

U of T's after-hours child care pilot project had a wait-list ^[1]

Author: Weikle, Brandie

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EXCERPTS

The University of Toronto has just completed a small pilot program to test interest in free weekend child care among students who have children up to age 12.

Held over two weekends last month and situated in the downtown campus's Robarts Library, the program offered space for 10 kids each day minded by licensed child care providers.

Spots for the youngest children — under the age of 2 1/2 — were booked up almost instantly, and the program was at capacity almost the entire time, with wait-lists for most sessions.

Of course this was the case.

Our country, especially its big cities, faces a child care crisis. Even putting your fetus on a wait-list for infant care in the early weeks of pregnancy is no longer enough to guarantee a spot at some child care centres. An Oxfam Canada report in May called on the federal government to create a universal child care program, citing costs as high as \$20,000 a year in Toronto.

Parents who are pursuing higher education are certainly not immune to these market conditions. In fact, they're all the more vulnerable to child care shortages, given not just limited income but their unique needs for flexible child care outside of standard business hours.

Francesca Dobbin, U of T's director of family programs and services, oversees all the available university-run child care on its three campuses as well as a host of services that help students find child care in their communities.

A survey conducted by the Robarts Library led to the opening of Robarts Family Study Space in March 2018, a comfy (and soundproof!) place where students and faculty who have children can study while their children 12 and under are occupied with toys and hang out on kiddie-sized furniture. "Once we established it was very well-utilized," said Dobbin.

"One of the things that became evident to us was that during crunch time around exam time most students who have small children probably will have child care arranged during the regular hours, but the reality is there isn't a lot availability of extended weekend or evening child care available in the community. And so it's really challenging for students to be able to eek out some additional study time when they don't have reliable support for their children on evenings and weekends."

That's what led to the weekend child care pilot, where care was provided in the already kid-friendly surround of the family study space.

Since 2003, the U of T has expanded its on-campus child care offerings by 32 per cent. It deserves credit for that.

Still, when you consider that there are 90,000 students on campus and a total of 303 child care spots across all three campuses, demand far outstrips supply. And that's actually a decent record for child care compared to many other post-secondary institutions.

Single parent Laura Fisher is working on a Master of Social Work at Acadia University in Wolfville, N.S. She also completed her undergrad studies in community development there, all while raising two kids, now ages 7 and 9. "Here we're in a child care desert," she said.

Two years ago she conducted a study about the struggles student parents face finding child care.

"A lot of students in the survey that I did expressed needing weekend or evening child care opportunities," said Fisher. While Acadia has no on-campus child care, institutions that do are often fighting for more flexibility and affordability for student parents, she said.

Jesse Carliner, the communications and user-services librarian for the Robarts Library, was closely involved in the U of T pilot program, and the creation of the family study space. He said student parents are "pretty invisible" on campus. "You don't know by looking around you which student is also caring for children, because for the most part you don't see them with their kids."

It's no surprise, then, that a survey conducted among student parents last summer found that "they miss feeling like part of a community and feeling seen," says Carliner. "So having this space that's dedicated just for them and that welcomes the whole person with the children that they're responsible for, I think has really been very meaningful."

Given women now outnumber men among those who graduate from university, and that older students now represent a growing portion of university populations, the need for this kind of inclusive and resourceful approach to on-campus child care is only going to get more critical.

The investment seems well worth it when you consider the established long-term benefits to children both from being in quality child care and from their parents accessing the opportunities afforded to them by advancing their education.

“I think in general it just speaks to the larger culture changing in academia to realize that there are students who are parents and they have needs that are different than others,” said Acadia’s Laura Fisher.

“It is about child care, but it’s also about a culture of welcome. It’s about recognizing that student parents are a demographic that exists and is growing.”

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