

Working parents scramble to find child care when the kids are sick [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Your kid is sick, but you're needed on the job.

Most working parents have faced the dilemma of a child who comes down with a flu, fever, ear infection or other "minor" illness that means he or she shouldn't be sent to school or regular child care.

Just ask Ann and John Fournier, letter carriers in Ottawa, who've had to scramble more times than they can count to get alternative care for their three youngsters when they've been ill.

In late July, for instance, the couple's middle child, nine-year-old Madeleine, had an ear infection so she couldn't attend summer camp for a day.

"If your child is sick and you have to pay for somebody to come in on top of what you're already paying for care, it really cuts into your budget," says Ann Fournier, 39.

Five years ago, though, the Fourniers' back-up babysitting headaches were eased thanks to a special fund paid for by Canada Post and administered by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers.

Canada Post is among a growing -- but still small -- number of employers who are helping workers with sick-child care needs.

Parents like the Fourniers can call the Short Term Child Care Program of Andrew Fleck Child Care Services, which sends a caregiver to their home. The cost of \$9.50 an hour is covered by the special fund. Fournier has called for fill-in help on a 24-hour phone line just a couple of hours before she has had to start her 7 a.m. shift.

The Andrew Fleck program, previously funded by the Ontario government, now consists of a consortium of employers who pay a service-access fee to link their workers to back-up child care.

The consortium also includes the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, the County of Carleton Law Association, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp., Nortel Networks and Nepean Hydro. But not all consortium members subsidize the cost of emergency care -- in most cases, the burden of payment still falls on the parents.

Jamie Kass, child-care co-ordinator for the postal workers' union, says about 3,000 Canada Post employees have access to the service in the Ottawa area.

Considering the growth in double-income families, and the fact that more than 70 per cent of mothers with kids up to age 14 are in the workforce and there are 1.4 million kids in regular child care, there's a lot of potential extra spending for parents when their kids get sick, says Sandra Griffin, executive director of the Canadian Child Care Federation in Ottawa.

Hiring back-up care also puts parents under more stress worrying about an emergency caregiver they know little about, adds Griffin.

Fournier said she was nervous the first time she used back-up child care.

"I was worried about how it was going to work, but the sitter came into my home with a bag full of games and things, and then I knew my kids were in pretty good hands."

The sick-child care movement is far more organized in the U.S., where the National Association for Sick Child Day Care pushes for quality emergency care -- both at licensed centres and at parents' homes.

The non-profit association comprises pediatricians and others who provide and support back-up child care, says its president, Dr. Jacqueline Stewart, a pediatrician in Birmingham, Ala. She says she's had queries from Canadian child-care experts looking for more information on programs to care for sick kids.

Each day, more than 350,000 American kids under 14 with both parents working are too sick to attend school or child care, and working mothers miss five to 29 days a year of work caring for sick kids, at a cost to employers of \$2 billion to \$12 billion US annually, says the

association (www.nascd.com/index.htm ^[2]).

With the tight labour market and employers working to cut lost work days, centres that provide back-up child care are increasingly common in part because it's cost-effective for companies, Stewart says by phone from one of the two Hugs and Kisses sick-child care centres she runs with the help of nurses.

More than 300 U.S. centres like Stewart's now offer care specifically for sick kids, compared to 100 a decade ago, says the association.

In Canada, there's no central network or directory that parents can access to find quality care. So parents commonly rely on community services, family, friends or a private licensed service found in the phone book or on the Internet.

Griffin says the federation encourages companies to be more "family friendly" by letting parents work from home when the kids are sick, or providing time off for family emergencies.

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