

Pests, mould, toxic chemicals among on-the-job concerns flagged by child-care workers ^[1]

Nearly half of roughly 2,000 child-care workers who took part in a national survey reported unhealthy conditions for children.

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EXCERPTS

Bedbug infestations, rodents, mould and toxic chemical exposures. These are among “concerning” unhealthy workplace conditions flagged by child-care workers from across Canada who took part in a new survey released Thursday.

Nearly half of the 2,000 workers who responded reported witnessing unhealthy conditions for children, according to the survey conducted in March and April by advocacy groups, the Canadian Partnership for Children’s Health and Environment (CPCHE) and the Canadian Child Care Federation, in collaboration with the University of Ottawa.

“What we’re hearing from child-care professionals is concerning. Programs of all different types and from all different parts of Canada are experiencing problems in their settings, with circumstances like mould or unhealthy air quality, structural disrepair and pest infestations,” said Erica Phipps, executive director of CPCHE.

When respondents were asked about environmental health conditions in child-care settings, 22 per cent reported mould or a mouldy smell, roughly 25 per cent flagged an insect or rodent infestation in the past year, 23 per cent pointed out structural disrepair such as a leaking roof and 29 per cent noted noticeable air pollution, for example, from renovations, nearby industry or roadways. Twenty-two per cent reported concerns about pesticides used indoors on a routine basis.

“We need support at multiple levels to make sure that child-care settings are such that they’re promoting child health and well-being rather than being a potential source of exposure to harmful substances,” Phipps said.

Respondents were anonymous and the survey involved educators, administrators, support staff and others in oversight roles in both licensed and unlicensed child-care programs in rural and urban areas.

More than half of those surveyed cited a lack of funding and 45 per cent cited lack of support from government as challenges to improving environmental health.

In March, Ontario signed a five-year \$10.2 billion child-care deal with the federal government that will cut child-care fees in the province in half by the end of the year. Under the deal, Ontario is creating 86,000 child-care spaces. This includes more than 15,000 spaces already in place since 2019. The new spaces will be a combination of for-profit and not-for-profit, according to the government. Premier Doug Ford also said the province would work on increasing wages for early childhood educators.

The deal is part of the federal government’s pledge of \$30 billion over five years to build a nationwide early learning and child-care system in co-operation with provincial, territorial and Indigenous partners.

Don Giesbrecht, CEO of the Canadian Child Care Federation, said the deal is a good opportunity to use findings from the survey to help guide the conversation and build better infrastructure.

“What the survey points to is the need for further investments, especially as it pertains to provincial dollars, for the infrastructure that currently exists” in Ontario, said Giesbrecht. “There’s a role for the province of Ontario to play in terms of supporting existing programs to address the very clear and urgent environmental and health concerns within programs.”

“As we’re building new spaces we need to be using the data from the survey to guide that construction or renovation, to make sure we’re building healthy and sustainable environments by design,” Giesbrecht said.

Carolyn Ferns, of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, agrees that the creation of new spaces must also include a plan to maintain them long-term, which requires funding and adequate staffing of a sector that has endured years of underinvestment.

“Child-care programs have had to try to balance keeping child-care fees affordable while trying to retain early childhood educators by paying them as well as they can and somehow also maintaining the space,” said Ferns, whose group was not involved in the survey.

“This should be a wake-up call. It’s fine to build a new nice shiny child-care program but in 10 years’ time, if we’re not maintaining it and if you don’t have the staff, it’s going to be a problem.”

CPCHE, the Canadian Child Care Federation and more than 40 organizations across Canada, including from the child-care and public health sectors, also released a national vision Thursday to help guide actions towards fixing challenges in the child-care system, including reducing toxic exposures and creating culturally inclusive settings.

“It’s important that we are doing this right. The fact that these agreements are in place across Canada is a really important step forward,” Phipps said.

“This is a moment of opportunity for Canada,” Phipps said. “We have the capacity to work towards that vision. The details will matter, and we are calling for thoughtful investment and that additional spaces are created with children’s health in mind.”

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: health and safety ^[4]

children's health ^[5]

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