

Weighing the cost of childcare ^[1]

Stephanie Kirk had to leave the workforce to look after her kids because childcare is so expensive - and she isn't alone.

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EXCERPTS

Stephanie Kirk used to get up every morning and get ready for work as the regional manager for a financial company – a job she loved and was proud to do. Now, Kirk wakes up each morning to care for her kids because she can't afford childcare.

Kirk never imagined being a stay-at-home parent, but after she got married a second time, she was suddenly the matriarch of a blended family: two of her own kids, two of her husband's, and the two they had together. Her kids range in age from two to 15 years old.

"I want to be that successful woman that is bringing in a paycheque, but I'm forced to not be able to do that. You feel small and worthless and like you can't provide for your own family when I am more than willing and capable of doing so," Kirk said.

When Kirk went on maternity leave with her youngest kids, her company went bankrupt. She tried looking for another job, but she struggled to find childcare even so she could go to interviews.

In the end, no job would bring in enough money to offset her childcare costs and she decided she had to stay home with her kids. Kirk estimated she would have to budget a monthly minimum of \$800 to \$1,200 per child for full-time care, and would need childcare for at least four of her children. The cost calculated out to between \$38,400 and \$57,600 every year.

"There was physically no way I could go back to work," Kirk said.

Kirk's husband makes a good living, but with six children, the family has little money left over at the end of the month. On paper, the family makes too much for childcare subsidies, but they are left struggling to pay their bills.

If affordable childcare was readily available, allowing Kirk to return to work, she said their financial situation would be drastically different.

Kirk is not alone in her struggles to pay for childcare. The Gazette heard from dozens of mothers in many different situations who are struggling to find and pay for quality childcare that works for their family. Several mothers who found themselves unexpectedly single-parenting their children struggled to cover childcare costs and pay their monthly bills, even with a subsidy from the government. Some parents who work precarious hours struggle to find appropriate childcare for their kids and have resorted to paying for nannies, which eats a large portion of their family income.

Other parents have had to stay out of the workforce longer than they expected, like Kirk, because they can't make enough money through a job to pay for childcare.

Mothers described the costs as "astronomical." One mom told the Gazette the situation could get so desperate for some families that they rely on unregulated care.

Others said they tried to rely on family and friends for care but those circumstances weren't a long-term solution for their childcare problems.

Not just a St. Albert problem

Childcare costs vary greatly across Canada, but typically infant care is more expensive than preschool-aged care because of the low staff-to-child ratio required for infants.

In Edmonton, childcare costs rank in the middle of the pack, according to a 2018 study tracking childcare costs (Child care fees in Canada's big cities 2018 by Martha Friendly and David MacDonald at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives).

Edmonton's median monthly childcare costs come in at \$975 for infants, \$875 for toddlers and \$835 for preschool-aged kids.

Efforts by the former Alberta NDP government, with the help of federal funding, to address childcare costs through the implementation of a \$25-a-day pilot program saw limited success: Edmonton's childcare fees dropped by six per cent between 2017 and 2018 thanks to that program, but data since 2014 shows Edmonton's costs have still increased at nearly twice the rate of inflation.

Friendly, who has spent her career researching childcare and is now the founder and executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit based out of Toronto, said Alberta is not an outlier in childcare fees. The fees are high because the province has so many for-profit childcare centres along with low child-to-staff ratios, which drive up costs. Friendly added much of the cost of childcare goes to paying qualified staff a living wage, which eats up a good portion of the budget for childcare centres.

With the roll-out of \$25-a-day childcare centres in Alberta, costs dropped for some families. The program also helped ensure consistent quality daycare being delivered to Albertans. Through two phases, 122 locations were chosen for the pilot project and 7,276 spaces for children were created across the province. Two of the locations are in St. Albert, which provide 67 \$25-a-day spots for children in the city.

Both of the locations were part of the second phase of funding, which was slated to run until March 2021, but the future of \$25-a-day childcare is unknown beyond that date.

The YMCA Citadel Child Care centre in St. Albert is one of the two locations piloting the \$25-a-day program locally, and Annalise Yuzda, vice-president of Child Care for the YMCA of Northern Alberta, said the program and all the 18 other locations the YMCA has run as part of the pilot have been in high demand. Within a week of launching the pilot, all of their wait lists were full.

Low fees are one of the factors driving demand. Yuzda said it's not just people with low incomes who need affordable childcare, but middle income families struggle to afford it as well.

"It's those middle income people who have never been able to access subsidies, where both parents work, they mostly have two children and they struggle," Yuzda said.

