

Disabled kids are falling through BC's child-care gap ^[1]

Parents say their children are being left behind as the government expands affordable child care.

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EXCERPTS:

British Columbia's \$10-a-day child-care plan is about increasing accessibility by improving affordability and availability.

But while thousands of child-care spaces have been subsidized through the program since 2018, children with disabilities — and their parents — are still waiting for the province to live up to its pledge that accessible child care “is about inclusion for all children.”

There is no official count of how many child-care sites are accessible for kids with disabilities because there is no provincial definition of what makes a child-care site inclusive.

But parents say there are not enough spaces — preschool or before and after school — to meet the need.

“We hear talk constantly about inclusion, and it's really stabbing to hear that word constantly, and yet not experience any glimmer of it,” said Brenda Lenahan, president of BC Complex Kids Society, a grassroots advocacy organization for families of kids with disabilities.

When child care is unavailable, parents — often the birthing parent — quit working or reduce their hours to care for their child, creating financial pressures.

That's also true for families of kids with disabilities, whose expenses are often greater than your average family, Lenahan said.

“Our families experience huge, extraordinary costs because of our kids' care needs: accessible housing, all the extraordinary medical expenses, etc.,” she said.

“It's propelling families, from an early stage of their child's life, into poverty and financial instability.”

Katrina Chen, minister of state for child care, says the province is improving disabled child-care access. The government is prioritizing inclusive child-care sites for subsidies and updating early childhood education training to include working with kids with disabilities.

Over the next two years “there's going to be a lot of work that's surrounding inclusion, including the educational curriculum,” Chen said.

‘For my own mental health and sanity’

Katie Jameson hasn't been able to find after-school or summertime child care for her twins since she took them out of a YMCA after-school program in Vancouver last fall.

As reported by CBC at the time, Jameson had secured provincial funding for the YMCA to hire a support worker for her daughter Kenzie, who has Down syndrome and is non-verbal, so Kenzie and her brother Wally could attend the YMCA's after-school program at Malkin Park.

But despite accepting the funding, the YMCA never hired the support worker. Jameson pulled the six-year-old twins out of the after-school care just one month in last October when she found Kenzie wandering outside one day, alone and poorly dressed for the weather, at pickup time.

YMCA took responsibility for the failure to care for Kenzie, who was in Grade 1 at the time, and apologized. But a subsequent government investigation did not find the child-care provider at fault.

Jameson has not been able to find a spot in an after-school or summer child-care program that supports kids with disabilities since. So Jameson, a family photographer who also handles marketing for the three Vancouver restaurants she co-owns with her husband, has cut back her work hours to care for her kids.

Unlike many families in the same situation, Jameson and her husband are fine financially, and they have access to a babysitter for 15 hours per week.

But not having full-time child care for her twins is affecting Jameson's mental health, she told The Tyee.

"I want to work. I was a whole person before I had children," she said. "For my own mental health and sanity, I needed to go back to work and feel useful and use my brain in new ways."

It also affects her kids. Kenzie is missing out on interacting with her peers this summer, and her brother, Wally, who does not have a disability, misses out, too, because generally he goes where Kenzie is.

"Wally's going to start to notice that he isn't doing programs like his friends are doing because there aren't options for his sister. And that's going to be a whole other conversation about fairness and access to things that he might not understand," Jameson said.

Before they were school age, Jameson was able to find a child-care centre that supported both twins through the BC Centre for Ability, a community agency offering the provincial government's Supported Child Development program in Vancouver and Burnaby. The program also provided funding to the YMCA last fall that was supposed to be used to hire a support worker for Kenzie.

Funded by the Ministry of Children and Family Development, which was responsible for child care before it moved to the Education Ministry in February — and delivered by community agencies across B.C., the Supported Child Development program helps kids with disabilities access child-care programs in their community.

The program provides free consultation for families of kids with disabilities who need to access child care; a worker to assist child-care providers in supporting a disabled child or the funding to hire extra staff or provide physical accommodations; and training for early childhood educators on supporting kids with disabilities.

There is also a separate Aboriginal Supported Child Development program to ensure the supports for Indigenous children are culturally appropriate. Both programs help an average of 7,350 children in B.C. per month.

