

Career or family? Moms face tough choice due to cost of day care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Families in Niagara - most notably mothers - are having to make stark choices between careers and having families.

That's been known anecdotally among parents for years. But a new policy brief by Brock University's Niagara Community Observatory has tossed sobering statistics into the issue of child care and society.

Entitled 'Can Niagara Families Afford Day Care?', the report by observatory researcher Carol Phillips shows the heavy financial burden that can come with having kids in the vacuum of universally affordable day care. Phillips crunched numbers to come up with data that she said can help policy makers get a clearer picture of the true cost - and benefits - of day care.

Her study, released on Thursday at the Rosalind Blauer Centre for Child Care at Brock, show that a mother in Niagara would have to earn nearly \$38,000 a year to feel it was affordable to return to work after having just one child. For a mom in Niagara with both a two-year-old and three-year-old, day care costs would top the \$18,000 mark. That mom would have to pull in a hefty \$72,342 to feel it was financially worthwhile to return to work, in a region where the median income of a single woman was just \$20,000 in 2010, the study found.

"High quality day care is expensive and it's hard to find," said Phillips, who knows what it's like to try to juggle work and kids. The Beamsville resident was an on-call reporter for the Hamilton Spectator when she and her husband were expecting their first child 12 years ago. Then the couple had child number two. They did the math, and Phillips opted to be a stay-at-home mom because it simply made financial sense instead of forking out big dollars for day care.

"My husband was making a good wage, but it was still cost-prohibitive for us with two children," she said.

"Mothers are choosing between work and having children," Phillips said. "It's reality."

Niagara's regional government, which operates five day care centres and which purchases day care spots as well, offered about 4,228 subsidized day care spots in 2012 for people with lower incomes. Those spots, for which the province pays about four-fifths of the cost, are among about 9,700 child care spaces in Niagara operated by 168 licensed child care spaces. That number includes junior and senior kindergarten, plus before- and after-school care.

On top of that, there are about 780 home child care spots that licensed home child care agencies contract with home care providers in Niagara.

With the 2011 Census showing 56,910 kids up to age 12 in Niagara, Phillips said the current child care system - excluding non-licensed day care, which can't be tracked - has the capacity for about 17 per cent of Niagara's children.

Phillips said Canada ranks dead last out of industrialized nations on spending for early childhood education. She cited a TD Economics report showing Canada would need to spend more than \$3 billion to catch up to those countries.

Dave Siegel, a political science professor who is director of the community observatory, said the new brief is meant to at least put the issue of affordable day care on the list of priorities that policy-makers juggle.

"We want to get this on the radar," he said.

Mary Louise Vanderlee, an early childhood expert with Brock's faculty of education, said the brief sheds light on what can be a substantial financial burden on parents.

"It gives us a bigger picture of the issues facing families," she said.

Phillips said at a time when governments at all levels are struggling to balance budgets, affordable day care should be something that decision-makers consider because day care brings key social and economic impacts. That includes kids more likely to succeed down the road because they've been exposed to high-quality day care with early childhood educators, and taxes collected by governments from working parents.

In Quebec, parents pay a mere \$7 a day for regulated child care. Child care advocates in British Columbia are pushing for a similar \$10-per-day program, said Phillips.

The phasing in of full-day kindergarten in Ontario has helped to ease some of the day care burden, said Phillips.

"That was a huge step in the right direction," she said. But many parents of pre-school kids will continue to struggle financially as things stand now, she noted.

"At some point, Canadian society has decided you're on your own when it comes to your two-year-old and three-year-old."

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