

New rules for unregulated child care providers ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Local child care providers operating under the radar could soon be swayed to make their services official.

Proposed legislation aiming to increase safety and quality standards in daycare centres would offer a financial incentive to private providers who are licensed by the Province, by allowing them to take on one extra child. While private operators don't need to comply with provincial standards right now, the new laws would give inspectors the right to fine those who break the rules -- regulated or not. A local group of advocates for local child care is welcoming the changes.

The government is flipping the economic advantage for people who want to run private daycares, says Susan Scoffin, the quality initiative co-ordinator with the Investing in Quality - Early Learning and Child Care Peterborough Advisory Committee.

Currently, at-home childcare providers are only allowed to care for up to five children. Under the proposed legislation, licensed providers will be able to take on six -- as long as their own children under the age of six are included in that total.

Peterborough MPP Jeff Leal says the legislation would give the Province the power to lay fines of up to \$100,000 per infraction to providers who break the rules. Nannies, family members and school-aged camps caring for children would be exempt from the stipulations, he adds.

According to the Province, allowing licensed operators an extra child could create up to 6,000 new child care spots.

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Christine, Mumford, chair of the Investing in Quality Committee, says with unregulated care, parents are largely responsible for monitoring the care their children receive.

"It's really on your shoulders to ask the right questions, to ask to visit, and to be suspicious if you can't," she says, adding parents have the opportunity to report any concerns they might have about a provider to a Ministry of Education area advisor.

The move to introduce the Child Care Modernization Act comes after police were called in to investigate a number of at-home day cares when three children died in a six-month span across the Greater Toronto Area and a coroner's inquiry in Ottawa.

"There isn't a choice," Ms Scoffin says. "Something has to be done; we would be irresponsible to ignore those deaths."

With research showing a children's early learning experience has a lasting effect on their futures, Ms Scoffin says it's something everyone should be concerned about.

"Children can't advocate for themselves," she says.

Ms Scoffin says she can understand how a provider with good intentions might find themselves taking on too many children -- when a friend asks them to take their child as a favour, or when a current client has another child and wants the siblings to stay together.

"Often, these people are your friend, your neighbour -- I think the intentions are honourable."

In all, the Child Care Modernization Act, which has passed its first reading in the legislature, would amend three other acts. It would repeal and replace the Day Nurseries Act with the Child Care and Early Years Act, as well as amend the Early Childhood Educators Act and the Education Act to support before-and after-school programs for children ages six to 12.

In Peterborough, a number of schools are already providing the programs where there is sufficient demand. The schools provides the space, with licensed professionals running the programs, according to Judy Malfara, communications officer with the public school board.

In daycare centres, Ms Scoffin says the legislation would give care providers more flexibility to provide child-centered learning, although many already tailor programs to the specific interests of children. It would also give providers more flexibility with childrens' rest time.

Essentially, the legislation is shifting daycare centres under scope of the Ministry of Education -- which is a good thing, says Ms Scoffin.

"It fits with what a lot of other nations and provinces are doing," she says.

MPP Leal agrees.

"It's a very natural transition," he says.

Amidst the proposed changes, Ms Mumford says there is no need for parents sending their children to unregulated, at-home providers to worry, adding there are many in the area doing a fantastic job.

"There are lots of people who provide unregulated care and they follow all provisions of (the Day Nurseries Act)," she says.

Whether children attend regulated or unregulated child care centres, she says parents should look for the same things in their child when they come home.

"Look for that growth," she says. "For the communication of their day. Do they seem happy? It's really about looking for all those positive things."

As the lifestyles of families continue to shift, with parents working shifts -- needing to drop children off earlier and pick them up later -- the committee says it's more important than ever for families to have a good plan for child care.

Ms Scoffin and Ms Mumford say they'd love to see more parents advocate for more funding for childcare centres and for subsidies for families.

The duo encourage parents to express their concerns with municipal, provincial and national government officials.

It's unclear when the new legislation would come into effect, if it's passed. MPP Leal is hoping the Act will be debated in the legislature's winter session, resuming on Feb. 18.

"Our children are so, so precious," he says. "We want to have the power to shut down (providers) that aren't operating appropriately."

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[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/legislation-and-regulation>

[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/unregulated>