

Parents clued out about daycare: study ^[1]

Seek out more than a 'warm and nurturing' atmosphere, expert suggests

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EXCERPTS:

MONTREAL - Despite placing their children in daycare seven, eight or even nine hours a day, five days a week, many parents know little about the people who look after their children. They tend to base their choice of a centre on its location and "reputation."

"Whatever 'reputation' means," said Nina Howe, professor in Concordia University's department of education and author of a new study on how much, or little, Canadian parents know about their children's care.

Howe said she and her fellow researchers had their doubts about whether many parents know how well-trained or educated their children's caregivers were, or what kinds of activities were offered by the centre.

The researchers were, in large part, right. Most parents had no idea. They hoped for the best, but didn't have much on which to base their optimism.

"No one buys a car without doing some homework," Howe said, "so why don't parents do some homework when selecting child care?"

The study, which is to be published in the *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, involved interviewing 261 parents or guardians in Halifax, Montreal and Winnipeg. Only about 40 per cent of parents knew how much education daycare teachers had.

Parents should not think of daycare as simply a babysitting service, said Howe, or assume that kindergarten marks the start of real learning.

"Early childhood education sets the stage for going to school," she said. "It's very important."

Research from around the world shows that high-quality early childhood education helps children, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds, be more successful in later school and become more competent socially and emotionally; it increases their economic self-sufficiency and promotes better nutrition and health, the World Bank reports. The benefits of high-quality learning in the first years of life, according to research cited by the TD Bank, are important and long-lasting. And they are often underestimated, the bank said, urging in a recent report that other provinces follow Quebec's lead in investing in high-quality daycare centres.

Asked what makes a high-quality early childhood education centre, Howe said there are a number of factors: educators who have gone through at least a one-year certificate program or, far better, a three-year college program; a stimulating, interesting environment with a range of activities such as painting, music, reading, play-acting.

"A 2-year-old, for instance, learns sensory motor skills by playing with water and sand or puzzles and blocks," Howe said. "Children also need plenty of opportunity for free play, where they can decide on their own where to play and who they're going to play with."

A mistake some parents make in choosing a daycare centre is to decide that a "warm, nurturing" atmosphere is really all that's needed, said Howe. "Warm and nurturing is a good start, it's key, but it's not enough," she said. "You really need some training to understand children's development. When you observe them and understand what they're thinking about and how they understand the world you can create a program that's appropriate for them."

There are questions parents can ask that will help them determine if a centre offers high-quality care, Howe said. She urged parents to ask about educators' training; what kind of activities are available and what the teachers think children learn from the activities; how the child's day is organized; how the centre sees its mission; if there is a balance between active and quiet times, indoor and outdoor activities; if the daycare sees itself as a partner with the parent in helping raise the child.

Howe suggested that parents choose not-for-profit Centres de la petite enfance over private daycares, pointing to research by Christa Japel of the Université du Québec à Montréal. In an interview with Radio-Canada in February, Japel said that in 2003 private centres were six times more likely to have been found unsatisfactory than not-for-profit centres on matters such as food and supervision. Private centres also generated the majority of the more than 2,000 complaints made in 2009 by parents to the government.

While in theory, all child care centres in Quebec are subject to identical regulations, researchers say that not-for-profit centres surpass the requirements and private centres tend to just meet the minimum requirements.

"Minimum requirements may be fine to a point, but they are not optimal for a child's development," Howe said.

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