

Child care system not meeting needs of Canadian families: study

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Study highlights needs for universal, affordable child care, say social policy researchers

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EXCERPTS

From frantic races against the clock to juggling their kids among friends and relatives, a lack of reliable child care for Canadian families continues to highlight the need for universal, affordable, quality child care, says a University of Alberta researcher.

A new study of 109 Alberta mothers, titled *Producing the Patchwork* shows the “messiness of the day-to-day organization of child care” Canadian families deal with on a constant basis, said U of A social policy expert Rhonda Breitreuz.

“Our child care policies in Canada are lagging behind the needs of families. We’ve got a largely unregulated system that creates stress, chaos and unsustainable routines for families with young children,” said Breitreuz, who was the lead researcher on the study.

According to one study, nearly two-thirds of Canadian children are in unregulated--not accredited or monitored--child care, she said.

Patchwork

Breitreuz’s research, which included focus groups with rural and urban-based moms from across the province, found that families are piecing together care for their kids in several ways.

Twenty per cent got by with no formal or informal child care at all, by having one parent stay home full-time or by juggling shiftwork so that both parents weren’t working at the same time. Another 21 per cent used one type of child care, usually accredited daycare. The remaining 59 per cent relied on a mix, including using friends or relatives as babysitters, daycare, dayhomes or even cutting back on their employment.

Most of the arrangements posed challenges, the women interviewed for the study noted, including working around misaligned bus schedules, multiple drop-offs of kids, sudden sickness, inflexible working hours and daycare late fees of a dollar per minute.

“There is a kind of juggling act that I do to get everybody where they need to be, and piece my work together with my jigsaw puzzle of who’s got them this day and who’s picking them up,” one mother told researchers.

Another told how she and her spouse struggle to deal with almost daily changes.

“Both my husband and I don’t have predictable jobs. Sometimes one of us calls the other up 10 minutes before it’s time to go and says, ‘This happened and I can’t leave right now.’ So, we’re looking for some help, you know, two to three days consistently every week that we can have someone pick up our school-age son and get him home. It’s not sustainable right now...”

Such constant upheaval isn’t stressful just for parents, Breitreuz said.

“Chaos is not good for children.”

More sustainable family life

The study also revealed that women shouldered most of the load for planning child care, which could affect their employment, Breitreuz noted.

“Women are doing much of the organization of care and also trying to be employed. There’s a lack of policy support for families, and sacrificing maternal employment may be the tradeoff. Women reduce their workload, or don’t take a promotion, or take jobs rather than careers, to address child care gaps.”

Parents in the study who used a ‘daycare-plus model’—one which used regulated child care facilities and occasional other sources of care—seemed to have the most stability, suggesting that Canada needs universal, regulated daycare, Breitreuz noted.

“In a daycare-plus model, regulated, centre-based child care available during the day for all children who need it, would be the cornerstone

of child care services. Additional care needs could be met through other forms of child care around the edges of the system, including supports for children with special needs or alternative care for parents who work non-standard hours,” she said.

“We need regulated child care to make family life more sustainable.”

Most provinces in Canada lag behind Quebec and other countries like Denmark that already provide a universal child care system, she noted.

“Child care is not an entitlement in Canada like elementary and secondary education is; there is no guarantee of a child care space,” she noted.

Across Canada, there is space for one in four preschoolers in regulated facilities, but it’s inconsistent, ranging from 55 per cent access in Quebec to less than 15 per cent in Saskatchewan. Alberta has space for one in five preschoolers, Breitkreuz said.

She believes the lack of a universal system can put some children at a disadvantage, noting that studies show at-risk kids tend to do better behaviourally and socially in regulated child care settings.

“Equitable access to regulated child care helps children have better opportunities in life.

“If we treated education the way we treat child care, it would be that some kids attend school and some kids wouldn’t, and that creates an uneven playing field. Some kids would get an excellent education and some would get a poor education. That is what’s happening with child care,” she said.

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