

Baby, is it tough to get into a good day care [CA-AB]^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

Shortage of spaces means waiting lists can stretch to two years.

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While critics lash the Harper government for its decision to give parents a \$100 monthly payout for children under six instead of building a better day-care system, the shortage of day-care spaces is already with us.

Try getting your kids into one of the better-quality non-profit centres, the ones with certification by the Child and Family Resource Association that require a certain percentage of the staff to have a diploma in early childhood education and a strong educational component.

That could take a couple of years.

Or try living in a suburb like Spruce Grove or Stony Plain, where day-care centres also have waiting lists and some parents have to bring their kids into Edmonton.

Melanie Bielby, a Spruce Grove single mother with three kids between the ages of two and five, has had a great deal of stress related to child care over the past few years.

Currently, two of her kids are in a day-care centre in Stony Plain and the youngest is in a day home in Spruce Grove.

There is no subsidy for the day home, so she is paying hundreds more per month for child care than she would at a subsidized day care, while trying to raise her kids on a \$13-per-hour job at a stair-assembling plant.

At one point she had to quit a course at NAIT because of child-care problems, and lost her space in a Spruce Grove day-care centre because of disagreements with the manager.

She'd like to see a non-profit day care in Spruce Grove, and even asked her local city council to open one like the town of Beaumont did, but was unsuccessful.

"I would have preferred to be a stay-at-home mom, but that's impossible because I can't afford to," Bielby says.

"I want the day care to raise them the way I would raise them. They spend eight, nine hours a day at the day care, and that's a lot of time."

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[Critics] shudder to think what the situation will be like when the new child credit of the Harper government takes effect in Alberta next March.

Not that the Liberals were great proponents of day care.

They promised a national day-care program from the 1993 election on, but didn't get around to doing anything about it until last year, finally committing to a \$5-billion program and signing agreements with the provinces.

It seemed like a good example of federalism. The provinces had a say in how the money would be spent, and each signed a separate agreement to reflect their own regional needs.

The five-year agreement with Alberta matched the provincial \$70-million contribution to day care with federal dollars. The money is used to top up wages for qualified staff.

It is also used to extend the range of incomes that families qualify for subsidy, and to provide subsidies for parents who put their preschool children into stimulating programs, including play school, whether they work or stay at home.

And it goes to support day care for disabled children.

The provincial government liked the deal and so did the day-care establishment -- especially the part that allowed them to pay staff a little more.

Day-care workers are notoriously underpaid, in a boom economy where there are plenty of well-paying jobs.

ALTA. COOL TO HARPER PLAN

The Harper government, in one of its five priorities and key election planks, will scrap the program after the first year, replacing it with a \$100-per-month payment to parents for children under six.

Critics have said the new program will not do anything for child care in an era when the majority of women work.

It's not only the "special-interest groups" that oppose the Harper plan. Data indicate that the majority of Albertans are also cold to the idea, according to a poll of 800 people in April by Viewpoints Research for Public Interest Alberta.

Only 36.6 per cent of Albertans support or strongly support the Harper program, while 50.3 per cent are opposed and 13 per cent don't know.

In Edmonton support is only at 22 per cent.

The survey, which has a margin of error of 3.4 per cent, 19 times out of 20, also shows a high level of support (61 per cent) right here in Tory Alberta for the province to continue paying the full cost of the Liberal program when the new government pulls out.

Day-care advocates have hopes that the Alberta government will extend the program past March 2007, but with the upcoming Conservative leadership race they're not counting their chickens.

But they'll likely be able to continue counting a lot of families on their waiting lists.

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