

More N.L. parents speaking out following 'discriminatory' daycare dismissals for kids with exceptionalities ^[1]

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Excerpt

Two mothers of children with arthrogryposis, a physical disability that makes muscles and joints stiff, say their children have been facing discrimination when it comes to finding child care, just like parents of children with autism who have been dismissed from daycare.

Lindsay Chafe and Selian Dixon both have daughters with arthrogryposis. They say they've been battling discrimination when it comes to finding services like child care, after-school programs and summer camps.

They say they were upset when they heard earlier this week that children with autism were being dismissed from daycare due to a shortage of early childhood educators.

"It's unfortunate that there's parents, additional parents going through what we've been going through for years because we know what it feels like. We know the frustration," said Lindsay Chafe, mom to Caci, who uses a wheelchair.

Two children with autism, William La Montagne and Benjamin Pike, who both live in Paradise, have been dismissed from different daycare centres because there is a shortage of early childhood educators and inclusion workers needed to support them.

The loss of child care is forcing William's mom, Kristen Parsons-La Montagne, to consider leaving Newfoundland and Labrador for Alberta, where she said she has already found three inclusive daycare centres in Calgary that will accept her son.

The Pikes say they will have to juggle their work schedules until their son goes to school in about a year and a half.

Both families call their children's daycare dismissals discriminatory.

Chafe said her daughter was dismissed from an after-school daycare program in 2020 after she wrote a letter inquiring about getting an inclusion worker at the daycare.

"I was met with a letter when I dropped her off one day saying that she was terminated. I think 'dismissed' is too nice of a word. I say that she was kicked out," she said.

Chafe said the daycare told her it was unable to meet her daughter's needs. She said she had to scramble to find a solution and managed with some help from her daughter's grandparents, but it's a struggle for them too, since they can't lift Caci.

Chafe said years later she's still scrambling and skips lunch breaks to manage.

"My whole life revolves around trying to figure out solutions, and it's exhausting because you're constantly trying to find a resolution for a problem and there is no fix at this point," she said.

Chafe said her daughter was in daycare for socialization, since things like socializing and attending birthday parties can be difficult for children with disabilities because of issues with accessibility.

Chafe says \$10-a-day regulated child-care programs are being subsidized for able-bodied children but not for those with exceptionalities.

"To me, that is a little bit discriminatory, because everybody else who's able-bodied is able to avail of these programs," she said.

Both moms say they've been combating discrimination for years when it comes to finding services like child care, after-school programs and summer camps.

"There is nothing that we can avail of, absolutely nothing," said Chafe.

"So we all know that the school preaches inclusion and they want everybody to feel like they're involved. But yet these after-school programs that the Department of Education allows ... in their schools are not inclusive to kids with exceptionalities. They cannot go," Selina Dixon said about her daughter Ava and Chafe's daughter Caci.

Chafe is glad to see the parents of children with autism who have been dismissed from daycare speak out on the issue.

"I'm exhausted. She's exhausted. We're mentally exhausted. We're physically exhausted," she said. "It's just every time we think we find a solution, we're met with a wall."

Education Minister John Haggie says he understands the concerns of parents when it comes to finding adequate child care, especially for children with exceptionalities.

Haggie said the government is working to increase the number of early childhood educators being trained in the province, but those who could fill gaps as inclusion workers — like former teachers or social workers — could only do so with upgraded training. Training was introduced in 2017, Haggie said, and there was a long enough grace period for that training to happen.

"The facts of the case are that the only way we're going to attract ECEs into the profession is to regard it as a profession. And to accept that to do that work, you need a minimum level of training."

Haggie stated multiple times that although child care in Newfoundland and Labrador is regulated by his department, the provincial government can't instruct child-care centres to accept children with exceptionalities, as the majority of them are private businesses.

He says inclusion in daycares is currently voluntary — but that could change.

"Maybe what we should do is incentivize them. Discuss with them how we encourage them to do this, and make sure that children with exceptionalities are included in the package, as it were, of children for whom they provide services," Haggie said.

Haggie wouldn't say how long that would take. The department is also reviewing the operating grant program that funds daycares, he said.

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