

# What Ontario's child-care deal means for 'frustrated' parents: 'The system is broken'

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

For Liz Enriquez, a new mother living in Hamilton, Ont., the federal child-care deal came at an opportune time. One week before Ontario signed on, she received an email from a daycare centre that had a spot open for her 11-month-old son. Having been on the waitlist for almost a year, she felt relieved that the timing worked out and she could go back to work.

"When I can get a break from being an isolated mom...I'm so much happier with my son around," she says, adding that she can eventually use the reduction of fees to pay for extracurricular activities, like swimming lessons for her son.

Enriquez is one of the thousands of parents who will be able to save money under Canada's first national child-care program. Ontario, the last province to sign on, will see \$13.2 billion of investments over a six-year span, cutting fees in half by the end of the year. The agreement will bring fees down to an average of \$10 a day by the end of 2025. Additionally, the government will see the creation of 86,000 child-care spaces, 15,000 of which have already been created since 2019.

The news of the deal comes as a relief for many parents who feel the financial burden of child-care and to those who are hoping to secure a spot for their kids. Many advocates and parents, however, have pointed out some of the gaps in the government's plan—like the shortage of Early Childhood Educators and the exclusion of private daycares—putting both parents and business owners in a tough spot.

Yahoo Canada spoke to four Ontario mothers about their thoughts on the deal and how it will affect them.

For Kingston, Ont. resident Becky Thomlinson, the announcement has only frustrated her even more. Both her toddlers currently go to an unlicensed home daycare, despite being on a waitlist for a licensed centre for a year and a half.

"I think the Ontario child-care deal sounds great on paper but the amount of spaces they plan to open won't be enough for everyone who wants a space," Thomlinson says.

Experts say the number of licensed spaces the government plans to create is far below the 200,000 to 300,000 spaces needed to address the demand that will be created from the drop in fees.

"It's frustrating for me because I'll be paying for cheaper child-care with my taxes, but I still can't gain access to it," she says. She adds that it would be more realistic to provide money directly to parents if they can prove they are accessing child-care since centres might not be helpful for everyone.

During the pandemic, a home daycare did provide Thomlinson with a sense of security because her children were exposed to fewer families. Her 3-year-old son, however, was recently diagnosed with a motor speech disorder and she says he could benefit greatly from a more structured centre setting.

"The system is broken and I hope that it works for other families in the future — it just won't make a difference for us," she says.

For Dominique Riley, a mother living in Peterborough, Ont., getting a spot for her youngest son in a licensed centre would mean a better quality of life. The affordability of \$10-a-day would allow her to save, potentially going on more camping trips with her family, and not forfeiting a third of her wage to home daycare.

"Home daycare has shocked me...because every provider wants to be paid top dollar, but refuses to get licensed," she says.

For the thousands of unlicensed daycares which have been excluded from the deal, getting licensed would lead to a reduction in profits and increased protocols and paperwork. According to a January 2021 Statistics Canada survey, more than half of the 52,794 child care providers in Canada reported they were unlicensed.

At the home daycare Riley's son is enrolled in, she is required to pay \$45 for the day, even if it is closed on a statutory holiday or Riley's family is on vacation. Still, it's better than the alternative Riley was faced with. Having gone back to work and feeling pressured by the cost of living, she would drive her son for an hour every morning so her mom could look after him.

Riley has been on a waitlist for a licensed centre since September, still hoping to secure a spot.

"I used to be optimistic," she says. "As time goes on I hear from people who have had their kids [on] the waiting list for four years and never got in. I'm hoping the government will do something to remedy this."

Jaime Oren is another mother enduring the high cost of home daycare, but she is immensely grateful for the level of care her provider brings her son. Her provider lives just down the street from her, running a daycare for over 10 years and "loves and cares for [the] kids like her own."

Oren says the personalized, less structured care means the days are planned based on the children's interests and needs. Every Friday, her son brings home crafts, has stories to share of nature walks and is given a home-cooked meal.

"I'm frustrated that at some point, I might have to choose between a fantastic, loving provider and saving money," Oren says, adding that the opportunity to save hundreds of dollars could help her with her mortgage and future savings for her son. "I totally feel torn between my financial responsibilities and my priorities as a parent."

Still, she says she feels a sense of solidarity with her provider, adding that she wants her to be her son's "daycare mom" until he can go to school.

"I do think the government is perhaps being narrow-sighted [because] daycare solutions can take many different forms. And as a parent, I would like to be able to choose what's best for my child," she says. She adds that including unlicensed daycares could be the solution to the current lack of spaces. "I get that this is kind of the first pass in a big solution, but I feel like there's opportunities to make up for those gaps and address them."

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** \$10-a-day child care <sup>[4]</sup>

child care costs <sup>[5]</sup>

child care shortage <sup>[6]</sup>

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