

Buyer beware: What parents navigating Canada's child care market need to know ^[1]

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The last year or two has seen a flood of media stories about unregulated (or unlicensed) child care situations with no public oversight in which children have died, were injured, or put at risk. We've read about:

- the death of a toddler in an Ontario unregulated home warehousing 35 children;
- a Kijiji ad posted by a Saskatchewan mother warning parents to "Beware of this.. [24 hour unlicensed home child care]";
- a jail term for the owner of a BC unlicensed home where an 11 month old died alone in a car seat;
- charges laid in Manitoba when parents discovered six children left alone at an unlicensed child care home;
- a police raid on an unlicensed Alberta home containing nine young children and a marijuana grow-op.

These are only the tip of an unregulated child care iceberg that comes to light only when someone notices-usually when there's a tragedy.

The parents using sometimes-legal, sometimes-illegal unregulated child care are not a small minority. No data are available but calculating the difference between the number of regulated spaces and the number of children with working mothers suggests that many-if not most-parents may fall into this category. There are undoubtedly families who would choose to have a grandmother or aunt look after their children (even if fabulous low cost child care was right down the block) but this is neither the reality nor choice for most families. A national CBC Marketplace survey of families with children 0-12 years found that more than half those using unlicensed care would prefer licensed child care.

Confusion reigns about which child care is regulated, what's legal and what isn't, and what kinds of assurances can-and can't -be provided through the public oversight of good regulation. Marketplace's survey verifies this: almost half of surveyed parents believed that all child care is required to meet government standards.

Recognizing that parents navigating Canada's hit-and-miss patchwork of regulated and unregulated child care are on their own, a comprehensive website for parents has been developed by the Childcare Resource and Research Unit and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers. findingqualitychildcare.ca ^[3] provides detailed information about child care in each province/territory; key regulations; which kinds of child care are required to be regulated; how to recognize good quality and how improve the chances of accessing it. It includes a 20 minute video showing good quality in centres, provincial/territorial search tools and contacts, "dos and don'ts", and a checklist to use to help assess potential child care. In English and French.

Inquiries and inquests dating back to the 1980s have recommended strengthening public oversight and increasing access to regulated child care but government's responses have been tepid. There's been little recognition that compelling so many parents to rely on entirely private, out-of-sight child care with no public oversight is risky and unacceptable. As Marketplace describes, parents rely on "a patchwork with no rules, potential dangers, and people breaking the law".

Two simple realities account for Canadian families' high use of unregulated child care. First, there are nowhere near enough regulated child care spaces, or such child care that is available often does not cover the right ages or work for shift workers or part-timers. Secondly, regulated child care-mostly funded through user fees-is usually much too expensive for ordinary middle income parents (especially with more than one child) or low income parents for whom arcane provincial subsidy systems often don't work in one way or another. Outside Quebec's \$154/month, median infant centre fees ranged by province from almost \$1200 to \$631/month in 2012 and can even be as high as \$2000 a month.

So what's the solution? In the shorter term, advocates and community groups are calling on the Ontario government to regulate all paid child care under the province's agency model while in Saskatchewan, the minister of education stated that his government "will now consider changes to regulate unlicensed home daycares". These and other basic provincial actions such as strengthening clout to act on complaints and non-compliance with regulations, closing loopholes and beefing up parent education are valuable pieces of - but not the whole-larger solution.

The real fix for the problem of unregulated child care is a long term, multi-faceted solution-good public policy-not more band-aids. What's needed in all parts of Canada are full well-developed provincial policy frameworks based on the best evidence and designed to meet 21st century families' needs. After all, the provinces are responsible for early childhood education and child care and have the power to make necessary changes.

But all levels of government need to play their parts in transforming child care from an unplanned, market-based, parent-funded patchwork to a publicly-managed, publicly-funded child care system so that eventually parents won't need to find their children's care on the internet or a supermarket bulletin board and can know that their children are-at least-safe.

A robust federal government role is pivotal for child care but the current federal government has abandoned its historical role shaping and paying for Canada's social safety net. It is apparent-from looking at how child care has fared since 2006-that families and children have been the victims of the Harper government's cancellation of the Liberal's fledgling national program that would have expanded access to regulated child care. Affordable, high quality child care clearly needs federal funding and involvement-just like other programs that affect all Canadians -health care, housing, social welfare, the environment, transportation and income security. A real solution needs a federal government willing to re-engage in social policy.

Public education like the new **Finding quality child care website** ^[4] is an important piece of any full early childhood education and child care system which treats parents as partners. But public education is by no means a long-term substitute for good public policy and public funding-a real child care system. Sadly, after all these years, in Canada's marketized non-system, affordable high quality child care is a scarce resource, with families pretty much on their own.

The Canada-wide multi-union advocacy campaign "**Rethink Child Care**" ^[5] asserts that "it shouldn't have to be this way"-and in many other places, it isn't. But for today's Canadian families, it remains "buyer beware" until the child care system that children and families deserve is a reality.

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