

City daycare ratings go public [CA-ON]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Parents can now check online how well their child's care stacks up in random spot checks.

Toronto has become the first municipality in Canada to post ratings of daycare centres on the web & some 650 of them.

The city conducts at least two random spot checks of centres with subsidized spots every year, rating them on a long list of criteria including interactions with teachers, learning activities, types of toys and food served.

"This allows parents to see what makes a good quality child-care centre," though it isn't all the information parents need, said Brenda Patterson, general manager of children's services.

"Nothing replaces picking up your child and seeing whether your child is happy."

The rating system, based on specific categories, measures 650 of the 900 daycares that receive funding for subsidized spaces. Twenty-two staffers conduct inspections every year, but this is first time the information is being made public.

"If we are measuring this, this should be public. We should share this information. Why should it be secret?" Patterson said.

She believes that, in addition to helping parents make informed decisions, releasing the ratings will also be an incentive to improve the overall quality of child care in the city.

This move comes on the heels of a Star investigation last year into how daycares are regulated in Ontario.

The series documented cases of repeated problems with substandard care & including major health and safety issues & yet the province allowed dozens of centres to stay open on provisional licences.

Since that series appeared, Queen's Park now posts information on its website about daycares, including whether they are operating with licence restrictions.

However, the city's rating system, which was unveiled at a news conference yesterday at the high-scoring City Kids daycare on Bathurst St. near Front St., goes much further, rating each category on a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 being the best. A rating of 3 is considered to be meeting expectations & 96 per cent of centres received an average score of at least 3 last year.

Patterson said the city would be reluctant to close a centre immediately because of the chaos it would create for parents. Instead, the city works with the centre to improve it and conducts more inspections.

Councillor Joe Mihevc, who chairs the community development and recreation committee, said he expects daycares not part of the rating system will clamour to be evaluated. "Parents will be asking that they be rated," he said.

"Once you put the information on the Net, it becomes accountability, and that accountability makes all the difference in the world."

The city could consider evaluating other programs for a small fee, he said.

Mihevc conceded that fly-by-night daycares would not be rated under the current system, but he believes more scrutiny will lead to better overall care.

The rating system also won't improve access to licensed child care, he said. More than 11,000 children are waiting for a subsidized spot in Toronto.

Some parents, after checking the ratings, may seek out a particular centre with high scores, but Patterson said the main factor is usually location.

Ultimately, she hopes the ratings will prompt parents to discuss scores with child-care operators and what can be done to improve them. She cautioned that the ratings are merely a snapshot of the day an evaluation was done.

"I don't want parents to be jerking kids out of child-care centres," she said, adding the city monitors centres between annual evaluations.

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Centres are rated on a range of issues from physical environment to how often toys are washed.

If a child's hands are not washed before a snack or meal, the centre would score only a 1.

A centre won't get a 3 if play equipment, toys and materials don't represent a diverse range of cultures, races and abilities.

Each centre is compared with the city's average in each category. Those scoring below 3 in any area are given a date by which they must meet expectations or face sanctions, which could include losing a fee subsidy.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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