

More parents are using child care — but use still below pre-pandemic levels ^[1]

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Excerpts

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That comes even as provinces and territories continue to open new child-care spaces as part of their agreements with the federal government.

Yet new numbers from Statistics Canada show the number of children in licensed or unlicensed child-care is still not back to normal — something experts say points at lingering challenges.

The data shows more than half of children aged five and under, about 56 per cent, had a space, but while that figure was above levels seen in 2020 and 2022, it had not reached the pre-pandemic level of 60 per cent seen in 2019.

But while the overall proportion of children was lower, the Canadian Survey on Early Learning and Child Care in Canada and the Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements showed the number of children receiving these services depended on the type of arrangement.

In 2023, the proportion of children in centre-based child-care actually exceeded 2019 levels, with more than one-third in the five-and-under age group attending, while that number sat at 31 per cent pre-pandemic.

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She noted they looked at the kinds of reasons parents didn't use child care, the top being they preferred to stay home or were on parental leave, while costs or wait-lists were the next biggest reasons.

University of Manitoba sociology professor Susan Prentice, who studies child-care policy, said there are multiple reasons why families are trying to use the service and there's a compounding effect to the issue.

She said first is there's more awareness "than ever before" that quality child care is good for children's development, but while some still note cost as an issue, Prentice said the price has still fallen "dramatically" across the country.

"Many families who might have wanted to use licensed child care but who were priced out now begin to look for a space," she told Global News.

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Sharon Gregson of the Coalition of Child Care Advocates told Global News in an email that Ottawa's agreements have changed how Canadians see child care.

"The expectation of parents now is that they should not only have access to licensed child care but also that it should cost no more than \$10 a day," she wrote.

While the number of children in child-care has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, actually finding a space is still difficult, with the agency showing the proportion of parents reporting difficulty finding available care increased from 53 per cent in 2019 to 62 per cent just four years later.

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Part of the difficulty comes from demand. YMCA Canada vice-president of government relations and advocacy Jessica Lue said that as more affordable child care becomes available, more people are going to seek it out.

To be able to meet that demand, however, is to have the staff to do so and Lue said more needs to be done to have an educated and experienced workforce.

“A well-supported and compensated professional early childhood educator workforce is the lynchpin to a high-quality system and to ensuring that we can meet demand today and expand as part of the Canada-wide Early Learning and Childcare System,” she said in an interview with Global News.

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Statistics Canada found more than one-quarter of children not in child care are on a wait-list, with 26 per cent of parents with children five and under reporting such an issue, compared with 19 per cent in 2022.

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[Prentice] also noted that when parents wait to get a space, there is also the issue of them resorting to unlicensed child care, which itself can be a danger because in some cases it may not meet certain safety standards or even see basic criminal checks.

Improvements are needed, but advocates say the reduction in costs for parents is still a good thing, even with demand, because it allows for more accessibility.

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Lue said there are still changes that should be considered in future iterations of the Canada-wide system, specifically in services for children over six, as she said the current system only deals with children under that age. Such a change could help parents continue to support their children even after they’ve aged out of the day-care system.

“We know that learning happens after age six as well,” Lue said. “A lot of families will have children going to early years programs because they’re under six, but also children who are in school and looking for before and after school.”

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<https://globalnews.ca/news/10149071/child-care-canada/> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/access> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9026> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/fees>