

Shift workers get short-shift when it comes to child-care. Here's how some families struggle to make it work ^[1]

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 13 Feb 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Like many Toronto-area youngsters, the evening routine for Kaila and Kree Phillips includes changing into pyjamas, brushing their teeth, and choosing a favourite bedtime story.

But for the Phillips sisters, weeknight dinners, homework and bedtime happen at Brampton's Collegeside Early Learning Centre where up to 12 children from 18 months to age 12 are cared for until 11:30 p.m.

"If this program didn't exist, I would have had to quit a career I love," says their mother Sabrina McElroy, 43, a single parent who works in baggage handling at Pearson International Airport and is training to become a commercial pilot.

Her daughters, ages 8 and 6, have been in the night-care program since they were babies and don't know anything different, McElroy adds. "They definitely get their homework done and have regular bedtime hours. It gives them consistency. It is good for them."

McElroy knows she is lucky.

About 1.5 million Canadian parents with young children - representing almost four in 10 families - work non-standard hours, defined as a schedule other than regular weekdays. And that number, which has been on the rise for a decade, is expected to increase, says a new report being released Thursday.

Yet, less than 2 per cent of regulated child-care centres across Canada offer care before 7 a.m. or after 6 p.m., according to the federally funded report. And most of those centres provide only slightly earlier opening or slightly later closing times. Care overnight or on weekends is "extremely rare," it says.

The report, headed by University of Guelph professor emerita Donna Lero, comes in the wake of last fall's Liberal election promise to ensure 10 per cent of all new child-care spaces are designed for parents who work overtime, late shifts or multiple jobs.

Ottawa is showing leadership by supporting these programs, says Lero, co-founder of the university's Centre for Families and Work and Well-being. "But it is up to provinces to enact the policies and framework to make them happen."

The report, funded a year ago, is part of Ottawa's 2017 "multilateral framework agreement" with the provinces to boost quality, accessibility, affordability, flexibility and inclusivity in early learning and child-care programs.

"We know family members - particularly grandparents - are relied on heavily to pick up the pieces," says Lero.

"But there are very limited options for those who don't have family nearby. And we have to be looking at what's best for kids as well as what's best to combine work and family," she adds. "It's not a simple fix."

Toronto-area parents already scramble to find - and afford - regular-hours child care, with only enough licensed spaces in centres to serve about one-third of kids under age 10. Annual fees top \$20,000 a year for an infant, the highest in the country.

Across the country, almost one-sixth of parents who work non-standard hours have regular evening or night shifts, according to the report, which used 2016-17 Statistics Canada data. But three-quarters have rotating shifts or irregular hours. And many may have little advance notice of their work hours.

These parents come from all walks of life, including highly educated professionals such as doctors, nurses and police officers, as well as low-skilled, minimum-wage retail and factory workers, the report says.

At a time when regular-hours child-care operators struggle to find and retain qualified staff, the report found that non-standard hours child-care services are even more difficult to sustain.

They are costlier to operate, have greater difficulty recruiting and retaining staff and are more administratively complex, especially for parents with less predictable schedules, the report says.

"Under the current system, it is not just challenging, but essentially impossible to address the unique, varied needs of the non-standard hours workforce in a meaningful way," it says.

As one researcher quoted in the report observed, "it is like trying to have dessert before the meat-and-potatoes part of the meal."

If Ottawa wants to boost child-care options for parents who work evenings, weekends and rotating shifts, the government needs to transform the country's current patchwork of daytime care into a planned, publicly funded system of affordable, quality programs, the report concludes.

The report's authors, who include University of Manitoba Sociology Professor Susan Prentice, Martha Friendly of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, and Brooke Richardson, a post-doctoral fellow at Brock University, found parents with non-standard work hours often rely on complex and unstable "packages" of child care.

These packages include parent "tag-teaming," relying on other family members, as well as regulated or unregulated child care.

Where families can find regulated child care, it often forms the backbone of a care "package," the report says.

The report, which includes data from interviews with parents who work non-standard hours, found mothers usually made career sacrifices to accommodate child-care responsibilities.

Examples include a nurse who shifted from full-time to a part-time casual position, mothers who changed occupations for a more predictable or flexible schedule, and some who put their career on hold altogether. Of the 20 families profiled in the report, 11 mothers had reduced or changed jobs because they couldn't find or afford child care.

Toronto restaurateur Tina Leckie, 40, who was not part of the study, says every young parent she knows in her industry struggles with child care.

"Society is changing. The way we work is changing. But the structure of child care is not adapting," she says.

The constant challenge of finding child care for her two young sons during weekends and evenings - the busiest time at the popular Danforth Ave. restaurant she runs with her husband Alex Chong - is one of the reasons Leckie is reluctantly giving up the career she cherishes.

"We are lucky to have child care in a municipal centre that provides amazing care for our kids during the day," says Leckie, whose boys are ages 1 and 4.

"But I spend a huge amount of time lining up child care for the kids on the weekend and to cover evening hours when we both have to work. It is just not sustainable."

Leckie has enrolled in York University's bachelor of education program and hopes she can keep her hand in the industry by teaching hospitality.

Of seven child-care programs with non-standard hours profiled in the report, all are dependent on outside financial support or pilot project funding. For example, an extended-hours program for Edmonton hospital workers that opened in 1981 closed in 2006 due to financial difficulties. It reopened in 2018 under a \$25-a-day pilot project introduced by Alberta's former NDP government. However, it is expected to close under Jason Kenney's new United Conservative Party government when the pilot project ends later this year, the report notes.

Brampton's Collegeside child care is one of the few licensed programs in the Toronto area that offers nighttime care.

The program, which operates from 7 a.m. until 11:30 p.m., was opened by Peel Region near the Bramalea City Centre about 16 years ago to serve area shift workers.

Family Day Care Services, one of the largest non-profit child-care operators in the GTA with about 200 licensed homes, 58 centres and seven EarlyON parenting centres, took over the program in 2014, when Peel stopped operating child-care centres. Family Day moved the program to the Collegeside site at Sheridan College where it provides infant, toddler and preschool care for 55 children during the day and is licensed to provide mixed-age care for 15 toddlers, preschoolers and school-aged kids at night.

The centre's extended-day and night-care programs allow parents to use the service for up to 11 hours a day. It costs \$45.35 a day for a pre-schooler, almost \$2-a-day higher than the centre's regular-hours rate. However, most parents who use the more costly service receive a subsidy.

"This program has been such a relief for our family," says Keren Argueta, 28, who works as an early childhood educator at a local EarlyON parenting centre and is studying to become an elementary school teacher.

Her son Levi, 9, has been in the program for about three years "and loves it," she says.

"I am often working until 6 p.m. or in the evening running parenting classes. So it was always a scramble trying to arrange for family members to pick him up from daycare before I found this program," she says.

"I loved having my family care for him in the evening, but the consistency and the activities, and warm friendships he has formed with the staff and other children has really helped him thrive," Argueta says.

Retail worker Pamela Jarrett says "there's no way I'd be able to work" without access to night care at Collegeside, where her daughter

Ava, 8, is dropped off after school, enjoys free time, homework help and dinner during the week.

Jarrett, who works from 12:30 p.m. to 8 p.m., says knowing Ava is fed and ready for bed when she picks her up at the end of her work day, makes all the difference.

"This is huge for us. Very accessible," Jarrett says, cradling her own takeout dinner as she drives off into the evening with Ava.

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