

Compassion required in child-care crunch ^[1]

Author:

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EXCERPTED

It won't be like a snow day, that's for sure.

As part of the response to the COVID-19 crisis, the province has moved to close licensed daycares as of the end of this week. That, in addition to schools in the province being closed for (at least) three weeks starting March 23, means there are a lot of children and young people who need looking after for the hours they would normally be in care or at school.

Children older than 12 are permitted to be home alone; the younger set, particularly the preschool children ranging from one to five years old, require adult supervision. While many parents are scrambling to find solutions to having their kids out of school, finding care at the level of a parent or qualified early-childhood educator for young children poses an acute challenge.

Most parents know the struggle involved in just getting their little ones into a daycare, with many applying to be on waiting lists even before the child is born. As of June 2018, there were 16,605 children on waiting lists for spots in licensed daycares in Manitoba. In 2019, there were 36,779 children in licensed daycare in the province. There is a licensed daycare space for fewer than one in five children in Manitoba.

The different types of licensed child care programs include infant programs (three months to two years old), preschool programs (2-6 years old), nursery school programs (2-6 years old) and school-age programs (6-12 years old, before and after school, and sometimes full-day care on days without school).

The move to close licensed daycares (private home-based daycares limited to eight children can remain open) is intended to limit the transmission of COVID-19. However, as with the move to close schools for the same reason, the daycare shutdown poses logistical problems for parents.

The era of single-income families being the norm, with one parent at home, is long past. Working parents may not be able to take time away from their jobs to look after their children during the day. They may not have family members able to assist – and given the higher danger posed by COVID-19 to those over 60, asking grandparents to help might not be an option.

That complication has prompted Norway to leave daycare facilities open, and primary schools and kindergartens partially open, so as not to force parents to turn to elderly relatives for help with child care.

Norway is also keeping certain facilities open to help care for children of parents in essential industries such as health care and transportation. Germany, on the other hand, is closing all schools and daycares.

Manitoba businesses whose employees will be scrambling to find appropriate care for their children should be prepared to be flexible. Some jobs may be possible to work from home; others are not. Useful measures could include more flexibility in hours, and seeking case-by-case solutions suited to employees' situations.

The current crisis is a reminder that our society relies on workers doing the day-to-day work in a wide variety of fields. Many of them are working parents who suddenly find themselves in a queue for some kind of child care during a crisis whose end date remains uncertain.

In some cases, there simply will be no workable solution. That is an unfortunate fact of these uncertain times. Moving forward, employers, workers and government will all have roles to play in identifying the most compassionate solutions possible as Manitoba faces a suddenly urgent child-care crunch.

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