

# Unlicensed day cares common in province [CA-NB] <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** New Brunswick Telegraph Journal

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 4 Nov 2003

## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

At a day care tucked away on a shady Fredericton side street, a clutch of three-year-olds sit around a low table, pensively munching on sandwiches while staff walk to and fro, getting ready for an afternoon skating trip.

A room not far away is abuzz with children a year older, while upstairs, infants are being changed, fed, or napping, while a particularly energetic toddler toddles from room to room. The walls and doors are trimmed in bright yellow, red and blue, and covered with seasonal decorations - red and orange leaves, pumpkins, drawings of witches. Classical music whispers from a radio.

This scene may be life more or less as usual at the day care, but it's probably far from typical for most children of working New Brunswickers. New Brunswick has less licensed day care space per child than the Canadian average, and the shortage is particularly acute in the province's rural areas. According to a federal study released last spring, young children in the Hampton-Sussex area seem to be lagging the national average in some key areas of development - and a dearth of licensed day care facilities in the area could be to blame.

The study, *Understanding the Early Years: Early Childhood Development in Hampton/Sussex, New Brunswick*, tested kindergarten children living in the area in a number of categories having to do with their mental and social development. The Hampton/Sussex children, according to the study, scored well in many categories of the test, including communication skills, general knowledge and social competence. But they were weak in language and cognitive development and emotional health and maturity.

The paper, done for Human Resources Development Canada by Douglas Willms, a professor of education at the University of New Brunswick, also looked at the environment in which the children were growing - their families and communities, for example. It suggested that the children's high scores in many areas of the testing were due largely to factors such as good parenting, safe streets and high levels of "social support" - availability of neighbours to provide babysitting in a pinch, for example.

According to the study, a slightly higher percentage of five- and six-year-olds in Hampton/Sussex - 44.5 per cent - compared to in Canada as a whole - 43.4 per cent - receive care for at least part of the day by someone other than their parents. Yet only 0.3 per cent of the children in these communities received formal, licensed day care, compared to the national average of eight per cent.

Quality day care, Dr. Willms wrote, seems to result in higher test scores, especially among children from lower-income families, and also a greater ability to learn throughout life.

Dr. Willms's findings seem in line with what many parents in the area are thinking. When parents, child-care workers and others met in Sussex last September to discuss child care in rural New Brunswick, many were "passionate" about the importance for young children of "developmentally appropriate" programs - with activities selected to match children's ages - such as those that licensed day cares typically offer, says Rosella Melanson, executive director of New Brunswick's Advisory Council on the Status of Women.

But the reality, she says, is that a shortage of licensed day care space has many parents with little other option than to entrust their children with unlicensed caretakers - under-the-table day cares, babysitters, or grandmother, for example.

Unlicensed day care isn't necessarily worse than licensed, Ms. Melanson says. But, because unlicensed arrangements are unregulated, there's nothing preventing them from having more children per adult than licensed day cares, and therefore less attention and supervision per child - or from providing little more in the way of "programming" than daytime television.

Because unlicensed day cares work under the table, it's impossible to estimate how many of them there are in the province, and how many children attend them, Ms. Melanson says.

- reprinted from the New Brunswick Telegraph Journal

**Region:** New Brunswick <sup>[2]</sup>

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