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High cost makes on-site daycare a rare perk [1]

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EXCERPTS

When Celina Costa became pregnant with her son Jack in 2005, the George Brown College professor was able to skip the stress of searching for daycare. Competition for spots is fierce in Toronto for infants younger than 18 months, but Ms. Costa knew that her employer offered a quality daycare program.

The fact the college offered on-site child care also helped her overcome the guilt she felt as a working mom.

"It was very hard to give up taking care of him, and I kept wondering if it was the right choice," says Ms. Costa, who now also has her 22-month-old daughter Stella in care at the college - itself named one of Canada's Top 25 Family-Friendly Employers for 2011.

"They're only small once, but my work was satisfying," Ms. Costa says. "Knowing they were going to be in a stimulating and positive environment where they could thrive made the transition much more bearable."

Having on-site child care provides a logistical advantage, too. When Jack fell recently and chipped a tooth, Ms. Costa was able to handle the situation within minutes.

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So why don't more companies offer child care to employees?

The biggest reason is cost, says Lori Cranson, associate dean for community services and health sciences at George Brown. The school offers an early childhood education program, so its nine centres are also used as training facilities for students. The school provides care for 500 children, mostly infants to six-year-olds, including kindergarten in partnership with the Toronto District School Board, and before- and after-school care for children from ages six to 12. All the centres are not-for-profit.

"Most companies don't have expertise in running child care centres - their business is whatever their business is. And there are regulations," Ms. Cranson says.

Ontario employers must apply to the Ministry of Community and Social Services and meet the regulations of the Day Nurseries Act. "It takes a bit of work and detail if you're not familiar with the field of early childhood," she says, "but if a company hired an organization with expertise to do it, it really wouldn't be that difficult."

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The college gives employees a break financially, but only 15 George Brown employees have children enrolled in the non-profit centres, which charge a staff rate of $1,636 monthly for infants, $1,515 for toddlers and $1,165 for children in preschool or kindergarten. The rest of the children are from the community at large, often subsidized by Toronto Children's Services, and a few are the offspring of George Brown students.

"It's like a second mortgage," says Ms. Costa. "Because both my husband and I work, we don't receive any other funding. We're fortunate that we could make that choice but I have colleagues who haven't been able to afford to put their children here and have had to find alternative arrangements."

The biggest cost for child care is staff, says Moira Bell, manager of the Richmond Adelaide Child Care Centre, part of the George Brown network. "Our staff are unionized and get paid very well, from $45,000 up. Although we don't pay for space (the college provides that), there's the cost of running that space.

"Whenever costs go up, such as hydro, you have to increase the fees. Plus, every centre has a cook that cooks for the children, or catering that provides two snacks and lunch every day."

Being non-profit is an advantage, Ms. Bell believes, because the first concern is for the quality of care and not the bottom line. "That's not to say the bottom line doesn't count," she says. "You have to manage that bottom line, but the budget supports the quality of care."

Non-profit centres are also able to apply for subsidies, while for-profits can't, she notes.

Ms. Costa would like to see more employers offer daycare, but if it's very expensive it may alienate some employees, unless a subsidy is offered. Parents paying 50 per cent to 75 per cent of the cost would be acceptable, she notes.

"It may seem like a frivolous expense, to have quality subsidized daycare available for employees," she says. "But in the long run, it would pay off with happier employees - employees who don't have to take as many sick days, and who are better able to focus on their job during the day because they know that their kids are being well cared for."

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