Children don't need a disability diagnosis to access the programs, said Terri Calvert, leader of the Supported Child Development program at the BC Centre for Ability, which helps 800 families in Vancouver and another 300 in Burnaby.

"We want to make sure that children have an experience in some kind of child-care program before they go to kindergarten," she said, "so their parents are able to continue to stay in the workforce if that's what they choose to do."

Thanks to an agreement with the federal government, the Supported Child Development programs received a \$31.8-million boost in the 2022-23 provincial budget, on top of the \$70 million already budgeted, covering an additional 2,000 children.

But it's still not enough, says Calvert. Because the Supported Child Development programs prioritize families with the greatest needs, some will never receive help.

"The bottom line is there's not enough funding for every child and family who needs the program, who could benefit from it," she said, adding there are 300 families in Vancouver and 130 in Burnaby on their waitlist for funding support.

Sometimes the issue isn't money, but the lack of child-care sites able to care for kids with disabilities.

Currently every child-care centre receiving government subsidies must be willing to take kids with disabilities. Calvert wants this to be a requirement of all B.C. child-care providers.

"Unfortunately, sometimes when a child-care program hears that a child needs some extra support or is with our program, then they won't allow them to come unless they have extra staff," Calvert said.

Because the Supported Child Development program is delivered locally, the province doesn't keep track of the waitlists.

"Government is currently testing some new wait time indicators to support an understanding of wait times provincially," an education and child care ministry spokesperson told The Tyee via email.

Not all children with disabilities can be accommodated through these programs. The Health Ministry's Nursing Support Services program provides a nurse to accompany a child with disabilities at school, but not in a child-care setting.

And while Chen says child-care sites are encouraged to adopt enhanced COVID-19 protocols, there are no mask or vaccine requirements, which excludes children with compromised immune systems from child care, says Lenahan.

"Many of our kids are still home from school and not going to child care because of their fragility or they're being immunocompromised."

Even if the child-care system were perfect, Lenahan says there will always be reasons why some children with disabilities won't be able to access outside child care.

Which is why the BC Complex Kids Society is advocating for a \$2,200 monthly grant for families caring for disabled kids.

"We need that flexibility and that support built into the system," Lenahan said.

The government's priorities

When the NDP came to power in 2017 it inherited a patchwork child-care system, says Chen, making it difficult for the province to collect data on inclusion for kids with disabilities.

But the province is focusing on improvements for the early childhood education workforce — known for being underpaid and overburdened, particularly during the pandemic — to make child care more inclusive, Chen said. That includes training and supporting early childhood educators to support kids with disabilities, she said.

Recent changes include releasing an Inclusive Child Care Toolkit for child-care providers; expanding the province's \$4-an-hour wage topup to Supported Child Development workers; an online professional development course for early childhood educators learning to support kids with disabilities; and prioritizing early childhood educators for immigration to B.C.

The province's \$10-a-day subsidies for public, non-profit and private child-care sites prioritizes those that support disabled children, requesting they work with Supported Child Development program providers.

"We provided funding to enhance spaces, as well," said Chen, adding the \$10-a-day program began with an "Inclusion Pilot Project" in 2019 where 13 child-care sites were either funded to hire an inclusion co-ordinator to create or enhance supports for kids with disabilities or received per-child funding for kids with disabilities.

"We've heard great stories of how, because of the extra funding given to those centres that upgraded their spaces and supported their workers, that more and more children are able to access child care," Chen said.

Now the province wants early childhood educators' training to include mandatory lessons on supporting kids with disabilities, and is working with the University of Victoria's CanAssist program to develop a new early childhood curriculum inclusive of kids with disabilities. They are also working on a proposed wage grid for current early childhood educators. These changes are expected to happen over the next two years.

But Jameson says Kenzie's needs can't wait for changes to the system. She wants to see parents of kids who aren't disabled apply pressure when they don't see children with disabilities like her daughter in child care, as well as in summer camps or on sports teams.

"I need other parents who have young kids to want to see kids like Kenzie on their kids' soccer team and baseball team, and that when they show up to practice and they don't see kids like Kenzie, to say 'Where are all the kids with disabilities?'" Jameson said.

"I need people to stop being sympathetic and I need them to be angry."

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