

# Should your child attend an unlicensed daycare? <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

Each of Canada's provinces and territories allows some unlicensed childcare facilities to operate, but a toddler's recent death in an unlicensed Vaughan, Ont., daycare offers a warning that some centres may be failing to provide a safe space for children.

"You want to be so sure and so crystal clear about where your child is," said Don Giesbrecht, the CEO of the Canadian Child Care Federation, which informs Canadians about the best practices for early childhood education. Giesbrecht, who also runs a daycare for more than 200 children in Winnipeg, said that despite the existence of some daycares with amazing people and great home environments, he considers a license to be essential.

"If you're that good and that confident in what you're doing, then open yourself up to inspection and monitoring," he said.

Some unlicensed facility operators say the extra time needed and funds spent to acquire a licence are a hassle. It's an argument Giesbrecht doesn't accept.

"In a country in which you cannot legally cut hair without a licence, fix homes without a licence.... [Child care] is no different, and we should expect no less for young children," said Giesbrecht.

## Limited licensed spots

Spots in licensed daycares can be tough to obtain, however, with only enough space in regulated facilities for about 20 per cent of Canadian children between zero and five years old, according to the CCCF. The CBC's Marketplace investigation discovered a similar level of availability.

That leaves four out of every five children requiring some form of alternative care, which can include recruiting family members, hiring a nanny or opting for an unlicensed facility.

Though Giesbrecht believes in greater regulation, he acknowledges some unlicensed facilities provide a safe, stimulating environment for children during their formative years.

Julie Martel works with Ottawa-based Child Care Providers Resource Network, offering training and support to home daycare facilitators.

She helps connect parents with local child care centres and said the trick is finding a centre and owner the parents trust.

## Tips when daycare hunting

Parents can take some simple steps to determine a licensed or unlicensed daycare's suitability.

Parents should be prepared to visit a prospective daycare more than once to interview the owners, ideally during operating hours so they can observe a typical day.

Martel's organization compiled a checklist of questions for parents to ask daycare providers, covering topics such as health, safety and discipline.

Some essential questions include:

Is the caregiver first-aid certified?

Is the home equipped with smoke detectors, fire extinguishers and electric outlet covers?

Are there different types of play materials, such as art supplies, science experiments, instruments, dress-up clothes and more?

What are the caregiver's discipline policies?

Are the children fed nutritious meals and snacks?

It's also important to see the daycare's insurance policy and the owner's police check, adds Giesbrecht.

Provincial and territorial governments regulate how many children unlicensed facilities can care for. Showing up during operating hours

can help parents ensure the owners are abiding by those regulations.

#### Checking up by checking in

Once parents select a daycare, they should still have free access to the home to monitor their child's safety and happiness.

If the care provider won't allow unannounced parents into the facility, "You've got a big red flag," said Giesbrecht. "Anyone who says you're not, I would run away from."

Martel agreed that parents should have rights to enter facilities, but argued unscheduled visits shouldn't be approved in such a cut-and-dried way, sharing the story of one well-established daycare.

Its owner originally gave parents unrestricted access while their kids attended, but found that tearful kids would be devastated when their parents had to leave. So the owner decreed a new rule: visiting parents must be willing to take their child with them when they leave if that is what their little girl or boy wished for.

If unrestricted visits are not allowed, parents should be comfortable with the reasoning behind the decision, said Martel, and still be permitted some level of access.

#### Lack of avenues for complaints

If parents are concerned over visiting rights or any other daycare activities, they should speak to the owners, said Martel.

If the direct approach doesn't spark results, parents can register a formal complaint - but only if it concerns the number of children in the home's care.

This leaves parents with little choice if they have other serious concerns about their child's daycare.

"Because childcare spaces are at such a premium in Canada, parents are really in a horrible, horrible situation," said Giesbrecht. "If they have an issue with their current provider, they are going to be hard-pressed to find another arrangement."

Most families don't have a wide pool of relatives to call on for help or lengthy vacation time to take at a moment's notice, he said.

#### Government role

Giesbrecht and his childcare federation want the Canadian government to step up when it comes to Canada's growing childcare problem.

The federation is calling on Canada's premiers to rally together in "developing a plan to ensure all families and children can access good quality programs that are regulated, monitored and supported by provincial/territorial governments."

So far, Ontario has committed to including up to three years of inspections for centres and home-based daycares on its licensed child care website. Giesbrecht predicts other provinces and territories will follow in a "domino effect."

But that is only a small step, said Giesbrecht, who would prefer to see all daycares licensed.

For now, he advises parents to "really go with what your gut is telling you," ask the tough questions and carefully look around any facility you consider leaving your child in for eight to 10 hours a day.

-reprinted from the CBC

#### Related link:

Who's watching the kids? CBC's Marketplace <sup>[2]</sup>, 22 Feb 13

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