

# Tweens squeezed for after-school care [CA-ON]<sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** Toronto Star

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 3 Dec 2004

## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

Maureen Jackson was hit by a wave of panic as she fought her way through rush-hour traffic. The school bell had rung more than an hour earlier, dismissing her children, ages 6 and 9. No one had been there to pick them up.

"The adrenaline was pumping," she recalls of frantic minutes en route to Daystrom Public School near Weston Rd. and Finch Ave. "It was the drive from hell."

Jackson, a single mother and child-care worker whose shift ends at 4:45 p.m., had made arrangements. But the friend who was supposed to collect the children fell asleep. Jackson found out when she telephoned to say she was on her way.

She found the kids in the schoolyard, fine though a bit rattled.

But for her, the memory of that afternoon in September and the fear of what could have happened lingered. It took the form of a nagging anxiety that set in during her last hour of work. Last year, the children were in after-school care every day at Daystrom. This year, a shortage of spaces meant they had spots only three days a week. The other two she had to juggle &mdash; and worry.

Jackson is not alone. The after-school abyss &mdash; that window between when school gets out and the standard workday ends &mdash; is among the highest-stress periods of the day for many parents.

In many places offering affordable after-school care &mdash; like Daystrom, which charges \$20 a month, but this year can't provide enough spots every day because of funding constraints &mdash; the demand outstrips supply. An array of organizations runs programs across the GTA, from licensed school-based providers to the YMCA, neighbourhood centres, Boys' and Girls' Clubs, Parks and Recreation, and many offer subsidies. But they are not uniformly available. Costs, quality and programs vary, making it tough for parents to navigate. At the same time, corporate subsidies for many programs tend to be short-term, leaving organizers scrambling and future viability uncertain.

Even families who can afford to pay a typical fee of \$200-plus a month can face waiting lists for spots at convenient locations, such as in their child's school. Supervised care may be available at other sites, but parents then face the obstacle of how to safely transport their children.

Child-care advocates have long been fighting for a national system of care and education for children in the early years. But despite an equally piecemeal and patchwork system for school-age kids, there has been little outcry about the needs of that age group.

"I think people just suffer in silence," says Lorna Weigand, a founding member of the Middle Years Matter Coalition, a Toronto group launched earlier this year to raise public awareness and lobby for the needs of children age 6 to 12.

To the coalition &mdash; which includes representatives from organizations like Toronto Public Health, neighbourhood agencies, Children's Aid Society of Toronto, Toronto Parks and Recreation and the Toronto Public Library &mdash; the risk is too high. Lack of convenient and affordable quality after-school care translates to families under stress.

In the last few weeks, many child-care advocates have been encouraged by plans announced by Ottawa and the province to implement a new learning and care program.

But so far, it's all about children under 6, and the coalition doesn't want it to stop there. It plans to speak up for services to support families throughout the continuum of childhood.

Others in the community also recognize the need.

"All the good work that happened in the early years has to be continued in the middle years age group," says Maureen Adams, vice-president of allocations for the United Way of Greater Toronto.

"People take chances," says David Fleming, assistant director of intake with the Children's Aid Society of Toronto. "They don't come to our attention in large numbers, but I believe they're out there. I think there are a lot of parents crossing their fingers."

Jennifer Jenkins, professor of human development and applied psychology at OISE/ U of T and a specialist in delinquency prevention, agrees that supervision after school is important.

"There is evidence that you get higher incidence of delinquency between those hours," she says. "Studies show that when parents know where kids are, what they are up to and who they are with, they are better off."

It's no wonder this period of the day can affect productivity among anxious working parents.

"The biggest parental anxiety is `Do I know where my kids are, do I know what my kids are doing, do I know who they're doing it with?'" says Nora Spinks, president of consulting firm Work-Life Harmony Enterprises in Toronto.

And because those worries are distracting and cause stress, after-school child care "is very much an employee issue."

The middle years coalition wants to move these concerns up the agenda. It is working on a position paper to present to federal and provincial ministers when they get together to discuss child care in January. It is also assembling the latest research on the needs of kids in the middle years, and putting together a generic funding proposal for organizations which, in the meantime, want to set up after-school care to address the shortage.

As well, Weigand recently joined the working group of the new Mayor's Roundtable on Children, Youth and Education, which will advise Mayor David Miller and city council on policies, programs and services.

In Toronto, schools with after-school programs are restricted to a limited number of spots by lack of space, says Petr Varmuza, director of child care services for the City of Toronto.

"It's frustrating when you're willing to pay \$10 or \$15 a day and it doesn't exist."

Weigand says focusing all our energy on early childhood care and education rather than the whole spectrum of childhood makes no sense and has serious ramifications for kids, families and children down the road.

"It's the same child who's going to be 2 and 10 and 17."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

**Region:** Canada <sup>[2]</sup>

Ontario <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** integration <sup>[4]</sup>

school system <sup>[5]</sup>

school-age <sup>[6]</sup>

work/life balance <sup>[7]</sup>

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