

Daycare escape leads to call for reform ^[1]

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 9 Sep 2011

EXCERPTS

It is every parent's nightmare.

But for 2-year-old Ria, who walked out of a Markham daycare undetected, crossed a busy parking lot and wandered into a nearby drugstore, it was just another childhood adventure.

"I went shopping," the gregarious toddler readily tells anyone who asks. "For cho-co-late."

Her mother, pediatrician Deepa Grewal, can chuckle now at her daughter's daring escapade.

But Grewal wasn't laughing on Aug. 16 when York Region Police called to say Ria and two other tots, just 18 and 19 months old and still in diapers, were found by Shoppers Drug Mart staff.

If something like this can happen to a pediatrician's child, what hope do other working parents have of finding safe child care?

Ontario's Ministry of Children and Youth Services suspended the licence of Markham Village Childcare on Aug. 31. A ministry order posted on the daycare's door said the centre had allowed eight children to escape from the playground, was providing half the regulated amount of food for the number of children enrolled and did not have a qualified supervisor.

The owner, Sharifah Amanda Ally, who works as a home-care nurse, did not respond to numerous requests for an interview. But her mother, Patsy Ally, an investor in the business, blamed the centre's supervisor for not checking the playground to see if the gate was closed. She said the centre ordered less food because too much was being thrown out.

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Grewal says the province needs to do more to help parents choose safe, high-quality child care.

The latest inspection reports for all regulated child care facilities are available on the education ministry website. Starting in November, all licensed operators will have to clearly post serious occurrences in their centres for a minimum of 10 days. Parents say they would like to see serious occurrences posted online too, but government officials say they can't do that until privacy concerns and other details are worked out.

Grewal says she chose the daycare a year ago because it was operated by a nurse from the hospital where she works. It also came highly recommended by a colleague - also a pediatrician - whose child attended the centre. She says few parents are aware of the government website.

"I think the website should be posted prominently on the front door of all daycares along with a number to call for parents to report problems," she says. She would also like all the licensing history of a centre available online, not just the most recent report.

Licensing history can be one indication of quality, especially if there are a series of provisional licences with failing grades in compliance areas, child care experts say.

But a licence is no guarantee of quality and in the case of Markham Village, doesn't ensure safety, either. Far more important, they say, is staff qualifications and the question of profit.

Volumes of Canadian and international research over several decades show that for-profit centres generally deliver poorer quality care than non-profit or public daycares, says Martha Friendly of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit. For-profits are also more likely to be closed by government officials for breaching basic health and safety standards, she adds.

About 25 per cent of child-care centres in Ontario are run as businesses. That is up from about 17 per cent a decade ago and is a reflection of the lack of government funding at a time when more than 77 per cent of Canadian mothers with young children are in the labour force. Without a provincial plan to ensure child care funding is supporting best practices, incidents like the missing toddlers at Markham Village Childcare will only continue, she adds.

In his 2009 report, provincial early learning adviser Charles Pascal recommended that all new child care spaces be operated by municipalities, school boards, post-secondary institutions and non-profit agencies.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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