

Working moms in perpetual crisis over shortage of after-school care [CA-NS] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

There are a million ways to complete the following sentence: "If we can put a man on the moon, then why can't we (insert your pet frustration here)?"

If we've been able to plant a flag in moon dust, then why haven't we yet been able to create a viable alternative to the gas-driven car, or an efficient way to turn salt water into drinking water, or a method for producing snag-proof pantyhose?

This time of year, as I puzzle over my limited childcare options for the summer, I have to wonder: If we can put a man on the moon, why can't we develop quality, easy-to-access care for school age children?

During the school year, quality before- and after-school childcare is hard enough to find. Not all HRM schools have before- and after-school programs, or even lunch programs. Where programs do exist, waiting lists are long. A friend of mine whose son will start school in September confesses that her stomach is already in knots. If her son doesn't get into the before- and after-school program, she'll have to figure out how to travel through time and space Star Trek style.

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What will my friend do if her son doesn't make the cut? Well, she could try to find a kind neighborhood mom who takes in children before school, feeds them a nutritious lunch, and provides meaningful activities for them after school. Or my friend could buy a book of lottery tickets and hope that she wins enough money to allow her to take an extended vacation for the next six years. The odds of her succeeding are, I'd say, equally good.

As any income-earning parent can testify, there's no worse feeling than the uncertain, queasy sense that your child is not being properly cared for in your absence. The problem of finding adequate childcare for school age children is so troubling that I've known women to quit their jobs over it. I've known others to delay their return to their workforce because, like my friend, they're just not sure they can face the childcare difficulties awaiting them.

Meanwhile, society in general pretends that the difficulties don't even exist. We hear plenty about the country's disgraceful shortage of affordable daycare spaces, but we don't even broach the issue of what happens to kids who still need care outside the home once they've graduated from preschool. The Harper government pretends that childcare isn't even an issue once children start school. The cutoff age for the so-called Universal Child Care Benefit is six, even though parents of a child in elementary school can easily spend \$300 a month on childcare during the school year.

And that's not even taking into account summer camps, which can run between \$100 and \$300 a week.

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If we can put a man on the moon, then why can't we come up with more creative, community-based ways to provide care for all children, year-round? Why can't we make all-day care a priority for school age children as well as preschoolers? We might start by at least acknowledging that such care is not broadly available now, and that the lack of care is a problem that belongs to all of us.

Of course, there are millions of people who don't believe we have put men on the moon. They believe the Apollo 11 film footage is the product of an elaborate hoax. They may also, for all I know, believe that the moon is made of green cheese. Let them think what they will. I have to believe that Neil Armstrong really did take that "one small step for a man" because it helps me imagine the much larger steps we can take together to improve the quality of life for contemporary families.

- reprinted from The Chronicle Herald

Region: Nova Scotia ^[2]

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