

At the end of the daycare queue [CA]^[1]

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Source: Toronto Star [p.A18]

Format: Article

Publication Date: 27 Dec 2005

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

When I found out I was pregnant, the last thing on my mind was daycare.

So when my husband and I started calling child-care centres last spring, two months before our daughter was born, we were astonished to learn we were already too late.

Daycare waiting lists in Toronto are often measured in years, and parents who don't sign up as soon as they conceive can be out of luck. That leaves many new mothers and fathers fretting less about sleepless nights and developmental milestones than who will take care of their children when they return to work.

It's a simple matter of supply and demand. There are 2,471 spots for infants - defined as younger than 18 months old - at licensed child-care centres in Toronto. At the same time, about 40,000 babies are born each year in the city.

The lack of licensed child-care spaces is particularly acute in our neighbourhood, where finding a spot for a baby at a local daycare is more competitive than gaining admission to an Ivy League university.

According to the buzz in local parents groups, at least, our area boasts one of the densest concentrations of young children in the country. But due to the high staff ratios required by the government to care for infants, most child-care centres in the vicinity take only older children.

The handful that do offer infant spaces have given us little encouragement. One has not returned my calls. Another so much as said our daughter's name would not reach the top of its infant waiting list until she is ready to start kindergarten.

Still another has an 18-month waiting list. The last time I rang, 9 families were still ahead of us.

Demand for spots in licensed daycare centres vastly outstrips supply. Many parents turn, instead, to nannies, home daycares, both licensed and unlicensed, and family members to take care of their children.

With the right caregiver, these can be good options. Indeed, not all working parents need or want full-time, formal daycare.

But when so many families seek the security, structured environment and educational programs of licensed child-care centres, why are so many being left in the lurch?

Politicians have pledged for years to improve daycare. The issue has again hit the national agenda in the latest federal election. But the parties are split sharply on how best to provide it, and none offers immediate solutions.

Conservative leader Stephen Harper plans to give parents \$1,200 a year for each child under the age of 6 to spend as they see fit. It's about choice, goes his mantra.

True, formal child-care centres don't meet the needs of all parents, particularly those who work outside conventional business hours or need only part-time care for their children.

But Harper's proposal would pay for less than one month of daycare at the going rate in Toronto. And it still doesn't help many families like mine who can't find child-care spots at any price. That's not much of a choice.

The Liberal plan to give money to the provinces to create new daycare spaces, already in the works, comes closer to the mark. But the new funding will still take years to have much effect.

Our daughter is now on waiting lists at several child-care centres downtown, where infant spaces are more readily available. We are also considering sharing a nanny with another family in our neighbourhood. And if we are still high and dry by the time my maternity leave ends, a family member has kindly offered to step into the breach.

We have child-care options that many people do not. Our daughter will be well looked after no matter which route we take.

But I have been left to wonder what kind of a society gives such short shrift to the development and well-being of its young children and the

needs of working parents.

And why are we leaving so much to chance?

* Ann Perry is a member of the Toronto Star's editorial board.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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