

Cost of care for children under 5 exceeds university tuition for some Metro Vancouver families ^[1]

Author: Carman, Tara

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Day care prices in Metro Vancouver have risen so high that the cost of four years of early-childhood care can exceed that of a four-year university degree.

A typical family in Vancouver with a child in full-time care from the end of parental leave to the beginning of kindergarten can expect to pay somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$50,000 for child care. By contrast, a four-year undergraduate arts degree at the University of B.C. costs about \$31,000, including tuition, student fees and books.

Banks and financial institutions expend a great deal of effort convincing parents to invest in RESPs for post-secondary education, but child care costs hit much earlier in life, when parents often have not had the chance to accumulate savings.

Across the country, the cost of child care has risen by almost double the rate of inflation over the past decade.

Costs vary wildly

The cost of under-six child care can vary by as much as \$1,000 per month, depending on where you live.

The Vancouver Sun obtained child care fee survey data from municipalities across the region and compiled it into a searchable database, allowing parents to see average fees for children of all ages in each city.

The most expensive places to find child care in the region are Vancouver, where prices for infant care can be as high as \$2,000 a month, and the North Shore. Surrey, Delta and the Tri Cities are the least expensive. Prices vary more for family child care, offered in private homes, than group care, offered in daycare centres.

Those who can't pay or make other arrangements must choose between quitting work, leaving their children in unregulated, potentially dangerous situations or even leaving them alone to care for themselves, advocates warn.

Every couple of months, child care worker Sharon Gregson says she has to tell families they can no longer bring their child to the care centre because they are too far behind in their payments.

"It's tragic ... you see parents who tell you that their family is going to be in crisis without child care, but they acknowledge that they simply can't pay the fees," she says.

It is difficult to pinpoint how many families are in this situation. There are only enough licensed child care spaces for one in five B.C. children. Some families may not need spaces because one parent stays at home or extended families are able to help, but even so, a significant number are forced to make "hard choices that are based on economic realities rather than what you think is the ideal," says Vancouver mother Anna Geeroms.

High prices, long waits in Vancouver

In Vancouver, waiting lists for group daycare - offered in a centre, rather than a home - can be three years or longer.

"Some parents, their children have started kindergarten and they still haven't heard whether they've got an infant-toddler space," says Pam Preston, executive director of Vancouver's Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre. "We've heard stories from daycare centres where a parent has had a miscarriage and phones crying and begging to please not be taken off the list. I've heard stories of people offering their ultrasound for proof of pregnancy to get on a list. So, it's crazy."

Region: British Columbia ^[2]

Tags: affordability ^[3]

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