

From kid swaps to day camps: How parents fill the child-care gap over spring break ^[1]

For many students in B.C., the last day of school before spring break is March 13

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EXCERPTS

For many students in B.C., the last day of school before spring break is March 13. When the final bell rings, they're off for two weeks. But for their parents, especially those who work, spring break can be a logistical nightmare.

Christine Pilkington, a working mother of three, knows the challenges that come with finding two weeks of child care.

"I wouldn't say dread, but [there's some] juggling and rearranging and operational manoeuvring," said Pilkington, who publishes the parent-focused website, Vancouvermom.ca.

Spring break was extended to two weeks from one in many B.C. school districts in 2010 as a way for school boards to save money.

In Surrey and Vancouver, it has been estimated that each additional day classes are cancelled saves about \$100,000.

But while Pilkington appreciates why school boards added the extra week, "somebody has to watch those children."

And that can be expensive.

Standing outside Vancouver's Lord Nelson elementary waiting to pick up one of her children earlier this week, Gillian Aubie Vines had already organized the upcoming vacation for her kids.

"Monday, Tuesday they're going to Nana's house in Victoria. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday with my mom in Abbotsford."

For the second week, the family is going on a ski vacation.

Relatives are often the best option, and usually the cost is right, but not everybody has access to an available grandparent.

That's when a little creativity might be required, said Pilkington.

"What we've done in the past is we'll juggle with another family where we might take some days and then that other parent might take some days."

If a kid swap doesn't work, she suggests hiring a neighbourhood teenager for a few days, or if you know someone with a nanny, offer to pay extra for them to look after your children, too.

Another alternative is a day camp.

"A lot of our cities, for example, they have community centres that offer camps and you can usually get those for a full day, at least equivalent for what you'd get for a school day, around \$80 for the entire week."

The YMCA, arts organizations, sports groups, and museums are among those that also offer day camps.

There's Pedalheads for young cyclists and Arts Umbrella for creative types. There's sports camps, space camps, cooking camps, music camps, ecology camps – the list is endless. If your child has an interest, there's probably a camp out there.

But many of the less expensive ones fill up fast.

"Do your research," said Pilkington. A little organization goes a long way. "Think of it as a rehearsal for summer."

Aubie Vines agrees.

"It's just another part of being a family. You need to find a way to make it work. That's part of what you sign up for when you become a parent, I suppose."

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Tags: school-age ^[4]
education ^[5]
play ^[6]

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Links

- [1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/03/kid-swaps-day-camps-how-parents-fill-child-care-gap-over-spring>
- [2] <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/kids-school-spring-vacation-parents-camp-babysitters-1.5478346>
- [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7860>
- [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/school-age>
- [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/education>
- [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/play>