

Diapers, daycares, and dissertations: How McGill is failing student parents ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

For a McGill grad student and the parent of a small child, Hanady Bani Hani has a surprisingly tidy apartment. A few of her daughter Tia's picture books littered the ground - otherwise, the place was spotless. But concealed behind the charming, orderly home I saw that evening was the story of a family struggling to stay afloat amidst McGill's persistent neglect of students with children. As 14 month-old Tia ambled around the apartment picking up toys and occasionally reaching for my recorder, Hanady described the difficulty of balancing life as a student and parent.

Hanady is a PhD student in Speech Therapy at McGill's Faculty of Medicine. One of her and her husband Rasheed's biggest stresses is the severe shortage of daycare spots at McGill and in Montreal. When Hanady became pregnant about a year into her studies, she and Rasheed began to call around to find a spot for their child. Rasheed called exactly 153 daycares, including the McGill Daycare Center and SSMU Daycare. The McGill daycares, notorious for their long waiting lists, had no spots available, and they were turned away by many of the other daycares in downtown Montreal, whose spots are often reserved for employees of specific companies like Hydro-Quebec or Desjardins.

Exploring daycares farther away posed other difficulties; the spots they found were over forty-five minutes away by car, and were of little help to the couple, who both work downtown.

Cost was another problem. Spots in public daycares such as McGill Daycare Center and SSMU Daycare go for \$7 per day, but are scarce. Private daycares, on the other hand, can cost from around \$45 per day to upwards of \$60.

Tia is not in daycare now. The couple experimented with hiring nannies, but found them to be unqualified and far too expensive (the cheapest nanny they found asked for \$15 an hour before tax, which came to about \$2400 per month).

To compensate, Hanady and Rasheed have to be creative in their scheduling, sacrificing time and career opportunities.

"Sometimes I'd have to work from home for a whole month because I didn't have anybody and I had to write my comps," Hanady explained, referring to the comprehensive exams PhD candidates are required to write. Other times, Rasheed would take days off work while Hanady went to school, and then Rasheed would work on the weekends. Or Rasheed would work in the morning and then spend the afternoon with Tia while Hanady studied.

Hanady's PhD program often requires her to study more than 12 hours a day, time that she can only find once Tia is asleep. As a result, it is not uncommon for her to study from eight or nine at night until the same time the next morning.

"Nobody understands this," she said. "Nobody can see this. By the end of the day they think, 'okay, what you're doing is so normal.' It's not."

Sleep deprivation isn't the only consequence of Hanady's schedule - it's also delaying her studies, both in terms of time and achievement. "I have to miss lots of opportunities," she said. These include missed lectures and workshops.

To say that the couple is disappointed with McGill's show of support would be an understatement. "McGill is not a place for a parent," Hanady said. "It's not friendly to mothers. You have to [act] as though you have nothing else but your studies while you have a baby at home... and McGill is all about requirements, all about achievement. [They] ask me to be a full time student and act as though I don't have any other responsibilities."

The McGill Daycare Center, known officially as the Centre de la Petite Enfance de McGill (CPE McGill), was founded in 1973 with the help of a federal grant. Located in an austere stone building at 3491 Peel Street, the center serves 106 children of McGill students, staff, and faculty. There are 783 children on the waiting list, which lasts about three years. Because the center is government-subsidized, those fortunate enough to have a space pay just \$7 a day.

The SSMU Daycare, located in the Brown Building, is the other government-subsidized daycare reserved specifically for the McGill community. It opened in 2004 on a part-time basis, until it began receiving government subsidies in 2007. Now it operates full-time, and, like McGill Daycare, charges \$7 a day. According to director Amy Vincent, the SSMU Daycare serves thirty-two children (18-60 months) and eight infants (0-18 months). There are 351 children on the waiting list, with priority given to undergraduates, then graduate students, then staff and faculty. Undergraduates generally get a spot within a year of applying.

According to Lisa Gallagher, the executive director of McGill Daycare, the biggest constraint on expanding daycare access is physical space. Daycares require large interior spaces as well as green space where the children can play, which must be within fifty meters of the center.

In spite of these constraints, the center is aware of the community's need for more daycare spots, and is working in collaboration with the Post-Graduate Student Society (PGSS) and the McGill Association of University Teachers (MAUT) to find a solution. They have until February 24 to apply to the government for new childcare spaces. "We're all putting our resources together and trying to actively find space to expand childcare services for the university community as a whole," said Gallagher.

Hanady's obstacles don't end with daycare. Little did she know that as an international student from Jordan, she was ineligible for many supportive services from both McGill and Quebec.

For starters, Hanady is on a scholarship, which she would lose if she went on maternity leave. And taking maternity leave would also mean she was no longer covered by her private health insurance.

"Can you imagine?" Hanady exclaimed. "You give birth, you're on maternity leave as an international student, and you don't have health insurance? If I'm not covered, how do I give birth? What would cover my delivery? What would cover my baby?"

Even more shocking to Hanady and Rasheed was the fact that Tia isn't covered by Quebec public health insurance because of her parents' international status, despite the fact that she was born in Canada and is a Canadian citizen.

"[The government] treats you as Canadian in terms of tax but they don't treat you as Canadian when you need health insurance," said Hanady.

The family is now covered by Blue Cross, which charges \$3800 a year for all of them, instead of the \$1500 the couple would be paying on their own. The consequences of the policy are not only financial, however. Many pediatricians won't take the baby if she's covered by private insurance, and those that will often have no spots left for new patients. "My baby doesn't have a pediatrician," Hanady said.

