

Ottawa, Alberta reach deal for 'affordable, quality child care,' province says ^[1]

Alberta parents could be paying about half as many fees by next year

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EXCERPTS

A political stalemate over child-care funding ended Monday as the Alberta and federal Liberal government cemented a \$3.8-billion, five-year funding agreement.

After dismissing the federal government's pledge to slash the prices and improve the quality of early childhood education as too "cookie cutter," Alberta's United Conservative Party government has agreed to a plan that should create 42,500 new regulated non-profit and day home spaces for tots by 2026.

"This is big news for families, and it's yet another example of how governments work together to deliver in real, tangible ways for people," Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in a central Edmonton recreation centre, as preschoolers played in the background.

Like most other agreements the federal government has already inked with provinces, the federal investment should reduce by half the cost of licensed child care for kids age six and under beginning in January, Alberta Children's Services Minister Rebecca Schulz said.

The average cost of that care will be \$10 a day by 2026, she said.

The new money will flow directly to existing day cares — both private and non-profit. Schulz said families who earn up to \$180,000 a year would qualify for subsidies during the next two years. The current subsidy cutoff is \$75,000 household income.

The province will also tailor grants as incentives to create more hard-to-find child care, including infant spaces, centres in rural areas, and around-the-clock care for shift workers.

Should the governments successfully create the promised child-care spaces, it would be a 29 per cent increase from the nearly 147,000 licensed spaces now operating.

Money will also be allocated to training and professional development of early childhood educators, and their pay will improve.

Officials emphasized the investment could save Alberta families with young children thousands of dollars a year and help women, in particular, enter the workforce.

"This is a huge investment from the federal government here in Alberta, and it's going to be good for kids, good for families, and good for the economy," said Karina Gould, the federal minister of families, children and social development

Tough talks on child-care agreement

In an interview, she said she's still negotiating with the province about how the federal government could support the expansion of for-profit day-care spaces.

Including Alberta's large proportion of privately operated day care (56 per cent) was a sticking point in negotiations, Premier Jason Kenney said.

In August, Kenney insisted the federal government give Alberta a no-strings-attached deal similar to Quebec, which has already run a universal child-care system since the 1990s.

Trudeau said Monday it wasn't a matter of treating provinces differently, but looking at what steps each jurisdiction needed to take to meet the goal of widely available, affordable, high-quality child care.

As eight other provinces and territories inked deals with the federal government, Alberta child-care advocates criticized Kenney's government for dragging its feet.

The premier insisted the final result was worth the seven-month wait.

"It's a heck of a lot more flexibility to respond to the needs of Alberta parents," he said.

Alberta NDP children's services critic Rakhi Pancholi said the delay cost Alberta families thousands of dollars.

"It seems as though the UCP were actually hopeful that there would be a change in federal government and they wouldn't have to actually sign a deal for affordable, universal child care in Alberta," she said in a news conference.

Advocates now want to know how the provincial government will reach these goals.

The targets are "ambitious," said Christopher Smith, associate executive director of the Muttart Foundation, which funds early education initiatives.

Recruiting and training child-care workers is a challenge, and they must be well-compensated, Smith said.

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