"I can't tell you how many people cried when we were successful in obtaining this pilot project because they don't have to decide which bill they're going to pay this month and which they can push off the next month."

Yuzda said families are more relaxed if they know they can get good childcare at an affordable price.

Friendly said finding childcare across Canada comes down to luck.

"It's not that there is not any good childcare in Canada, because there is – but it's more serendipitous than anything else," Friendly said.

She said it could come down to a really great staff member at one childcare centre, or maybe a great workplace environment. In Canada, childcare is not systematically managed well enough to guarantee quality care country-wide, but rather the country implements childcare in a piecemeal way, she added.

Yuzda said one of the strengths of the childcare pilot in Alberta is the program guarantees quality care for families. At the YMCA location, they were able to hire family support workers to help families, rather than have executive directors try to support all the families coming into their childcare centres.

"This is where it doesn't just impact low-income families, because we have families at any point in their life that need support," Yuzda said.

The programs also ran the Getting Ready for Inclusion Today (GRIT) program, which supports children with special needs. Yuzda said they also were able to get the support of pedagogical partners through the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement to create a curriculum.

Yuzda said because of those measures in place, families were keeping their kids in daycare longer than they typically would.

"We were finding people aren't giving up their spaces. Kindergarten is not mandatory in Alberta and we're seeing in some instances that people aren't sending their children to kindergarten they're keeping them in a high-quality early learning program," Yuzda said.

Yuzda said the pilot project has been "totally a game-changer." If the program ends up being cancelled after the pilot runs its course, she said she would be sad for the families who would lose out. The vice-president said the program is valuable when it comes to early detection of issues, including those for childhood development and mental health, and helps keep kids out of poverty.

A report from Campaign 2000, released last month, showed one of the best ways Alberta can help lower child poverty is by providing affordable and accessible childcare. The report noted childcare can cost up to 67 per cent of a household's monthly income, "making it extremely difficult for a family to afford nutritious food, housing, education and other expenses."

Yuzda said investing in children when they are young pays off when it comes to prevention of problems later in life.

"Every child should have access to affordable, quality childcare no matter what income they make, because we all know that when you put resources into the early years you pay less later on in life when people start to have issues. So the prevention piece is huge."

Workforce impacts

The second pilot location in St. Albert is a Francophone location, the Centre D'Expérience Prescolaire which has space for 16 kids. As of last July, the centre had a wait list of 89 kids.

Gillian Anderson, president of the Fédération des Parents Francophone de l'Alberta (FPFA), which represents Francophone parents in Alberta and which helped set up the daycare centre, said the program is important for the community.

Anderson said in an English-speaking province, Francophones are in the minority, and it is important for children to start learning in French early on to help pass along language and culture. The Francophone program, like the YMCA program, also offers services to support parents and families to help provide high-quality childcare.

The president said childcare has become so expensive most families need two incomes to get by, but often most of one of the parents' salaries goes toward their child's fees.

"We're losing all these qualified people in the workforce because they can't afford to do it," Anderson said.

Anderson said when you have Francophone parents staying home, there are fewer Francophone parents in the workforce, including those who would be providing childcare. This contributes to a shortage of quality childcare workers, which then lowers the availability of quality childcare.

Yuzda described a similar cycle in English-speaking daycare centres.

But for both programs, despite their success and high demand, an uncertain future looms. Yuzda said that uncertainty is causing panic among parents and staff at these centres: staff are concerned that if the pilot project ends, parents who can no longer afford to work will keep their kids at home – and fewer kids in childcare centres means less demand for childcare workers. That could have economic impacts too, Yuzda said, as more people leave the workforce to care for their children.

A statement from Lauren Armstrong, press secretary for Alberta's Minister of Children's Services Rebecca Schultz, said as of right now the terms of the \$25-a-day childcare pilot have not changed and the 100 childcare centres taking part in the project's second phase – including both of the locations in St. Albert – will continue to be funded until March 2021.

"We are committed to working with all Early Learning and Childcare Centres to ensure the families most in need continue to be supported to access the workforce or pursue post-secondary education," Armstrong stated.

"We have begun negotiations on a new federal funding agreement, which we hope to conclude this month or early March. That process, along with reviewing the data from the \$25 a day pilot program, will help inform how we move forward with childcare in Alberta."

As the province considers the future of childcare, other regions of Canada and the world have seen some success in this area.

Pick up Wednesday's Gazette to read an exploration of how provinces like Quebec have tackled the childcare issues, how well those systems have worked and what impact it has had on families.

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