

Mothers demand more affordable child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When Erin George found out she was pregnant, the first thing she did was rush to a child-care centre to put her not-yet born daughter on the waiting list. Then she called her husband with the news.

"Because I know how hard it is to get child care in this city," said George, holding her five-week-old daughter Quinn at Friday's press conference.

Even though maternity leave is only 12 months long, children are considered infants in the child-care system until they're 18 months old. That gap creates headaches for new mothers like George because there aren't a lot of spaces for infants in the system.

She spent the next few months placing her daughter on 12 waiting lists for 16 spaces at various child-care facilities in the city. Less than half of those were infant child-care spaces with only one conveniently located in George's neighbourhood.

All this, she said, when an expectant mother should be focusing on good pre-natal care and a healthy pregnancy.

A week after George gave birth, she was back on the telephone contacting the child-care centres where she had previously registered to confirm that her daughter was still on the waiting list and to give them her name and birth date.

"Rather than figuring out breast feeding and bonding, I was making all these phone calls," she said. It turned out that three of the day-care centres didn't have any record of her application for a child-care space.

If George doesn't find a spot, she's not sure what she and her husband will do. They can't call on grandparents to help out because neither set live in Toronto.

In the last 18 months, George said her neighbourhood has lost two day-care centres.

"And there's no discussion about how to replace those two centres," she said. "If there's a 10 per cent cut to the child-care budget next year, it will be devastating for all neighbourhoods."

Without a child-care space, either George or her husband will have to stay home with their daughter. She loves her job, wants to return work and said it would be impossible to survive on one salary.

On Mother's Day, the Mothers' Task Force on Child Care launched an initiative to find out from mothers like George how they felt about child-care offerings in Toronto.

After interviewing 1,000 parents about their experiences, the Task Force presented its report and recommendations at the Hester How Daycare Services on Friday.

Mothers said that quality is the most important factor when selecting a child-care provider, followed by location and cost. They spoke about having to wait years to find a space for their child in a licensed municipal or non-profit facility.

And if they're lucky enough to find a spot, the cost is staggering. Subsidies are too low and in very short supply, forcing many parents to go into debt to pay for child care.

Only 31 per cent felt that most child-care programs met their child's needs. Almost 70 per cent were in favour of the government regulating child-care providers to ensure quality standards are met.

Many wanted child-care centres located closer to home with extended hours that meet the needs of shift workers and others who work outside of the standard 9-5 Monday to Friday work day.

In Toronto, there are almost 270,000 children living between the ages of zero and nine. Yet licensed child-care centres only have enough spaces for 21 per cent of these children.

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