

Parents feel squeezed by child-care costs: Here's where they want help^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Steve, 32, knows all about the struggle to find affordable, high-quality child care.

The new father lives in Ottawa with his wife and 11-month-old son. Until recently, both of them worked full time, Steve in marketing and his wife in child care. (Global News has agreed to withhold the family's last name to protect anonymity.)

Things drastically changed when Steve's wife had to leave her job because they couldn't afford daycare, and the irony of the situation isn't lost on the young parents.

"Child care in Ontario is so expensive ... with how little she makes teaching 10 other kids, it made more sense for her to stay home with our son than to go back to work," Steve told Global News.

It would have cost the young couple more to pay for daycare while earning dual incomes than it did for Steve's wife to remain on maternity leave.

Steve works a typical Monday-to-Friday workweek, but his wife had shifts that changed all the time. For this reason, he says their "ideal" child-care program would prioritize flexible hours.

"Our ideal program would have hours that reflect a typical workday [and] costs that would allow the daycare workers to earn a decent wage."

Unfortunately, Steve's experience isn't the exception — for most Canadian parents, it's the rule.

Lindsay Williams and her partner live in Toronto with their two kids, aged five and 10 months. She's currently on maternity leave but she worries what will happen when she needs to go back to work soon.

She's started the daycare search, but it's tough to find somewhere that checks all of her boxes.

"We both work full time [so] we need an extended day spot for my five-year-old and an infant spot for my 10-month-old. We need care Monday to Friday," she told Global News.

"Preferably, we're looking for care close to our home or close to my work ... [and] we're looking for a clean, safe environment with a registered early childhood educator. We're [also] looking for centre-based care with play-based learning."

Williams placed her first child on daycare wait lists when she was pregnant, but she still had to wait 17 months before securing a spot.

"I had to harass daycare [centres] by calling them non-stop," she said. When she finally found a spot, she was forced to end her maternity leave two months early in order to qualify for the centre.

Williams took the spot because it was the only one she could find, but the service has been less than ideal.

"The timing of daycare for my son has always been a struggle with my work hours ... I've had to pay people to take him to daycare or pick him up on top of paying the daycare fees," she said.

The "ridiculously high" cost of care has also been a struggle for Williams and her husband.

"To send both our sons to daycare — if we find a spot — we calculated that we would be paying \$2,600 a month. At that point, is it even worth me going back to work?" Williams said.

"We would struggle financially on my partner's earnings as he's a contractor ... his work is up and down and his hours vary. I would lose my career — something I worked so hard for — my paycheque, my adult interaction."

Williams is looking for affordability and accessibility, but it's also important that her children are well taken care of.

"We're leaving our sons with strangers for the majority of the day," she said.

About 60 per cent of Canadian children under the age of six received some form of child care from January to March 2019, a recent Statistics Canada survey found. That's nearly 1.4 million children in just three months.

According to child-care experts, the care services available aren't good enough to handle this many children across the country. There's a lack of options, and when care is available, it's typically a massive monthly expense.

To improve child care for Canadian families, experts say there needs to be more of a focus on three main principles: making child care affordable, accessible and high quality.

Affordability is most important

Unfortunately, the high cost of care is a major issue for parents, and the price tag varies widely across the country.

According to Statistics Canada, the average monthly cost of full-time care in 2011 ranged from \$152 in Quebec to \$677 in Ontario, and that's not even 10 years ago.

Sharon Gregson, a spokesperson for the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC, joined the fight for more affordable child care when she became a single mom of four children in the early 1990s.

"I needed affordable child care to go back to university [and] to work," she said.

She quickly realized good quality, affordable and accessible child-care centres were few and far between.

"There are a few basic tenets that are true of all quality child-care systems: they are affordable — or even free — for families, educators have good levels of education and are well-paid, and they're publicly funded."

High child-care costs can impact all aspects of how a family lives, Gregson said — from how they eat to the kinds of extracurricular activities they can access and everything in between.

"Care responsibilities are a huge barrier to women's economic equality," she said. "[Women] often have to make tough choices when it comes to working or caring for children ... this still disproportionately falls to women."

For Sarosi, it's critical to provide better child-care options so that women don't have to make these difficult sacrifices.

Accessibility is critical

Right now, finding daycare with flexible hours close to your home or work is an extremely difficult task.

Sarosi believes making child care in Canada more universal would be one way to make this process easier.

"This doesn't mean that in every municipality, the exact same program needs to be in place ... It means that everyone who wants child care has access to child care," she said.

"In municipalities, there are different needs. [Child care] has to be tailored to those specific needs."

For Morna Ballantyne, executive director of Child Care Now, making child care affordable and accessible can be made possible by creating a publicly owned and operated system.

"The current situation is that child care is really left to ... what we call 'the market,'" she said. "The child care that's available is available because individuals or organizations — it could be for-profit or not-for-profit, like a church — decide to set up a child-care service."

There are some government stipulations regarding how these businesses are allowed to run — like limits to how many children they're allowed to care for at once — but the service isn't publicly delivered or publicly funded, and that concerns Ballantyne.

"People set up shop in a variety of ways, and then parents have to go and find those services and pay money," she said. "Some parents will get some assistance from the government, depending on where they live, but the service itself isn't 100 per cent funded by the government."

Ballantyne believes this can lead to widely varied costs across the country and unregulated, inconsistent services.

"We have a situation now where there are lots of communities that are being under-served. When there's limited supply, it tends to be those with the highest income levels who are serviced," she said. "With a publicly managed system, we can manage the supply and demand."

High-quality care must be a priority

While affordability and accessibility are certainly necessary, Don Giesbrecht, CEO of the Canadian Child Care Federation, believes high-quality child care is equally as important.

"This isn't just about throwing money at [the problem]."

High-quality child care can be "really beneficial for young children in terms of their development," he said. "The first five years of [life] are the most important years in human development."

Research bears this out. According to a 2010 study, good-quality child care can have a positive impact on peer socialization, and it can help

prepare young kids for school.

Geisbrecht said high-quality childhood educators are needed to create strong curriculum and pedagogy for young children, but “recruiting and retaining” continues to be one of the long-standing issues in this sector.

This is due, in part, to low wages.

“It’s not just about compensation, but that is a primary motivator,” Giesbrecht said.

Ballantyne agrees.

“You want to make sure the caregivers are qualified ... that they’ve actually had training in early childhood education,” she said. “You also want to make sure that there’s not high staff turnover because we know that really impacts the quality of care.

“For all of that, you need to pay sufficiently high wages to attract people into the sector and to keep them there.”

Ultimately, it all comes back to funding.

“We want public funding, public management and planning ... so that these three things can happen simultaneously: the number of spaces can be expanded, the quality can be assured to be good and ... the fees are actually affordable,” said Ballantyne.

“You can’t do one without the other.”

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