

The daycare dilemma ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

For the first time in the history of our country, there are more women than men in the paid workforce. And despite the fact that working women still only make about 71 cents to every \$1 that men make, these numbers still mean that women's work is a huge portion of our gross domestic product, more than ever.

So why does our government ignore the needs of working mothers and mothers in general? Why must women go through such stress just to be able to work outside the home? Why are women taking part-time jobs, evening work, temporary contracts and work from home opportunities in numbers higher than ever before when they are also more highly educated than ever before, and indeed hold more post-secondary degrees than men?

The answer is simple. In Canada, it actually is almost impossible to "have it all." To be a working mom with your children in a stable and safe daycare environment is a dream many women just can't reach.

Despite the fact that women's contribution to the economy is huge, our government's contribution to women's work is minuscule. The Canadian government spends just 0.02 per cent of its GDP on early childhood education for three to six-year-olds, which is half of what it spends on all child care for children ages newborn to 12 years.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, just one quarter of children in Canada up to age six have access to a regulated daycare spot. And yet over two-thirds of women with a youngest child under age six are working.

What this means is that women are struggling to find reliable and safe care for their children. If we add into that total the number of women pursuing secondary and post-secondary education while also trying to secure child care, the numbers become even more alarming.

Anyone who has ever tried to secure a daycare spot for their child knows that it is nearly impossible, especially on short notice. Employers aren't likely to wait several months for a child-care opportunity to arise. So women are making do. They are engaging family and friends, sending their children to a mish-mash of care settings and programs in an attempt to keep their child safe while they work or attend school.

Unfortunately, the lack of choice and affordability means that some children end up in unsafe situations. Parents hire babysitters without training, or send their children to unlicensed home daycares, hoping and trusting that their child will be taken care of.

And usually it works out. Our two best child-care experiences have been with an untrained but experienced babysitter and an unlicensed home daycare.

And as we have seen too often, this can also end with tragic results.

In a daycare facility there are any number of adults present always able to watch the children, and the other adults.

We often hear of larger centers being shut down because of minor infractions or because an employee reported an abuse or negligence.

Unfortunately, in a home daycare setting or when inviting a babysitter into your home, there usually aren't other adults present to aid in child care or monitor the child-care supplier.

That is why many home daycares are licensed, providing a level of regulation consistent to that offered in larger facilities. And while this might mean more restrictions, less ease in setting up the centre, and higher costs to parents, it's often worth it.

As I've said, we've been fortunate to have found quality child care ourselves, but not until after we experienced horrible child care and from a licensed provider. Just because a facility or home daycare is licensed doesn't mean your child will receive the best care.

And most daycares (especially in unregulated homes) provide simply that - care and no education or development training. For a family such as ours with three children requiring care, two of whom need extra help meeting their developmental goals, having a parent at home became the only viable option.

For even if we could find quality care that we felt met their needs, the cost of such care for all three children would be about \$19,000 a

year. In order to help with that cost, the government provides us with \$2,400 a year (\$100 a month for each child under the age of six). It currently costs more to send a child to daycare than it does to pay tuition and books for university.

That taxable \$100 a month for children up to age six is our current government's answer to the child-care crisis. It does nothing to create more child-care spots, nothing to regulate current spots, nothing to enhance the education and employment standards for child-care workers. It's a drop in the bucket to what is really needed, albeit a costly one.

That money would be better spent on creating and supporting non-profit community-care centers, providing training for care providers, hiring more inspectors and redeveloping licensing criteria for short-term care environments, and subsidizing the costs of care at the source.

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