

Parents on their own when it comes to choosing the best day care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The case of Arto Howley, the nearly one-year-old boy who died on his first day of daycare, is every parent's worst nightmare.

But it also raises questions about a family's child care options.

In B.C., parents can choose between licensed daycares (of which there are eight different types, depending on the age of your child), licence-not-required (LNR) and registered LNR daycares.

But it's only the licensed facilities, where the operator is caring for three or more children not related to them by blood or marriage, that are monitored by the Fraser Health Authority under the Community Care and Assisted Living Act, which also covers long-term care facilities.

Monitoring of licensed child care centres involves at least one inspection per year but those with a higher risk rating will receive, at the minimum, another one or two inspections, said Paul Hundal, Fraser Health's licensing manager for the Tri-Cities.

The unannounced inspections check on the level of care and supervision of the children, cleanliness, nutrition and food services, equipment and furnishings, policies, records and reporting and staffing, among other things. Results are posted online, although with few details.

"For unlicensed child care centres, our only mandate and the only process in place is to inspect on a complaint basis," Hundal said.

COMPLAINTS INVESTIGATED

Fraser Health investigates all complaints and, if an inspection confirms an unlicensed daycare is operating with three or more children, it will be required to reduce those numbers or stop operating entirely. The care provider can alternately apply for a licence.

If follow-up inspections show the operator is not complying with requirements to have fewer than three children, Hundal said Fraser Health can obtain a court injunction to shut it down.

The Rattle-n-Roll daycare where Arto Howley died in 2011 had been the subject of complaints before, in late 2007 and in early 2005, but follow-up inspections showed owner Maria McFerran was in compliance with the regulations.

There were seven children under McFerran's care at Rattle-n-Roll when Howley died on Jan. 17, 2011. (McFerran will be sentenced for criminal negligence causing death on May 27.)

Fraser Health does not keep records of unlicensed child care centres - the registered LNRs have done so on a voluntary basis - and has no idea how many are operating, said FHA spokesperson Tasleem Juma.

UP TO PARENTS TO DO RESEARCH

"The only way they're brought to our attention is through a complaint and the only way we can get involved is when it's in regards to too many kids," she added.

Parents can find out information on complaints lodged against unlicensed facilities by contacting their local licensing office (in the Tri-Cities, call 604-949-7700).

Hundal said it's up to parents to research the differences between licensed and unlicensed child care centres and make an informed choice.

"They should... make sure the daycare they're choosing is good for their children," he said, suggesting parents should inquire about its licensed vs. unlicensed status, whether there is any smoking in the facility, hours of operation, staff qualifications, philosophy of care and more.

"They can also go to the child care centre and observe the staff-to-child interactions and the type of programming... the number of art supplies, are the toys in good shape?"

In a statement outside court earlier this week, Victoria Howley said she and her husband believed they were making the right daycare choice for their son when they picked McFerran's facility but learned too late that their information "wasn't complete."

Had they known about the complaints and the parents who had left McFerran's daycare fearing for their children's safety, she said, they

would never have trusted McFerran with Arto's life.

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