

# Daycare centres struggle to adjust to full-day kindergarten <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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### EXCERPTS:

Ontario's child-care centres are still adjusting to the dramatic change caused by the introduction of full-day kindergarten.

This month, the final wave of 4- and 5-year-olds entered the all-day learning program, with its \$1.5-billion price tag, that has been phased in since 2010. The universal program has forced some child-care centres to adjust spaces while others, including home-based daycares, find it hard to fill spots due to age rules.

That's because child-care budgets - both at non-profit and for-profit centres - are based on a system where the fees paid to look after older children help offset the higher costs for infants and toddlers, who require higher staffing ratios.

Even though parents pay far more for infant care, which can exceed \$2,000 a month in Toronto, those fees alone don't begin to cover actual expenses. That's why a preschool spot, at about \$1,500 a month, where more kids are permitted per daycare teacher, helps balance the books.

In any centre, labour costs are the biggest operating expense, and Ontario's rules require one staffer for three babies up to age 18 months, one staffer for every five toddlers, and one staffer for every eight to 10 preschoolers, depending on age.

When the province began introducing full-day kindergarten, it essentially took away the budgetary linchpin that held things together. With the offer of all-day learning in the public schools, parents would naturally gravitate to the kindergarten program to save on child-care costs.

"With that business model, if you take out one part of it, and it's the bit that makes it go, why would you be surprised that they would collapse?" said Martha Friendly, executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

In the initial years of full-day kindergarten, some child-care centres closed their doors. The situation has stabilized, with some reorganizing their programs to accept more infants and toddlers, but that can require substantial renovations for change and sleep areas as well as washroom requirements.

Elaine Baxter-Trahair, general manager of children's services for the City of Toronto, said infant and toddler spaces have grown as a result of full-day kindergarten, with an additional 71 infant and 810 toddler spaces.

"It will continue to increase over the next two to three years," she said, but that will serve only 20 per cent of Toronto's child population. "The system is still woefully too small."

Centres are struggling to find early childhood educators, who have moved to take positions in schools for the full-day program, where a teacher is paired with an early childhood educator. And because child-care centres oversee before- and after-school programs, it means more split shifts for staff, which are harder to fill.

"We become trainers for those staff, who move on after one or two years," said Irene Udo, executive director and founder of the non-profit North York Little Prints Daycare, which has four locations.

"Salaries are so low in child care that the model has to be re-examined," said Udo, whose lease at its Yonge St. and York Mills Rd. location had been in jeopardy this summer.

Udo's centre, like George Brown College's child-care centre in Scotia Plaza, benefited from long-term leases with free rent, struck at a time when the landlords wanted to offer daycare.

In Scotia Plaza's case, the bank tower was allowed to exceed permitted zoning rules when it was built, in exchange for free child care for 25 years, under what is known as Section 37 funding. Typically, a developer may seek to build additional floors in exchange for providing community benefits, such as a daycare.

While both centres are staying put for now, thanks to lease extensions, Udo argues the city and province must come up with a plan on how to protect child-care centres.

Because hers is in a commercial building, the centre is subject to property taxes estimated at \$75,000 a year, which wouldn't apply if it was in a school or church.

"Section 37 benefits should be for a lifetime," Udo said. "If a developer gets to add six extra floors, it doesn't lose six floors after 20 years."

Little Prints has adjusted to the change in full-day kindergarten by adding more spots for infants and toddlers.

But that type of move directly affects home-based daycares, says Leslie Wilson, vice-president of Wee Watch, a franchise program that uses in-home providers.

Because Wee Watch is licensed by the province, caregivers are restricted to looking after five children, including their own, but there are strict age rules. It can be only two children younger than 2; one between 2 and 3, and two over 3.

Since those kindergarten-age children don't need care any more, it is harder for some providers to round out their income, Wilson said, arguing the province should rethink its licensing rules, especially around the number of infants.

That's because with EI maternity benefits having been extended to a year, from the previous four months and six months, fewer children under age 1 are going to daycare, she said.

As well, as neighbourhood centres add more licensed spaces for infants and toddlers, it reduces demand for home-based care.

"That's competition for us," Wilson said. "It has hit different areas at different times. It doesn't matter whether it hit in the first year or fifth year (of the rollout), it's new."

Add into the mix for-profit businesses like Kids and Company, which operates more than 60 daycare centres across the country.

Anna Green, director of the flagship Wellington St. location in the TD Centre, said her centre runs three rooms for 45 children, which include preschoolers and kindergarten age. In all, the centre has space for 115 children.

Her centre, which caters to parents who work in the downtown towers, hasn't seen an exodus of children as a result of the full-day program.

Green said most parents still need care before and after school, and many of those school programs have long waiting lists, so they chose to stay at Kids and Company, which is open from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.

She also touts the smaller ratios, of one staffer to eight children among preschool children, and one staffer to 10 children in the kindergarten age group, as another draw. The ratio for infants follows the provincial rule of one staffer per three infants.

Unlike other child-care centres, Kids and Company generates revenue through corporate partnerships with companies like some of the big banks, which pay annual fees of \$5,000 to \$10,000 to ensure child care spots for their employees.

Friendly, who has studied child care for decades, believes the answer for child care's challenges is that it should not be run as a business.

"It is not a viable for-profit business, and it's not a viable non-profit business," she said. "It should be a public service."

Friendly said early childhood education should be treated just like public education in Canada, from elementary schools right up to universities, with public funding.

"To me, it's a public good," she said. "Why do we leave the way children are cared for to the market?"

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** funding <sup>[4]</sup>

kindergarten <sup>[5]</sup>

integration <sup>[6]</sup>

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