

In BC, a hellish hunt for childcare^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

It was a message Kristina Kernohan and Alexis Morgan heard over and over. They knew it wouldn't be easy to find childcare for their son, Bevyn, but they hadn't imagined what a nightmare it would turn out to be.

When Kernohan started searching in November 2012, Bevyn was five months old and she had 10 months left before she had to return to her job as an on-call teacher. School holidays meant three months extra maternity leave for Kernohan.

She was going to need them.

"Every time I called a group care centre I was told: You know it's going to be a long wait, right?" says Kernohan. That meant two years or more, on average.

Morgan and Kernohan put their name on the list of any centre within a 15 minute drive from their home in East Vancouver, knowing there was a slim chance they would be offered a spot before Kernohan's September return.

Determined on returning to work on schedule, Kernohan rang the Westcoast Child Care Resource Center, got their list of family-based childcares (those run within private residences), and found more than 50 listings that met her distance requirements.

Then she started calling, expecting more luck here than with the group childcare centres. That luck didn't show.

"You know, it's absolutely disheartening. Every time you call a childcare you're thinking, okay, maybe this place will have a spot. But every single time they have none and when you ask them if they know of anyone else you get a no again. Everyone they know is full," says Kernohan. One told her their next available spot was in 2018.

An issue that won't go away

As of 2012 there were 55,652 regulated (meaning safety inspected by B.C. Ministry of Health) centre-based childcare spaces for all children up to age four in British Columbia. Including regulated family-based childcare spaces -- private homes licensed to care for up to seven kids -- the total goes up to 71,624, a number that falls far short of the overall number of B.C. kids in that age group: 226,000.

That means only one in every three children in B.C. has access to a regulated childcare space -- either part-time or full-time, depending on the parents' needs.

"Access to childcare is a big, big issue that keeps coming up. We constantly hear anecdotally how hard it is," says Adrienne Montani, provincial coordinator for First Call B.C., a child and youth advocacy organization.

And the few available spaces are expensive.

In Vancouver, parents working full time in 2013 would pay an average of \$1,261 monthly (an increase of five per cent from 2012, and part of a rising trend in childcare costs) to send their one-year old toddler to a daycare centre. That's \$15,132 per year; slightly less than three years of tuition at a Canadian university.

"And this comes at the very moment young British Columbian parents were hoping they would be paying down on their own student debts," says Paul Kershaw, interim associate director of the Human Early Learning Partnership at UBC.

While an unregulated space can be a slightly cheaper solution, it might come at a cost.

"Research has shown that quality is higher in regulated childcare settings and that the quality matters not only for putting parents at ease but also in terms of helping kids develop socially, emotionally, cognitively and physically," says Kershaw.

The waiting game

By March, after six months of futile hunting, Morgan and Kernohan had finished their list of family-based childcare spaces and come up empty. As a last resort they found themselves searching for unlicensed family-based daycares on Craigslist.

"We didn't feel comfortable with a lot of them," explains Kernohan.

"I felt really terrible because now I'm doing what has already happened to us. These are people that are only paid \$9 an hour to raise my kid," says Kernohan.

No-goes were the childcares in dark basement apartments with almost no daylight and a smell of wet and mould. Others were inconsistent in their communication, making Kernohan and Morgan guessing whether or not they could be trusted with their son.

Eventually they were offered a slot at a part-time family-based childcare on Mondays to Wednesdays only, starting August. The offer came with a promise of a full-time spot the following year, so Morgan and Kernohan decided to strike.

"Even if it meant I had to stay home two days a week, losing income and chances of getting in a situation where I could find a long term stint," says Kernohan.

She went back to Craigslist and found an unlicensed family-based daycare that she and Morgan were comfortable with that could take Bevyn on Thursdays and Fridays starting in October, one month after Kernohan was supposed to return to the workforce.

It wasn't ideal -- the two childcares were located on opposite sides of the city and each would charge about \$80 a day or \$1,600 per month total -- but for now they had childcare.

"Luckily we were in a position where we could afford to pay that, which also meant we were free to choose a place we were comfortable with. I fully acknowledge that for most families this wouldn't have been an option -- I mean, we only had one kid but what of single parent families or families with two children?" says Kernohan.

Childcare a low priority for government

In 2006 the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) ranked Canada worst amongst 14 developed countries in a comparison of who did most to provide early childhood education and care (ECEC) for all children up to age six.

At the top where Nordic countries such as Denmark, Norway and Sweden. They spent upwards of two per cent of their GDP on ECEC while Canada hit rock bottom with a 0.25 per cent spending of the GDP -- half the percentage of what our American neighbours spend.

Another comparison comes from Kershaw.

As a political scientist he describes himself as a "show-me-the-money-guy" -- he likes to do big calculations to find out what and how much government is spending money on.

When he took all the provincial and federal budgets and added the numbers, he found that Canada spends slightly more money subsidizing livestock and agriculture than it does on subsidies for parental time at home with a new baby and ECEC for all children below school age.

"Our public policy priorities are literally putting cattle and families with kids at the same level of priority," says Kershaw.

Kershaw's observation gets backing from the United Nations.

