

# Early childhood educators frustrated with Halifax transit drivers

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'I get stressed out every time we need to take the bus' says child care worker

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## EXCERPTS

Early childhood educator Julianne Harnish says she was shocked to see a near-empty bus drive right past her stop as she and other staff waited with roughly 20 youngsters.

And it's not the first problem she's encountered.

She's been told there isn't enough room on the bus and children in her care have fallen off seats when drivers pull away as soon as they get on.

"I get stressed out every time we need to take the bus because I never know what kind of service it's going to be," said Harnish, who works at A Tiny Lab in Halifax, working with children between the ages of three and five.

In the last two weeks alone, Harnish has filed two complaints with Halifax Transit.

This comes days after Halifax regional council passed a pilot project that allows young people 12 and under to ride transit for free, including the ferry and other services like Access-A-Bus.

The six-month pilot will begin on Sept. 30 and run until March 31, 2020.

### 'There was plenty of space'

Harnish said the first incident this month happened on Sept. 5.

A driver tried to refuse service to Harnish, two other adults and 20 children, claiming there weren't enough seats on the bus — but there were 27 open spots.

"We could clearly see that there was plenty of space on the bus and we basically just told him that this wasn't OK, that children are members of the public, that they deserve to be able to use public transit," she said.

"And he continued to attempt to deny us service."

The second incident happened on Tuesday, when a bus driver began driving away from the stop before all the children were seated.

When Harnish tried to follow up with the driver about her safety concerns as they were getting off the bus, she said the driver repeatedly told her, 'Don't make a big deal about it,' and to get off the bus, threatening to drive away if she didn't exit.

But she said these experiences aren't anything new — and they aren't just happening to her.

Early childhood educators can't use private vehicles to transport children and often can't afford to hire Stock Transportation for field trips, leaving public transit as their only option.

After her experience on Sept. 5, Harnish said she made a post in a Facebook group for early childhood educators in the province.

Dozens of replies began flooding in, with other educators sharing similar experiences and voicing their frustration that despite repeated complaints to the municipality, nothing has changed.

"A lot of people wrote back saying things like, 'We don't even use public transit anymore because of this issue,'" Harnish said.

Lindsay Awalt, who works at Sherwood Park Preschool in Halifax, said earlier this week, a driver pulled away from a stop before all the young children were seated.

She said they've had kids fall out of their seats a few times and once, she fell with a child onto what was luckily an empty seat.

"I just wish that they would understand too that these kids want to go out. The highlight of their day is going on the bus," Awalt said.

The preschool where she works also has a partnership with Shannex and twice a month goes to a nursing home to interact with seniors.

"We're going above and beyond here to reach out to our community and going out of our way to integrate the children in our community," she said.

"And then the bus driver just pulls away and it's like, what impression does that leave on the children?"

### **Safety decisions up to driver**

Erin DiCarlo, senior communications advisor for the municipality, said there is no limit to how many children can actually board the bus at one time.

DiCarlo also said she can't comment on specific incidents.

"Safety being the primary topic, if the driver feels that it isn't safe to allow those passengers on to the bus, for various reasons, it would be at their discretion to refuse service," she said.

"Operators may elect not to allow small children to stand in the aisles if they feel like it may create a safety concern and in these cases, discretion is used by the operator."

DiCarlo said complaints that come in through 311 are redirected to transit operations for review.

She said if a problem is identified, corrective action is taken, which can include anything from coaching to progressive discipline.

### **'They don't enjoy children on the bus'**

Harnish said she received a reply to her complaint for the Sept. 5 incident, saying that "the matter has been addressed with the bus operator in question."

She said she's happy to hear they dealt with the driver, but she wants to see Halifax Transit address the ongoing wider problems.

"There seems to be this kind of systemic issue among the Halifax Transit drivers where they don't enjoy children being on the bus," said Harnish.

**Region:** Nova Scotia <sup>[3]</sup>

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**Source URL (modified on 25 Sep 2019):** <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/19/09/early-childhood-educators-frustrated-halifax-transit-drivers>

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