

Parents often overestimate child care quality, U of T researcher says ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Numerous Canadian and international studies show that when it comes to judging child care quality, parents are largely in the dark.

In the wake of two Toronto-area deaths of toddlers in unregulated home daycare this past summer, the perils for parents are clear, says a University of Toronto economist who specializes in child care research.

There is little research on quality in unregulated child care, said Gord Cleveland, who teaches in the university's management studies program.

But literature reviews of quality in regulated home and centre-based daycare, show parents almost always judge care to be of higher quality than it really is, he said.

That is because most of the care and learning goes on when parents aren't there. And when they do check, they often don't know what to look for, he said.

"Parents tend to be more focused on physical surroundings and less able to assess the interactions of the adults with the children."

It gets even more difficult in unregulated settings, he said.

"What are parents supposed to look for when there aren't any standards?" he asked. "Are they supposed to look for listeria? Go around the kitchen with a little test kit?"

A York Region public health report on the unsanitary conditions in an illegal Vaughan home daycare found potentially deadly listeria in several food items.

At least 35 children were registered for daycare in the home where 2-year-old Eva Ravikovich died in July, officials said.

The coroner has not yet determined a cause of death in the case, although he has ruled out food poisoning and infection.

In licensed care, there are numerous standards covering everything from health and safety to caregiver training. The only requirement in unregulated homes is that they cannot have more than five children under age 10 who are not related to the caregiver.

"You could start with 'expected standards.' What do we expect to see in an informal setting?" Cleveland said. "At least that would give parents an idea of what they should be asking."

The provincial Education Ministry has a detailed check-list on its website for parents looking for licensed care.

But with licensed care available for just 21 per cent of Ontario children under age 12, most parents are forced to use unregulated settings.

There is no specific advice for parents considering informal care apart from the limit on the number of children permitted and a warning that informal settings do not have to meet provincial health, safety and caregiver training standards.

Since August, the ministry has encouraged parents with questions about a particular unregulated home daycare to contact regional offices to see if there have been any confirmed violations or fines levied against the caregiver, said Lauren Ramey, a spokeswoman for Education Minister Liz Sandals.

However, as previously reported, the ministry does not keep records of any action by public health, Children's Aid, property standards or animal control in these homes.

"We recognize that, along with legislative changes, we need to consider how we increase public awareness around the child care options that are available," Ramey said.

Four inquests into child deaths in unregulated home daycares dating back to 1986 have called for more provincial oversight and more information for parents.

Child care advocates, including the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and the Home Child Care Association of Ontario, are calling on the province to regulate all home daycare businesses through existing home child care agencies.

These licensed community agencies ensure daycare homes meet health and safety standards and verify that caregivers are capable. Agency staff visit a minimum of three times a year and provide training and other support to caregivers.

"Regulation is a basic first step on which you can build quality," said Martha Friendly, of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

"It is not a ticket to quality," she warned. "But without it you can't even begin to judge basic health and safety."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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