Of course, many of these issues are largely out of McGill's hands. But there seems to be a consensus among many student parents that a lack of information and understanding from the school's student services is compounding the problem.

For Ieva PaberzYTE, a PhD student in anthropology, one of the biggest issues is a lack of information. Ieva is an international student like Hanady, originally from Lithuania. She has two children: Joris, who is two years old, and Benas, who is fifteen months.

"What I really missed from McGill is information," she said. "I went to the office of international student services with several questions when I had just become pregnant with my first baby and they couldn't provide me answers. There's nobody [there] who specializes in family issues."

Ieva recalled how the office would often direct her to the website of the Quebec government for her questions about benefits. "There's so much on that website," she said. "What is the help in just giving out web pages? I can google these things myself."

Although Ieva explained that the Office of International Student Services had helped her a great deal in other areas, she felt alone when it came to family issues. For example, like so many other parents, Ieva found it nearly impossible to find a cheap daycare spot on her own. "I couldn't find any other solution than to just put all the money into daycare so I could start moving with my studies, otherwise I'd be kicked out of the country," she explained. "I really think that there should be a person in the international office who knows about family issues - how to find a daycare, what benefits you're eligible for, when to apply, how to apply for daycares, things about health insurance."

Julia Tischer, a PhD student in the School of Architecture, felt a similar lack of support on family issues. Julia was pregnant during her first term at McGill.

"First year was really hard," she recounted. "My whole pregnancy was hard, from the moment I started to show. There were lots of misconceptions, like [people would] think you're going to be a worse student or fall behind."

Once her daughter Mia was born, things were no different. "I was looked at differently," she said. "[People] would have comments that were hurtful about my performance as a student. It wasn't really direct and it was always cheerful, but I felt really bad about it."

For Julia, the issue wasn't a lack of balance between motherhood and student life, but of a lack of real inclusion for student parents at McGill. She explained that she thought having a child during her graduate studies was a positive thing - she felt mature enough to have a baby and it gave her something to work for - but that the lack of certain services like daycare, as well as a lack of understanding from administration, made things difficult for student parents.

"There was no network to fall back on," she said. "It was really me alone against my crazy schedule."

Given that the majority of student parents are grad students, the Post Graduate Student Society (PGSS) clearly has a role to play in providing childcare at McGill. Until recently, it hasn't done much. Though still in its infant years, the Family Care Committee of PGSS is working hard to change that.

The Family Care Committee was founded in the fall of 2008 to provide support for students caring for young dependents or for dependents who can no longer care for themselves, such as elderly parents. It organizes events for student parents, serves as a liaison between graduate students and administration, and seeks to represent the priorities of graduate students and their families at McGill.

For the past few years, the committee has been awarding need-based financial aid to graduate student parents in lump sums of \$3000, \$1500, and \$500. However, PGSS stopped the program when they realized that their status as a non-profit organization might make it illegal to pay dividends to their own members. According to Family Care Commissioner Irina Pivneva, PGSS is looking to circumvent this problem by transferring funds to McGill's financial aid office, so aid packages would be distributed by McGill rather than directly from PGSS. They hope to have the financial aid program reinstated by the end of the year.

The Family Care Committee has also been working with McGill Daycare and MAUT to find a solution for the severe shortage of daycare spots at McGill. Pivneva described three possible solutions in progress.

The most immediate of these is a potential partnership with a private daycare in Westmount to reserve a number of drop-in spots for PGSS members at a reduced rate for several hours a day. Pivneva and VP Finance and former Daily columnist Adrian Kaats, working with an architect and a daycare consultant, have also recently completed a feasibility study that would allow them to apply to the Minister of Education for a license to build a daycare on campus specifically for PGSS members. As a third avenue, the Family Care Committee is working with MAUT and McGill Daycare to assess the needs of the McGill community and possibly apply to the Minister of Education to expand the existing McGill Daycare to include more spots.

Although organizations like PGSS and McGill Daycare are working diligently towards this end, Pivneva hinted that other members of the McGill administration have not been so willing to help. She recounted a presentation that Principal Heather Munroe-Blum gave at a PGSS council meeting last spring. According to Pivneva, when asked about the issue of daycares, Munroe-Blum replied, "McGill is not in the business of daycare."

While PGSS and its partners work to secure funding and daycare spots for its members, many student parents are still struggling to balance student life with parenthood.

As of now, students are left with a patchwork of well-meaning but inadequate programs. The McGill Chaplaincy, for example, houses the McGill Student Parents' Network, a community of parents, children and student volunteers that hosts a number of programs to support families, such as in-house babysitting, and events that allow student parents to network and share stories. One program, "Study Saturdays," occurs once a month at the Thompson House and provides childcare services and a healthy lunch for a few hours while parents can study.

For Dareen Abd El-Aziz, a dental student and mother who takes advantage of these services whenever possible, it is not enough. As I struggled to play back Dareen's story with three-year-old Yaseen's exuberant rendition of the ABC's playing in the background, I imagined how difficult it must be to find quiet time to study when daycare is not an option. The Chaplaincy only provides three hours of free babysitting a week while the parents are home, and since the volunteer sitters are students, they are often busy themselves during exam periods when parents may need them most. Dareen also expressed a desire to have Study Saturdays more often, and a serious need for family residences at McGill.

In all my interviews with student parents, the same theme returned again and again: it's not enough. There are not enough daycare spots, not enough information. Not enough support from McGill administration or understanding from the community.

"I don't think they really care. I don't think there's a lot of understanding from the McGill administration in general," said Julia. "I felt really left out as a parent and student at the same time. It's hard enough, and there should really be more support."

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