

Finding the perfect after-school-care balance a challenge for parents ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

EDMONTON - Every morning on her way to work Laila Narayan takes a slight detour to drop off her eight-year-old son at the King Edward Child Care Centre.

For Narayan, one of the 80 per cent of Canadian working moms with six-to-12-year-old kids, after-school or out-of-school care is a necessity.

Narayan knows she's lucky to have access to an accredited out-of-school program that meets her summer scheduling needs so close to her job, and that another accredited program is available at Windsor Park Elementary, where her son Mithun Hitchcock starts Grade 4 in September.

The convenience is great, but the most important thing to Narayan is that Mithun is being cared for by caregivers with basic education in early childhood development, and that he feels comfortable, she says.

Mithun, who is an only child, says he likes playing with the other kids, and the creative activities he can take part in.

Although it's sometimes dismissed as babysitting or child minding, finding the right out-of-school care for your kids is as important as finding the right school, says Margaret Mykietyshyn, an instructor with the Early Childhood Learning program at Grant MacEwan University.

"An accredited or even just a good quality program goes much beyond what child minding or babysitting offers," she explains. It provides opportunities that not only meet a child's physical and developmental needs but their social and emotional needs as well.

And while the most convenient out-of-school program may be the one located in the same school your child attends, don't assume that makes it the best choice for your child, Mykietyshyn cautions.

Here are her tips for finding quality out of school care:

1. Start by figuring out what kind of child care meets your child's needs and family's needs. Take into account lifestyle, budget, times that care is required, and location. Often the decision comes down to location, Mykietyshyn says. If the program in the school your child attends isn't what you're looking for, there may be other programs, including day homes nearby that can transport your child to and from school.
2. Choose several program options to compare. Look for places that are licensed by the province, which means they meet minimum health and safety standards. Accredited facilities are a step above licensed ones because they have qualified care staff and offer opportunities for professional development, Mykietyshyn explains.
3. Visit each location more than once, dropping in at different times of the day to see how caregivers interact with the kids in their care. A quality program will have an open-door policy that allows parents to do that, welcomes them even, Mykietyshyn says.

As someone who instructs future child care providers, she admits she has a bias toward qualified caregivers. "I believe that children benefit from being in a program with trained staff who are educated and have a knowledge base about child development and programming, working with families and communication, because they have a broader awareness and skill base that someone just at home, who might be great with children, might not have."

4. Look for programs that have a wide variety of activities and that offer opportunities for children to do what interests them.

"Children should be able to interact with friends, peers and other adults in ways they might not in other parts of their life - in school and more organized programs," Mykietyshyn says. They should be encouraged to come up with games or activities. There should also be the opportunity for spending quiet time, and interesting books with a cosy corner in which to read them, as well as just hanging out with friends.

Watching TV or watching movies or playing video games could be a small part of a program, but such sedentary activities should not dominate how kids spend their time, something that can happen with latchkey kids.

5. Trust your gut instincts and gut feelings about the place and people who care for your children and listen to the gut instincts and gut feelings of your children about whether something is not right, Mykietyshyn advises. Parents and kids should feel welcome and respected at all times, as well as safe and secure.

While what parents want should be respected, however, some negotiation with educators might actually turn out to be better for the kids, Mykietyshyn observes.

For example, some parents want their kids to go to after- school care to do their homework and get it done before they come home, but out-of-school care staff observe the child needs some down time before starting their homework. The latter bridge the gap by suggesting the child play or has some unstructured time for 30 minutes before sitting down to do their homework.

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