

Happy parents, stressed daycare operators on first day of half-price child care ^[1]

Child care fees at licensed daycare centres has been cut by 50 per cent starting June 1

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EXCERPT

New Brunswick parents are set to save a lot of money starting now.

Licensed daycares in the province have reduced their fees by 50 per cent starting Wednesday.

The plan to reduce fees, part of a partnership agreement between the provincial and federal governments, was announced last December.

The program will cost \$544 million over five years, with the bulk of the money coming from Ottawa and the province chipping in \$53 million.

The goal is to eventually cut child-care costs to \$10 a day.

While child-care costs differ depending on the region and the age of children, Heather Hamilton, who runs two daycares in the Saint John area, said her clients will be paying \$21 per child instead of \$42, on average.

"They're happy," said Hamilton.

"Once they realized that everything was pretty much streamlined, it was OK."

A longtime coming, parents say

To say parents are happy may be an understatement.

Angela Bennett and her partner have three children and both work full time.

They're not from New Brunswick and have no family to fall back on, so cheaper daycare will be a major plus when Bennett returns to work from maternity leave.

"Having three children in daycare is extremely expensive," said Bennett.

"I feel like this is definitely a long time coming for New Brunswick to be able to have a program like this to help."

Amy Girouard's young child isn't in daycare yet, but she hopes the reduction in costs will help parents struggling through high inflation.

"Inflation is huge right now," said Girouard.

"Cost of living is going up. Any savings that can be given back to these families that have little ones would be a big help."

'Nightmare' switchover

While the discount will no doubt be appreciated by parents, the move left some daycare operators scrambling.

The province made the announcement of the June 1 discount date in late April. Operators like Cheryl Lewis, who runs three Saint John daycares, said it wasn't a lot of lead time.

"This meant a lot of extra work for staff to make sure parents were integrated into the new system," she said. "It's been a nightmare."

"We're only given things weeks before. We have no lead time, no communication."

Lewis said she wishes the province had given the industry more time to prepare.

"When the news comes out, and you guys are reporting on it, that's when we hear it," said Lewis.

"It's extremely frustrating as an owner."

Switching to the new fee structure went more smoothly for Hamilton, but she said there was some confusion, and staff did have to put in

some extra work to make sure it all worked out.

But she understands that switching over will always have some hiccups.

"You need to have a little bit of patience," said Hamilton.

"This is the first kick at the can for us. We're going to have some glitches."

Supply and demand

Cheaper daycare is also raising the possibility of more demand on the system.

Hamilton said when the announcement was first made, her phone rang constantly from parents looking for child-care spots.

Months later, she's still getting multiple calls a day from people in search of spaces for their kids, even though she already has a massive waiting list.

"We've got some that really don't realize how the inner workings work," said Hamilton.

"They say, 'we need a space for tomorrow.' Well, that is definitely not going to happen."

Hamilton said she thinks the demand could be exacerbated by the number of unlicensed daycares that may be unable to compete with the partly funded licensed centres.

"They can't compete with dropping their prices by half," said Hamilton.

"Unfortunately, some of those folks are going to close ... but the problem now is we don't have enough spaces anywhere in the province."

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<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/50-percent-daycare-spaces-1.6474009> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7854> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/early-childhood-education-and-care> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/workforce> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/pay>