

Where are kids going when school's out for summer? ^[1]

Child care gaps are causing strains for BC families, says social work prof.

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Excerpts

Childcare has not been easy to acquire in B.C. for a long time. Though the province's \$10-a-day child care initiative has increased the number of subsidized child care spaces, there aren't yet nearly enough spots available to meet the demand for care.

When the last school bell rings in June, access to child care gets even more dire: school's out, and so are the kids.

This creates a dilemma for working families, especially single parent-led families, when the cost of living far outpaces wages.

"They have that routine that schools provide them. We saw how much of a disruption that can be when that isn't available during the pandemic," said Sarah Dow-Fleisner, an assistant professor of social work at the University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus.

In the absence of schools, families turn to summer programming offered elsewhere. If they have the money, there are for-profit businesses that offer day and overnight camp options.

But families on a budget rely on subsidized or free programs offered by non-profits and institutions like libraries and charities. And those organizations struggle to secure funding for summer child care programs, said Dow-Fleisner.

"In the wake of the pandemic, we saw a lot of childcare centres, a lot of summer programs did not continue to get that stream of funding in. A lot of them had to shut down," she said, adding there should be multiple funding streams and grants for summer programs from the federal and provincial governments, while many places must subsidize funding by charging parents enrollment fees.

"It highlighted a pre-existing issue for many families in terms of finding quality and affordable opportunities for their children to have a place to be in the summer."

Aly Waddell from the Victoria Native Friendship Centre said the non-profit had problems finding enough funding last year for summer youth programming, and this year they don't have the capacity to offer programming for kids under 12.

But they are able to provide a six-week summer day camp for urban Indigenous youth ages 12 to 17 that includes daily meals and is free for families.

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The United Way of British Columbia has been offering School's Out, an afterschool program for kids in Grades 1 to 7, for over a decade, partnering with local community organizations across B.C. to offer the free-to-subsidized childcare.

Last year they expanded the program to offer a summer program, School's Out Summer, because of family feedback that summer programs have been scarce since COVID. They have partnered with 20 community agencies across the Lower Mainland and the Fraser Valley to run Schools Out Summer programs for seven to eight weeks this summer.

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When children, especially those under 12, do not have summer care, they are exposed to more screen time and sedentary, indoor activities, with less routine and interaction with kids their own age than they get during the school year, Dow-Fleisner said.

"You need interaction for the development of emotional regulation [and] executive functioning, which includes planning and being able to focus and concentrate," she added.

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A school teacher in the United States before she became a social work professor, Dow-Fleisner said she could tell which of her students participated in summer programs and which students did not.

"It takes just a little bit longer to get back into that routine, to be able to concentrate, to be able to focus, to be able to work with their peers," she said, adding summer programs help all kids develop physically, socially, emotionally and cognitively.

For kids who are already more vulnerable, whether that's thanks to a disability, financial and food insecurity at home, or being from a recent immigrant family that lacks community connections, not having summer programming can be even worse, Dow-Fleisner said.

"Having a place to go where there are snacks and food are incredibly important. And so you take summer programs away, now all of a sudden you don't have that continuity of learning, you don't have that continuity of peer connections and you don't have that continuity of food, which is really important for kids and their development," she said.

Parents who struggle to access affordable summer programming for their kids are exposed to more stress, scrambling to piece together care opportunities or balance working from home with childcare. Some even have to quit their jobs to care for children.

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Waddell wants to see more summer program-specific funding opportunities for non-profits like the Victoria Native Friendship Centre so they can provide camps for kids and teenagers.

Region: British Columbia ^[3]

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