

Mom's the word: Patching together child care requires skills of a project manager ^[1]

'Flexibility on the part of the mother is central' to making plan work, says U of A study

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Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 26 Jul 2019

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Behind every complicated patchwork of decisions and research in a corporate undertaking is a project manager. And behind every complicated series of negotiations behind a household's childcare arrangements is a mom.

A new study from the University of Alberta says mothers are primarily responsible for the daily struggles involved in drawing up plans — and backup plans — for a household's child-care needs.

"It is like being a project manager," Rhonda Breitreuz, a human ecology professor at the University of Alberta, said Friday to CBC Radio's Edmonton AM.

"The work required in managing the family calendar is intense. And it never goes away and you're doing that on top of doing childcare and all kinds of other paid and unpaid work."

Between 2012 and 2017, researchers conducted focus groups with 109 Albertans. The participants, recruited through posters, email and word-of-mouth, were all mothers except for one dad who attended with his girlfriend, says the study *Producing the patchwork: the hidden work of mothers in organizing child care*, published last month in the *Journal of Family Studies*.

"It was mothers that responded to our call ... and I think that's indicative of some of the issues that we found in our study," Breitreuz said.

"When we think about childcare, we often think about who's taking care of the kids in the here and now. ... But another important part of childcare is planning it — finding the childcare, managing the childcare, sustaining it. And that work is done primarily by mothers."

'There are options and yet there aren't'

Researchers learned that the longstanding factors in finding childcare, such as cost, quality, availability, location and transportation, are exacerbated by issues such as non-standard employment with irregular hours, needs for part-time care, long waiting lists or spaces that aren't the right "fit" for the child.

More than 70 per cent of families using non-parental care were patching together multiple arrangements, such as daycare plus babysitter or grandparents plus friends.

"There are options and yet there aren't options," Breitreuz said.

"There is a substantial shortage throughout the province. And in addition to finding a spot, you have to find a spot that fits for your family — the age of the kids, the location, a spot that's affordable. If you work shifts then formal kinds of childcare probably won't work for you."

Once arrangements in place, moms next handled the "jigsaw puzzle" of drop-offs, pickups and emergency backup plans for the times when work and family responsibilities came into conflict.

"A disproportionate number of accommodations are made by mothers of preschool children in order to maintain the family routine," the study states. "To make these accommodations, flexibility on the part of the mother was central: flexibility in her schedule, in her work and in her ability to problem-solve."

The boomerang of that reality, the report adds, is the impact on a mother's short- and long-term ability to succeed and progress in the workplace.

Breitreuz said the study reaches the disheartening conclusion that many problems experienced by working parents 25 years ago still exist today.

Government policy is said to be key in improving the situation from the existing "less-than-optimal array of options" and the study urges provincial governments to prioritize policies to implement regulated, universal child care.

She is hopeful that the current pilot project in Alberta, in which 122 centres are offering \$25 per day care, will continue even though the program has been targeted by the United Conservative Party to end after the pilot projects are completed.

"Parenting is 168 hours a week," she said. "It is all the time and parents need support, especially parents of little kids.

"Why wouldn't we do everything we can to support them to ensure that we have good outcomes for those kids and those families."

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