

\$10-a-day child care made for a good campaign slogan. The hard part is turning it into an actual plan ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In a few months, I'm going to start something new: I'm going to be a dad. My partner Erin and I are expecting our first kid at the end of December.

The impending delivery has got me feeling all the feelings. I feel excited, terrified, frantic, happy and overwhelmed.

It's also got me paying a whole lot more attention to child care as a political and policy issue.

That's not to say I didn't care about child care before. I just had less reason to pore over the details of various election promises.

Instead, before we decided to become parents, child care mostly just existed in the form of a flashing sign, warning us that having a baby was probably a bad idea. We waited a long time — the doctors keep using the flattering term “geriatric pregnancy” — because we'd done the math on what it would cost to raise a kid in Toronto, and the math was bad.

We're both privileged to have stable careers and our small downtown house. And, for all its many faults, we really like this city and want to stay here. But for years the prospect of adding Toronto daycare costs to our budget — on top of all the other costs that come with having a kid — felt like it could just send the whole carefully constructed Jenga tower of our lives tumbling down. According to an analysis earlier this year by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the median fee for Toronto child care is \$1,866 a month for an infant, \$1,578 a month for a toddler and \$1,250 a month for a preschooler.

In a word: bananas.

Luckily, things have changed for us over the last couple of years that have made things a bit easier. My freelance career means I can probably balance gigs while also looking after our child at home most days, so full-time daycare shouldn't be required. That's the hope, anyway.

The other hope is that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, freshly elected to another minority government, delivers on his commitment to implement a system of \$10-a-day child care within the next five years.

But as I spent some time reviewing city hall reports on licensed child care in Toronto it quickly became clear that it's going to take a lot of work to turn this \$10-a-day promise from a glorified slogan into a real plan.

Cutting the cost of child care is actually the easy part. The government can just throw a bunch more subsidies at it. And that'll be great for the parents who already have their kids enrolled. But it won't do anything for the parents or parents-to-be languishing on waiting lists.

Solving that problem means increasing capacity. And in Toronto, we need a lot of capacity.

A report released last spring updating Mayor John Tory and Toronto council on the status of their child care growth strategy pointed out Toronto would need 70,000 daycare spaces to reach a target where half of kids four years of age and under have access. The city has less than 40,000 spaces today and was adding an average of about 1,000 spaces a year before the pandemic. Decent progress, but it still gives a time horizon of about 30 years to hit the capacity target.

Not fast enough. And the pace could get slower from here. “Any opportunities for low-cost expansion of centres through existing available space have primarily been exhausted, meaning future growth will need to come through capital investments in new builds and retrofits,” notes the report.

Then there's the question of who's going to work at these new centres. The pandemic has shown that there's some reluctance for low-wage workers to return to the workforce, and child care has traditionally been a very low-wage job. The average hourly rate for Registered Early Child Educators working in a licensed Toronto daycare in 2019 was \$25.23, up from \$22.48 in 2016. But even that wage at full-time hours would still leave the average child care worker struggling to afford rent in this city. Paying workers more must be part of any plan.

The Liberal platform is not silent on the question of capacity and workers, promising to build 250,000 new child care spaces across the country, and hire 40,000 more early child care educators. How those numbers fit with Toronto's needs is an important question city hall is analyzing now. And the news last week that Premier Doug Ford would sign a child care agreement with Trudeau is a good start.

But there's a long way to go, and big government programs have a way of getting delayed, screwed up or even cancelled. I'm sure hoping for better and faster results with this one. The campaign promises were cool, but access to an affordable daycare spot for our kid — and all kids — would be even better.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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