

Daycare an oasis amid poverty [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

While bulldozers demolish apartment buildings around them, some of the city's most vulnerable children giggle as they dip small brushes into paint and fill blank sheets of paper with vibrant colours.

For the youngsters who come here, some from homes broken by drugs, abuse and poverty, the city-run Regent Park Childcare Centre is an oasis.

An ongoing Toronto Star investigation has found serious problems in some Ontario daycares, including children being hit and kicked, forcibly confined, fed allergy-triggering food that nearly ended their lives, left alone in public places and cared for in centres that are illegal or fall below minimum provincial standards for daycares.

The Star also found childcare centres doing an excellent job. Regent Park is one of them.

"I couldn't be happier with this place," says Ismaham Salah, a single mother who attends school during the day and needs daycare for her 2-year-old daughter, Samira.

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Regent Park has long been a symbol of urban decay in Toronto. The massive downtown public housing project is in the early stages of a \$1 billion redevelopment that will see nearly 2,100 rent-geared-to-income units razed and replaced with mixed housing.

In a Dundas St. E. building in one corner of the disappearing project, a team of dedicated early education professionals are engaged in one of the city's most ambitious childcare efforts. Staff qualifications at the centre exceed provincial standards for daycare workers.

Fees for the 40 children who come here &em; from \$33 a day for school age children to \$73 a day for infants &em; are entirely subsidized by government. And while the rates are higher than at most privately run childcare centres, the results speak for themselves.

Inside, children greet visitors with bright smiles and contagious laughter. The rooms are bright and airy, walls are covered with children's art and instructors kneel to give a steady supply of hugs.

Only a few hundred metres away from scenes of poverty, drug use and gang activity, four toddlers huddle around an easel and create impressionistic art with markers. Parents sometimes drop by. In one corner, a young mother gently bounces her baby on her lap and whispers in her ear.

In the context of Toronto childcare, staff at Regent Park are a kind of elite special operations unit. They all hold early childhood education (ECE) diplomas. That's not the case in most childcare centres across Ontario. Provincial legislation only requires a small number of staff &em; the equivalent of about one in each room of a centre &em; to have ECE qualifications.

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Regent Park is one of only three city-run childcare centres with early intervention programs designed to address the special needs of children in low-income neighbourhoods &em; the others are Galloway Childcare Centre in Scarborough and Albion Childcare Centre in Etobicoke.

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The wrecking ball will hit the childcare centre next fall, giving the city a year to relocate the children.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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