

# Day cares merit more care: Those who keep our children safe deserve a wage that they can live on [CA-NS] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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### EXCERPTS:

It is the single thing that parents agree on -- if your kids aren't safe, you can't work. Set aside the debate about whether a parent, almost always the mother, should stay home, and you have a nation of parents who must find some kind of child care for the first 13 years of a child's life.

However, all the caring in the world aside, at one time or another, most parents have left their child in a place or with a person they weren't quite sure about. No one talks about it, but we all recall the times when focusing on a task was tough because you weren't completely sure your child was being well cared for.

You can get that feeling even when you do everything according to the rulebook. We placed an ad in the newspaper and asked for references. We called those references and asked twice as many questions as you would in a normal interview, and plenty that were downright personal. Do you smoke? Watch soap operas? So, do you just love babies?

It was easy to feel as if you hadn't done quite enough fact-checking. One friend did her own investigating, which involved driving by the homes of potential candidates. She went so far as to pretend to be lost and then asked neighbours about the woman she wanted to hire. After she hired a sitter, she raced out of work at odd times to "surprise" her. That was in the days before parents paid a security firm to install a hidden camera in a family room.

When you are counting on someone to take care of the thing you value most, it is easy to get nutty. For every great child-care provider I was fortunate to know, there were two we fired. Our first babysitter baked cakes, cuddled the kids and made their time together wonderful. When we had to move, we considered buying her a car so she could commute to our new home, but realized there was no sensible solution. We had to say goodbye.

What followed was a young woman too busy trying to keep a relationship alive to notice what the kids were doing. There was another keen to take the job, but who a week later acknowledged, "maybe I'm not a kid person." Then there was one great woman who came for a few hours after school, until I could get home, and was as dependable as a sunrise.

The hit-and-miss aspect of hiring an employee is only one reason many parents decide to enrol their children in a day care. In a great daycare, your child makes friends, brings home amazing art and is well prepared for primary. There are school teachers who swear by day care students who often arrive knowing more than how to play well with others.

My children loved their daycare teachers and raced up a set of stairs to see their friends every morning.

The problem in Nova Scotia is not that there aren't excellent, well-run day cares willing to sign up new students. These facilities are staffed, usually, by young women who have gone to university to study early child-care development.

The problem is that these hard-working, enthused employees who love children are paid horrible wages. The parents' payments alone can't cover the costs, and we live in a society that pays lip service to the well-being of children.

National child-care funding makes for wonderful budget talk, but delivering on the promises is another thing. It took the federal government two years to pass out extra dollars for daycare to the provinces. That money will help Nova Scotia daycare staff, but it is only a first step in giving them a living wage.

While Canadian school teachers continue to make excellent wages, child-care educators make do on as little as \$17,000 a year. I have met many dedicated preschool teachers who work nights to supplement their daytime income.

Nova Scotia now has \$9.1 million it can direct toward quality child care.

That sounds great, but it will not erase the problem of low wages for those who care for our smallest citizens. The money from Ottawa means a worker may see their annual income go up to \$20,000 per year.

In March 2001, the Nova Scotia Child Care Funding Review found wages of child care staff are generally at or below poverty level. That means the average hourly wage of a child-care teacher was \$8.51 an hour. Compare that with the average hourly industrial wage of \$18.17 per hour.

Many staff want more training, but the report found low wages are a barrier to training. If we paid half as much attention to the people who teach the very young, as we did to those who teach older children, there would be huge payoffs. In March, Nova Scotia spent half the Canadian average per child in regulated care.

Well run early childhood education does more than provide parents with peace of mind while they work. We collect huge dividends when these well-adjusted, well-educated children move on to elementary school, bringing with them a love of learning. Paying early child-care teachers decent wages is the first step to acknowledging the valuable work they do.

We need to properly staff the Department of Community Services so day cares have the support they need.

The Nova Scotia government has plenty of people waiting in the money line, but perhaps none so deserving as the people who make it possible for parents to work and children to be safe.

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