

# Sticks, carrots and a real child-care system <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Friendly, Martha & Ferns, Carolyn

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## AVAILABILITY

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### EXCERPTS:

With a set of long-overdue changes to Ontario's child-care policy about to go to committee hearings, now is an important time to reflect on how best to protect our children.

Ontario ombudsman André Marin recently uncovered "systematic government ineptitude" contributing to the deaths of four children over seven months in unregulated child care. Marin's report, prepared within a narrow mandate, calls for crucial changes to help clean up the unregulated child-care "morass."

The provincial government should be commended for acting on 95 of the recommendations in its new legislation, and pledging to address the others, too. The recently tabled Child Care Modernization Act provides many measures aimed at tightening the rules under which unregulated child care may operate and beefs up complaint-based enforcement.

But the legislation doesn't go far enough. Without concerted government action to ensure considerably more accessible, affordable, high-quality child-care spaces, families will still have few alternatives but to rely on unregulated care and children will continue to be at risk.

To truly protect young children, Ontario needs three kinds of action: the regulatory "sticks" recommended by Marin to be implemented by the Ontario government; better "carrots" to move unregulated caregivers into existing regulation and - perhaps most effective and important - a real child-care system.

The "egregious," "brazenly illegal" child care the ombudsman profiled must be stopped. For this, a stronger regulatory "stick" and tighter rules are necessary. But tougher rules and enforcement are only the beginning of tackling the stubborn problem of unsafe child-care arrangements. As Marin says: "The momentum spurred by these children's terrible deaths must not be lost." That momentum needs to motivate further action.

Better "carrots" would also help protect children. A trend highlighted by the ombudsman is that regulated family child care in Ontario has been falling in recent years, from 19,760 children in 2008 to 16,807 in 2013. The new legislation suggests the government has grappled with the problem of how to encourage caregivers to become regulated, but its proposed "carrot" won't work.

The Ontario government proposes to increase the maximum number of children in a regulated child-care home to six (compared to five in legal unregulated homes), creating a financial incentive to become regulated. But this is unlikely to do the trick. Many unregulated caregivers argue that after paying fees to a child-care agency and changing their homes to meet regulations, adding one extra child will put them no further ahead monetarily. So upping the number of children allowed in regulated home child care won't provide an adequate "carrot."

Upping the maximum number of children in a child-care home is also questionable from a quality perspective. Research, expert opinion and common sense all suggest that six young children are too many for one adult alone in a home. A European Commission report noted: "Ratios in family daycare should not be less than 1:4 under school age, and should include the carer's own children."

So, what would better "carrots" look like? Recommendations from research include:

- Base-fund home child-care agencies (as other provinces do) so they can operate without charging fees to caregivers.
- Make regulated caregivers eligible for employment insurance and other benefits.
- Provide start-up, operating and income enhancement to offset the financial burden of regulation.

In short, make regulated family child care a job worth doing, with the support to do it well.

The third - and arguably most important - step to tackling the problem of unregulated care is to build a real child-care system. Indeed, access to regulated child care is the flip side to reliance on unregulated care. A 10-country study pointed out an obvious but often overlooked fact: "persistent and substantial use" of unregulated care is only an issue in countries without comprehensive child-care

systems.

Ontario desperately needs such a comprehensive system based on the principles of universal entitlement, high quality and comprehensiveness. It will require not only vision and a well-designed policy framework with long-term goals, targets and timetables, but also political will and ongoing sustained funding. And now is the time to start.

This week at ChildCare2020 almost 600 policy experts, researchers, advocates and politicians from across Canada are coming together for the first time in a decade to discuss how to move national child-care policy forward. The issue of how to improve access to high-quality regulated child care is central to this discussion.

With child care finally back on the national agenda, there's no time like the present for the Ontario government to regain its leadership to move toward a real system of quality child care. As the Toronto Star's editorial stated: "The bigger question, though, is what will it take for all levels of government to work together to create a universal child-care program that would permit parents to find safer licensed daycare spots?"

The ombudsman is correct: "The stakes in the child-care system are high." Indeed, the stakes are far too high not to get this right.

**Region:** Ontario [3]

**Tags:** legislation and regulation [4]

unregulated [5]

regulated family child care [6]

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