

Unlicensed daycares operate free from oversight ^[1]

Majority of Canadian children can't get into licensed daycare

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Excerpts

Just 20 per cent of Canadian children have access to licensed daycares, leaving millions of kids in unlicensed private facilities with no regulation or oversight.

A Marketplace investigation into unlicensed daycares found some providers with no training or credentials taking care of kids in potentially dangerous settings and, in some cases, breaking the law.

"In this country we have national standards for light bulbs but not for children," said Don Giesbrecht, president of the Canadian Child Care Federation.

"In an ideal world, there would be accountability and checkpoints in each and every region if you are going to be providing childcare."

Marketplace's investigation looked into 20 unlicensed daycares in Vancouver and the Toronto area and found unqualified providers with substandard facilities that included missing baby gates on stairways, cramped, windowless rooms with no fire exits and unfenced outdoor play areas.

One Toronto woman, charged in 2007 with running an illegal daycare that was shut down, was back in business, charging \$1,000 a month for each child. Marketplace cameras captured her husband — who runs a separate daycare — driving children as young as 11 months through snowy streets without car seats.

Short of breaking the law, unlicensed daycares have no outside oversight.

The only formal complaint parents can lodge against unlicensed daycares concerns the allowable number of kids — and Ontario alone has received 757 complaints of that nature since 2010.

"Most people think there is much more government oversight than there actually is," said Martha Friendly, head of Canada's Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

Death 'never would have happened'

When Melanie Audette enrolled her son Jérémié at a private facility in Ottawa, she says she did a lot of research, but wasn't "100 per cent" sure of the differences between licensed and unlicensed daycares.

The Audettes had waited 19 months for a spot in a regulated daycare, but the Ottawa waiting list alone had more than 10,000 names, so they resorted to an unlicensed setup.

Two-year old Jérémié drowned in July 2010 in a backyard swimming pool after his provider took her charges to another home daycare for a play date.

Combined, there were 31 kids in the backyard that day — a situation both illegal and dangerous.

The couple says a lack of rules for private daycares led to Jérémié's death.

"This never would have happened (if he'd been at a licensed facility)," Alain Audette told Marketplace.

Most licensed daycares require parental permission before such outings, and the Audettes say they wouldn't have okayed the outing if they had been told about it.

An inquest into Jérémié's death concluded in December, and the jury made multiple recommendations for improved safety, including:

- Requiring all unlicensed private home day cares to register with the Ontario Ministry of Education.
- Enforcing the same number of allowable kids as licensed daycares.

- Making all daycares subject to unannounced safety inspections.
- Requiring private daycare providers possess up-to-date CPR and first aid training.
- Encouraging the Ministry of Education to increase the number of licensed providers.

The recommendations are not binding, and Friendly anticipates little change.

"That happens every couple of years, and then people forget about it really quickly," she says. "The government changes and people forget about it."

She referred to a 1986 case where four kids and one adult died as a fire swept through a Bolton, Ont., home daycare. Toxicology tests showed the provider had the equivalent of 12 bottles of beer, plus three different prescription drugs in her system at the time of blaze.

In the aftermath, a jury recommended increasing the number of Peel Region daycare centres and offering tax breaks to make licensed daycares more affordable. The jury's suggestions were never implemented.

Some 'perfectly good'

The lack of qualifications and oversight for unlicensed providers is a major concern, Friendly says.

"It's not that everybody who's running an unregulated home is not good, but they may not be knowledgeable," she warned. "There are perfectly good people running unregulated homes, but you the parents have no way of knowing," she said.

In response to the investigation, parents at one of the unlicensed daycares said they feel their private facility offers more personalized care can be more flexible than some regulated outfits.

However, some parents expressed surprise at the Marketplace findings, including the high number of kids and transportation without car seats.

While researching the story, Marketplace spoke to a unlicensed Toronto provider who said she "would love to be licensed," but says there are disadvantages, including that Ontario's licensing agencies "severely underpay their providers."

Canada needs better system

Friendly stresses that she's not criticizing parents whose kids may end up in an unlicensed daycare, since they have so few options.

She argues that Canada needs a comprehensive, well-funded childcare system to take the pressure off parents.

"This is one of (Canada's) worst social policy issues," she says. "And we're getting worse. This is really bad, frustrating ... and more people should be more angry."

A 2008 report from UNICEF ranked Canada among the worst of 25 developed countries for providing basic minimum childcare services.

"In a country like Canada, in the 21st century, it's quite ludicrous that we don't have a real (child-care system)," she said. She wants the federal government to get serious on daycare, but laments there's never been enough political will to make it a priority.

Giesbrecht tells parents to speak out for change.

"What we need is for parents to rock the boat, to demand that they need a child-care spot," he urged. "You would never imagine that you would move to a different jurisdiction and not get access to an elementary school or health care."

But for now, Melanie Audette encourages parents to be direct with their providers to ensure their kids are safe.

"Do spot checks, ask questions, call during the day, don't be shy," she said. "It's your child. Do what you have to do to put your child in a safe place."

Who's watching the kids? CBC's Marketplace ^[3]

Region: Canada ^[4]

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