

Grandparents assuming more child-care duties – and risk – during pandemic ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When Carly Eddington needs someone to watch her four-year-old daughter Aylah in a pinch, her mother Kathy answers the call.

“We’re very lucky,” the Londoner said. “She lives about two blocks away. On the odd day if I had to rush in to work, she was available as backup help. I used to use her about two hours a week.”

The coronavirus pandemic, of course, changed everything.

Now, Kathy’s child-care duties have ramped up to around 20 hours a week.

She’s not alone. Many grandparents have stepped up to the babysitting front line the past four months.

“She’s all we have,” Eddington, a registered massage therapist, said. “My husband (Dennis, a landscaper) and I are self-employed. This is go-time for him and he can’t be stepping away from his business. We used a private daycare on a part-time basis before, but that hasn’t reopened and there is no specific date for that to happen.

“My mom loves spending the time, but I battle with it. She has a physical disability and multiple health issues. She’s willing and able, but a full day with my daughter is exhausting for me at 32, let alone my mom at 65.”

The family’s biggest decision is still to come. Aylah is supposed to start junior kindergarten in the fall, but she is immuno-compromised and considered a high-risk student as long as the virus remains a threat.

The Ontario government is expected to share what school will look like by mid-August.

“You can’t tell me right now it’s safe,” Eddington said. “All her specialists are saying she has to be at home, so I’m guessing school isn’t going to be happening for her.

“Everyone has some barriers and I know it’s going to be unpleasant for a lot of people, but I think it’s worse than that. It’s causing a ton of issues.”

Rachel Margolis knows exactly where this is heading. The Western University associate professor and sociologist expects parents in dual-earning households will either lean harder on grandparent assistance or drop down to a single income for the foreseeable future.

“This is a really big problem,” she said. “I take COVID-19 very seriously, but I also take parent and children well-being seriously. We should be opening schools and camps before opening restaurants and bars inside.

“Parents have different amounts of resources to give their kids and some don’t have flexibility. A lot of kids end up spending a lot of time in front of the television. We’re worried about inequalities between families that have a lot of resources and those who are poor will get a lot bigger.”

Grandparents are, by and large, a stop-gap measure. They are not meant to be a long-term solution.

“We can’t assume grandparents will pick up the burden of child care,” Margolis said. “A lot of them are already in the labour force or have health problems. They may have their own caregiving responsibilities for a spouse or sibling. Not all grandparents live nearby. There are some cases (most typically in immigrant families or families with fewer resources) of multi-generational households where grandparents are already part of the caretaking in some way, but that’s a special kind of situation.”

There is also still a major risk factor at play.

“Sometimes, that results in a tremendous amount of guilt,” said Carolyn Ferns, public policy and government relations co-ordinator for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. “It’s terribly fraught and not something that’s safe. Turning to grandparents works for some, but it’s clearly not a family’s first choice and they’ve been forced into this situation.

"The government hasn't taken the child care crisis or the needs of working parents seriously. Everything's up in the air and it's terribly frustrating."

A month ago, the Ontario government allowed child-care centres to reopen. The ones that did are taking a gradual approach and not confident they will return to full capacity by Labour Day.

"We reopened Monday and have two classrooms (with a maximum of 10 people per room) running at a majority of our sites," said Angela Woodburn, co-executive director of London Bridge child-care services. "It's a big impact on families. We're noticing some have found alternate options for care, including grandparents. It feels more manageable over the summer with people taking vacations, but will be interesting to see what happens because people are banking on children going back to school."

"We're hopeful, by then, as long as we continue on a good trajectory (with fewer positive cases), group sizes will be changed and we will be able to accommodate more families."

Woodburn believes the situation will eventually return to normal, but Ferns has spoken to a lot of parents at the end of their ropes. She believes a national child-care system with more public funding is the only answer.

"The way child care was organized is not going to fit back together again," she said. "The financial model was high fees (Ontario parents pay the most in the country for child care), full enrollment and paying early educators a pretty low wage. Now, we're going to have parents who can't afford to pay and absorb additional costs at centres that can't have full enrolment for health and safety reasons and you have underpaid early educators who won't go back because there are other things they can be doing."

"The implications are huge. The government assumes we can still be doing Zoom calls with kids crawling on our heads — and we can't."

A new study by professor Sylvia Fuller conducted at the University of British Columbia with Yue Qian suggest women are nearly five times more likely than men to cut back their working hours to watch their children. Eddington will soon be confronted with that question.

"I'm trying to work less time and make money and not have child care and it feels like I'm backed in a corner," she said. "I don't expect everyone to have the answers, but it's scary to think about what's coming. Do we have to make an impossible choice: put food on the table or risk my daughter's health and worry about my mom?"

"It's not a position we've been in before."

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