In 2012 the UN released their observations on children's rights in Canada. They raised concern over the "high cost of childcare, the lack of available places for children, the absence of uniform training requirements for all childcare staff and of standards of quality care."

Despite Canada's significant resources, the report states, childcare and early education is still inadequate for all children under four and the majority of care services are provided by private, profit-driven institutions, unaffordable for most families.

'I'm kind of in a panic'

In September 2013, just as Bevyn was about to start in his second daycare slot, Morgan and Kernohan's Monday to Wednesday childcare cancelled on them, saying they could not make ends meet and had to close with two week's notice.

The news left Kernohan distraught.

"At this point I am back working full time and Morgan is travelling a lot and away one week out of every five. I'm kind of in a panic," says Kernohan.

In two weeks she had to do what she and Morgan barely managed in six months.

She rushed through the family-based childcare list yet another time and, despite many a false start, managed to land a spot where Bevyn could begin immediately.

Then something extremely unexpected happened: a group childcare centre called to inform them they had a full-time slot available. It would cost Morgan and Kernohan upwards of \$1,800 to get out of their contracts with the two part-time childcares, but the family coped with the penalty to send Bevyn to group-based childcare in a stable and cheaper setting.

The price of raising kids

Having a child in Canada comes at a cost, but the exact numbers are disputed.

In early fall 2013 professor Christopher A. Sarlo published his report "The Cost of Raising Children" where he argues against the belief that raising a child comes with an annual cost ranging from \$10,000 to \$15,000.

"These estimates are as frightening as they are wrong. They simply don't reflect the experience of real contemporary families raising children," writes Sarlo, adding that such high estimates could deter would-be parents.

Sarlo's approach is that expenses associated with having a child -- things like clothing, food and education -- can be separated from normal household expenses such as housing, transportation and furnishings, and those were left out of the calculation.

Childcare costs are not included in Sarlo's calculation either.

In the report he writes "many families with children will have little or no daycare costs," citing Statistics Canada that only 14 per cent of younger couples aged 25 to 44 with one child spent more than \$5,000 on childcare in 2009.

Drawing on estimates of Canadian family budgets from 2010, Sarlo arrives at an annual price of raising a kid that is three times lower than previous estimates: between \$3,000 and \$4,500 per year.

Kershaw disagrees.

"We know that when Canadians go on parental leave, the typical couple will forego in the order of \$15,000 dollars from their after tax income compared to the year before the baby was born," he says.

A \$15,000 loss from the annual income is like another mortgage payment on top of already higher housing prices, Kershaw adds. For a family living in B.C. that is a particularly hard hit.

"It's the one province where wages have gone down furthest and costs have gone up most," he says.

Generation 'squeeze'

In 2012 Kershaw founded Generation Squeeze, a social campaign backed by his UBC research that seeks to push public policy towards narrowing the financial gap between the older and younger generations.

"We're outdated in describing what the big problems are that we need policy adaptations for and we're failing to recognize that the economic vulnerability has shifted to younger people," says Kershaw.

He says major policy changes are needed to right the wrongs in today's system:

"Rather than childcare costing more than university tuition and be hard to find, it would be easy for government to fix that problem. We just need to build more childcare spaces and invest in them to bring the cost down. This is not rocket science."

Kershaw proposes to bring childcare costs down to around \$2,500 a year or more accurately, \$10 a day. In Quebec childcare costs \$7 a day.

Kershaw says the change would only require the government to spend \$1,000 extra a year per Canadian under 45. By comparison the government annually spends \$45,000 on every Canadian above 65 but only \$12,000 on every Canadian below 45. With cheaper childcare an 18-month parental leave and savings of up to \$50,000 in the child's first five years would follow, says Kershaw.

He is not the first to suggest such changes.

In March 2013 nearly 200 protesters marched to Premier Christy Clark's constituency office in Vancouver demanding cheaper childcare.

Clark told CTV News that the province didn't have the money to make \$10 a day childcare happen. The government's priorities were to keep taxes low, control government spending and balance the budget.

Kershaw doesn't believe that's good enough.

"I think Canada generally is doing poorly in terms of being a great place to raise a family these days."

It's a national problem but it's especially extreme in B.C., which means the policy adaption here needs to be more significant. And so far it has been minimal," says Kershaw.

Second child conundrum

Bevyn is now just over 18 months old. He's been in the group-based childcare centre for four months now, and according to mom and dad, absolutely loves it, blissfully unaware of the conundrum his parents are now faced with: the cost of a second child.

"You up the ante on the whole thing," says Morgan. "All of the sudden you're looking at \$2,400 a month for childcare in a best case scenario."

That is most of a single person's income, he adds.

"So do you sacrifice one person's income just to keep your careers alive or will one person stay home because financially it makes more sense in a way -- even though it's the short term finances. If you get out of the game for too long it's really hard to get back into it."

Kernohan adds the numbers together: if they'd had twins it would've been \$3,600 a month for childcare alone.

"That's just insane. We would've been losing money," she says.

Both Kernohan and Morgan have well-paid full-time jobs. By their own description they earn good money.

"If we earn good money and we're questioning if we were to have two kids, would both of us be able to work? That's crazy," says Kernohan. "How is a single parent working one or two minimum wage jobs making ends meet? That's impossible."

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Region: British Columbia [2]

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