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Is it time for a child-care uprising in Ontario? [1]

Child care can be hard to find and cost tens of thousands of dollars a year. Advocates are hoping to turn it into a political priority — by harnessing the power of stories

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EXCERPTS

For Chetna Rach, finding child care in Toronto was a complicated and exhausting process. She tried to leave her abusive partner but discovered she couldn't look after her young daughter while also trying to find a job. Through a combination of luck, support, and skills, she ultimately found child care for her two children, got a City of Toronto subsidy, and left him for good in 2017.

Organizing the subsidy, she says, was a tedious and complex process, and finding two-child care spots — one of them for an infant — came about through what she calls a "perfect storm of coincidence." She was able to get a job and go off social assistance. "I can only imagine what it would have been like if I had been a newer immigrant or if my English hadn't have been so savvy, or even my administrative skills," she says. But now she worries that the subsidy she depends on will disappear as a result of the Doug Ford government's cuts to child-care funding. "When he got elected, I started crying," she says, adding that, without a subsidy, child care would take up more than two-thirds of her income.

For many Ontario parents like Rach, accessing affordable, high-quality child care is determined by luck, market forces, and a patchwork of policies. This is leading some advocates to ask whether it is time for a certain kind of uprising — one based not on statistics but on stories that highlight the shortcomings of the current system.

The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario has begun gathering child-care stories from ECEs and parents; they will eventually be released using the hashtag #childcareuprising. Brooke Richardson, the association's president, recommends that parents check out the AECEO's labour-rights petition, as well as provincewide communities of practice for ECEs and allies. The Ontario Coalition for Better Childcare has also created a group for parents to have their say on child care. "We want to change the conversation from what we have now, which is one of spaces and grants and licensing regulations to one of the human experience," says Carolyn Ferns, the public-policy and government-relations coordinator at the OCBCC.

The approach was inspired by Norway's Barnehageopprør ("kindergarten uprising"), a successful campaign to protect the country's universal early-childhood-care and education system. On January 15, the AECEO brought Norweigian early-child-care educator Kari Eide to speak to an audience of 200 people, half of them in Toronto and the other half online, about the movement.

In Norway, Eide explained, early-care settings are as regulated, available, and universal as public schools are in Canada (a common situation in European Union countries, which follow the progressive "Barcelona targets" for child-care accessibility). But, in 2018, thousands across Norway shared stories on social media with the hashtag #unjustifiable to highlight what they saw as growing flaws in the system. ECEs felt understaffed and helpless. Parents feared for their children's well-being. In face of public pressure, the government reaffirmed its commitment to quality early child care. For example, prior to 2018, Eide said, Norway did not have a statutory staffing norm — the movement helped secure legislation with explicit minimum ratios for each age group. The grassroots campaign, she said, had managed to make an incredibly complex issue feel personal.

Susan Prentice, a professor of sociology at the University of Manitoba, agrees that it's necessary to foster a shared sense of purpose. "The reason that countries like Norway, Sweden, and Finland have such terrific social programs and high levels of solidarity," she says, "is because people fought for it — it didn't just fall from the sky." Prentice, who has been researching child-care policy and social change for decades, says that Canadians have what we do because of a child-care movement that has been stubbornly pushing forward since the 1950s.

"But for a long time in North America, we've had a very weird imaginary line between things we think are public and things we think are private," says Prentice. Child care, then, is often seen as a personal matter — not a public-policy priority. She believes that we need to see a political and cultural shift, one that acknowledges that "children are something we all have a stake in. In a way, it's this notion that 'it takes a village.'"

Advocates say that the need for such a shift is becoming only more urgent here. There are piles of research outlining the various benefits of affordable, accessible early child care. Quebec's low-fee child-care program, for instance, in 2008 earned 47 per cent more than it cost, and,

that year, newly employed mothers contributed $5.1 billion to the province's GDP. Quality early care has been linked to positive learning and life outcomes. Yet the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives estimates that 44 per cent of non-school-aged Canadian children live in "child-care deserts," areas where there is only one available spot per three or more children.

And the child care that is available is expensive: according to a 2019 report from the CCPA, infant care in Toronto will run you $1,685 a month, or $20,220 a year (Mississauga and Kitchener come in just behind, at $1,490 a month). The median fee for a preschooler space in the province's capital is $1,150 a month, and in Brampton, Mississauga, Vaughan, Markham, London, Kitchener and Ottawa, it's around $1,000.

"The facts and figures have been there forever," says Richardson."Child care is not a political priority … how do we organize ourselves practically while also connecting with people in a way that is motivating to continue this work? The child-care uprising will be about connecting with each other as human beings."

Ingrid Anderson, communications representative from the Ministry of Education, told TVO.org in an email that "the government's child care plan for Ontario will help meet the needs of parents, caregivers and families across the province and make life easier for them," citing a reduction in red tape, more affordable care, and increased choice for families.

According to Ferns, however, the province is moving backwards: "We are fighting for the soul of what these programs are all about." The recent changes to Ontario child care have been "extremely chaotic," she says, adding that, next year, programs will likely be cut, more fees will be offloaded onto parents, and wait-lists will get even longer. "We need parents to be working alongside ECEs, academics, and researchers: all the people who know the benefit of child care."

Ferns believes that a national child-care system is not only possible, but critical for gender equity, labour rights, and a healthy future for children. A mother herself, she knows the struggle of parents across the country who can't afford care, can't find spots, or can't navigate the system. "This not a private crisis anymore," she says. "It's a national crisis."

Since Rach's experiences with the challenges and obstacles involved in finding child care, she's joined online moms' groups, gone to protests, and written her member of parliament urging the creation of better national policies. Privilege and luck, she says, shouldn't be deciding factors. If Ontario had a more robust child-care system she says, she "would have been able to leave this guy a lot earlier."

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