

What the city's childcare needs is some good old-fashion promotion ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

In this instalment of our occasional series about what Toronto can learn from other cities, we suggest the city follow Brussels' lead in promoting childcare.

Dewlyn D'Mellow, an on-air personality for Rogers TV, has been enjoying the last of her year-long maternity leave with her first-born son, Markus. Thanks to the province launching full-day kindergarten, she can enroll Markus in school when he's four, but a decision has yet to be made about who will look after him for the next three years.

"I've been Googling like crazy, asking all my friends who have kids what to do," D'Mellow says. "My husband and I still haven't figured it out."

Like most new moms in Toronto, she is dreading this three-year gap between maternity leave and kindergarten. Daycare fees and wait lists are a huge issue - the cost for childcare can be prohibitively expensive, and those who qualify for a subsidy must get in line behind 22,000 others.

The obvious solution here is increased funding (a 2007 report by the OECD ranks Canada 39th out of 40 countries for its public spending on childcare), but there are steps Toronto can take without relying on the provincial or federal governments for cash, and a perfect place to look for inspiration is Brussels.

Belgium doesn't actually spend much more than we do on childcare - about 0.8% of their GDP, compared to our 0.2% - but the French, Dutch and international expats living in its capital city have a different approach to raising their young, both on a logistical and socio-cultural level.

Timing-wise, new moms return to work after just 15 weeks of maternity leave and pre-school begins when a child is two and a half years old (much like our kindergarten, this is free to parents). This means parents only have a two-year window during which to fret about childcare, and that mothers are pumping money back into the economy much sooner. Because of this structure, there's a keen societal awareness of the ties between affordable childcare and a strong economy, as well as an firm belief in early schooling.

Overhauling our system to mimic Belgium's would require massive legislative changes, which aren't going to happen any time soon. But it's worth taking a closer look at the importance Belgians place on education and communication about childcare. The value, for instance, placed on early childhood educators and the resources made available to guide new parents through the process of finding care for their babies are just a couple of the things Toronto can take notes on and adopt.

One of the best starting points for English-speaking residents in Brussels is the Brussels Childbirth Trust (BCT), an organization that provides assistance to pregnant women and new mothers, connecting experienced parents with those navigating the system for the first time, in need of recommendations for a good crèche (nursery school) or a list of important dates to keep in mind for preschool registration. Its website offers links to local pre- and post-natal yoga classes, as well as registration for its regular Pregnancy in Belgium evenings, a kind of support group.

Sandra Drechsel, president of BCT, and her husband moved to Brussels from Germany five years ago to work as an interpreter. She has two young children and found raising them in this city to be an easy, fulfilling experience, as long as she was following the "schedule" for what to do, and when.

"Everything is pretty straightforward," Drechsel says. "Of course, we always find minor problems, like you have to register your child for preschool on a specific day, or maybe you don't like a certain teacher. But as we would say back in Germany, it's complaining at a very high level."

Drechsel believes part of what makes the system work is how goal-oriented everyone is - women return to work earlier, kids start school earlier - which helps stimulate the economy. But she also says grandparents and other extended family are more involved in childcare. Every Wednesday, French schools in Brussels close for the afternoon, which should send parents into a panic. Yet, it doesn't.

"Some mothers find a way to rework their schedules," she says, "but you always see lots of grandparents in the parks and playgrounds at this time, helping out."

In Toronto, you're more likely to find nannies in the playground, which isn't a bad thing - but it might reflect a different perspective on childcare in general.

"We don't necessarily value our elderly, nor our children, like those in other cultures do," says Amy Underwood, an early childhood educator at St. Bartholemew's Children's Centre, a daycare in Regent Park. "Funding is important, but there needs to be an attitude shift as well. I've come across a lot of people who think what we do is glorified babysitting. They don't understand how childcare affects development, how it boosts the economy."

Altering the public's views on organized childcare largely comes down to exposure. A good place to start is offering better resources to new moms. In Brussels, government and non-profits have ensured both locals and the international community are catered to when it comes to learning about crèches and preschools: BCT is geared toward English speakers, the Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance (O.N.E.) serves French parents and Kind en Gezin helps out the Dutch.

Here, there's Children's Services, the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care (an advocacy group) and the newly formed Toronto Child and Family Network, but not many parents are familiar with the roles these organizations play, let alone how to interact with them.

D'Mellow says she was bombarded with helpful information during her pregnancy and received an educational package about breastfeeding and vaccinations, but then it came to a halt.

"I would have loved a Toronto-centric guide or a chart that outlined all of my options for childcare here," she says. "Over time, I figured out that certain programs do exist - OHIP, for instance, covers physiotherapy once a week for infants, so we have a person coming to our house to do stretches with Markus, for free." But she didn't realize this until months after he was born; it was her pediatrician who, during a visit, recommended she sign up for the service.

"The moment you're pregnant, our health-care system is supporting you," says Jane Mercer, executive co-ordinator at the TCBC. "Then you have the baby and a public health nurse visits, and then it's like, 'Good luck with that, you're on your own until your child is in school.'"

Mercer says the City of Toronto's website offers a good breakdown of childcare options available in each ward, but it takes a while to investigate all the options and there's no centralized system for getting on waiting lists. Furthermore, the webpage itself could stand an upgrade.

But Elaine Baxter-Trahair, manager at Toronto Children's Services, says it's hard to justify investing in improvements to the site or simply boosting outreach to new parents in general when there are thousands of low-income families desperately awaiting subsidies. It always comes back to funding, and "any time you cut anything related to children, it's controversial," she explains. Hence, managing those subsidies and funding new daycare spots will always take priority over distributing promotional material.

And as far as public perception is concerned, Baxter-Trahair disagrees with Underwood. She feels the advocacy groups have done a good job of shifting how we view the role of childcare workers. Mercer supports this, arguing, "The public is now solidly behind the need for childcare because we understand how it contributes to a strong workforce, both now and in the future."

She may be right. But it's unclear how much we value the sanity of our new parents - and while throwing money at childcare is undoubtedly necessary, it's equally important to make smaller gestures of support for mothers such as D'Mellow. Let's start with a better website, at the very least.

-reprinted from the National Post

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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