

Waiting lists for Vancouver day cares can be two years, 1,100 names long [CA-BC] ^[1]

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Source: Vancouver Sun

Format: Article

Publication Date: 20 Sep 2002

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Although many Vancouver working women have gone to extraordinary lengths to provide day care for their children, none have gone as far as the British mother who on Thursday undertook a Lady-Godiva-like protest.

They have put their names on waiting lists years in advance of birth and they've tried to grab -- and pay for -- spots months in advance of returning to work. Some have even offered bribes to day-care centres to move their children up waiting lists, said Sandra Menzer, executive director of the Vancouver Society of Children's Centres.

"Seventy per cent of moms now with kids under the age of 12 are working so those children are somewhere, or need to be somewhere," Menzer said. "And there's just such a shortage of what we call regulated, group child-care spaces."

Menzer knows about the scarcity. Her society has 500 spaces in 10 centres around the city including downtown's Dorothy Lamb Centre and Library Square. The society's waiting list, however, is 1,100 names long.

She said the price tag is another big issue. It costs the Vancouver Society \$1,500 per month to provide an infant spot (for children under three). It charges parents \$945 per month.

Menzer said people are just starting to recognize how important the first six years are to children's development and governments need to put resources into the effort.

"At all levels not just provincially, because I know people tend to dump on the provincial government," Menzer said. "The feds have been talking about this for a number of years as well."

The province, in January, cut \$15 million from a before-and-after school program that was seen as a bridge toward universal day care.

The concerns are universal around the world, and in the U.K., Jacqueline de Baer, a 45-year-old mother of four and successful businesswoman, did disrobe Thursday in London and followed in Lady Godiva's hoof-steps. She was looking for attention for her campaign to win a 50-per-cent child-care tax credit for working parents.

BBC's Internet news service reported that, in homage to Godiva's 11th-century nude ride through Coventry to gain tax reform, de Baer stripped to a flesh-coloured body stocking, hopped on a former Spanish police horse and rode to Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown on Downing Street.

In Vancouver, Donna Braaten took a different tack. Director of research and development for the software-maker Crystal Decisions and a mother of two, she joined the Vancouver Society of Children's Centres board of directors following her own personal experience.

Braaten and her husband used to walk by the Dorothy Lamb Centre on False Creek when they lived in Yaletown. With laughing children playing in a nearby park, close to the lapping waters of the inlet, it seemed a perfect environment for their child when they decided to conceive.

But when they walked into the centre, they found a lengthy waiting list and started hearing the stories of families waiting up to two years for spaces.

"It was a huge eye-opener for me," Braaten said. "I thought it was just a choice of whether or not to leave my children in day care."

She said those thoughts quickly turned to "oh my God, am I going to be able to get into any day care. You start off really picky looking into facilities and you realize if you get into any spot downtown you're really lucky."

Provincial statistics show 7,500 licensed day-care spaces across Vancouver.

Pam Best, program director for the West Coast Child Care Resource Centre, said there are also in-home and out-of-school programs.

However, that is only the tip of the situation. Best said of children in some form of child care, 79 per cent are in unlicensed or illegal situations. She said there needs to be more affordable, licensed, quality spaces and the priority of governments should be to provide operating grants that make that possible.

Menzer said non-profits like hers run into difficulties filling the gap between what care costs and what parents can afford to pay.

With fees at the Vancouver Society's centres ranging from \$610 a month for children between three and 12 and \$945 for infants, Braaten said making sure that day care doesn't create another elite in society should be another consideration.

"You want it to be . . . reflective of what's in the community," she said. "If you really want to keep it so it's not an elite day care, then the funding has got to come from somewhere else."

Menzer said parents are already under financial pressure. She knows of parents who have cut maternity leaves short because they can't afford an extended period with reduced income.

She added the need is growing, particularly in the downtown. There, the Yaletown, Coal Harbour and Concorde Pacific communities are growing by leaps and bounds and attracting many families with children.

"We're seeming to have a little bit of a baby boom in Vancouver," she said. "Especially in the downtown core."

-Reprinted from The Vancouver Sun

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