tear up'

Over in Port Moody, MacHattie and Kelley felt the same way as the Lyles, until one morning last fall, when they learned their daycare, The Centre For Child Development in Surrey, had been chosen as a prototype site for \$10-a-day daycare, and that by chance, Aurora and Theo would end up with two out of 2,500 coveted spots in the province.

"I just want to tear up every time I hear that (number)," MacHattie says.

Before the drop in childcare prices, MacHattie, an occupational therapist, and Kelley, a secondary school teacher, weren't saving anything and say they had even been forced to dip into their savings.

Now they're paying off student loans, starting college funds for their kids and can afford to go out to dinner as a family.

"It just opens up a whole bunch of other possibilities," Kelley says.

Just this month, B.C.'s NDP government announced an additional \$300 million in new funding for childcare initiatives, bringing its total investment over four years to \$1.3 billion.

That includes the Child Care Fee Reduction Initiative where enrolled providers pass along savings of up to \$350 per month per child, and the Affordable Child Care Benefit (link 2), which helps families offset the cost of childcare, depending on their income.

The latter is capped at \$111,000 which means Tran and Lyle don't qualify.

"We're just middle class and we just get stuck in the middle," Tran says.

After Jack, Max, and Charlie tire themselves out on their front yard swing set, Lyle – who co-owns a family-run construction business – explains how he and Tran remortgaged the house, and took out a small portion loan to try to subsidize some of their childcare costs.

"It's just kind of scary that two professionals in Vancouver, who make as much money as we do, struggle as hard as we have to in this city," he says.

"Is it getting better?" I ask. "No," Tran says.

Heading for universal daycare?

Which is why MacHattie and Kelley call the NDP government's child care investment a "first step" for all B.C. families and say they hope the \$10-a-day program will soon be scaled up.

"Do it as quickly as you can," MacHattie says. "Because the need is out there."

While the NDP ran on a pledge to make \$10-a-day universal daycare a reality, officials haven't yet committed to continuing the pilot, which is funded through a \$60 million agreement with Ottawa, and set to run through March 2020.

Tran and Lyle question the fairness of the prototype approach, which benefits all families at the 53 selected centres, not just those who've demonstrated financial need.

"Maybe if they were able to cut [fees] by 50 per cent..." Lyle says. "Maybe than rather doing the spot testing, they could do something that applied to everybody."

Tran also raises the tricky question of where the money to pay for universal care would come from, though despite their very different daycare bills, both families seem to agree, when it comes to childcare, the status quo is simply unsustainable.

Tran also has some advice for new parents in Metro Vancouver:

"I would say space [the kids] out a little bit more!" she laughs. She's dead serious.

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