

Childcare dilemma heats up as summer looms in pricey Vancouver ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Young school-age kids may be counting the days until the start of summer holidays but many of their parents are frantically calculating the high cost of nine full weeks of summer childcare.

"It's definitely a real struggle," says Vancouver parent Melanie Barker. "I'm probably going to have to take some time off, and I'm not exactly sure how that's going to work because I'm not sure I can afford that."

Living in Vancouver has never been worse on the wallet; it's the priciest city in North America and ranks within the top 25 most expensive cities on earth. The cost of rent, food and transportation is crippling for many families; throw childcare fees into the mix, and it's a serious financial crunch.

Barker is a single mom to an eight-year-old son, and works three jobs to make ends meet. During the school year, she pays \$355 per month for before- and after-school care, but during the summer, the costs skyrocket.

"I have to be pretty creative about (paying for) it," she explains. "This year I'm actually teaching some camps, so my son is going to come with me."

Crunched numbers reveal childcare crisis

The average monthly cost of full-day care is more than \$1,000 per child in the city, according to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. That's roughly on par with the average cost of rent, which stands at \$1,054 plus utilities.

In Vancouver, summer camps can cost more than \$600 per week including food, activities and certified supervision. Registered daycares can cost upwards of \$1,200 a month for an infant or toddler, according to a 2014 study, *The Parent Trap*.

The Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC (CCCABC) is calling it a provincial "childcare crisis," complicated by high costs of living, increasing care fees, and a lack of vacancy in regulated care centres.

"Unfortunately (the provincial government) is giving scarce public dollars to for-profit corporations to build childcare spaces," says Sharon Gregson, spokesperson for the CCCABC's \$10 a Day Child Care campaign.

"The capital expenditures that they're committing to will not even keep up with the birth rate in the province, never mind the whole issue of giving public assets to private corporations for profit."

Ministry defends its childcare investment

Earlier this month, the B.C. Ministry of Children and Family Development invested roughly \$8.2 million in the creation of 1,488 new, licensed childcare spaces in 14 communities across the province, with the goal of reaching 13,000 more by 2020.

Nearly 110,000 spaces are already supported by the government, yet according to the *Parent Trap* report, as of 2012, B.C. spent less public money per regulated childcare space than any other province except New Brunswick.

When asked about its ongoing efforts to support provincial child care, the ministry issued an email statement:

"This government is committed to supporting a range of quality child care options, including care during school breaks and holidays, to meet the diverse needs of families. To that end, the ministry provides operating funding to eligible licensed child care operators to assist with the costs of delivering care through the Child Care Operating Funding Program."

For parents, the ministry offers a monthly \$55-tax benefit for each child under the age of six, and childcare subsidies based on income. According to its rate tables, the maximum subsidy for an infant is \$750 per month and \$635 for toddlers, which still leaves parents with a

hefty bill if they're paying average Vancouver prices for daycare.

"You have to be so poor to qualify for subsidy that even if you do qualify there's no way you have the rest of the money available to make up the difference between subsidy and the real fee," says Gregson. "So we're seeing fewer and fewer subsidized families in licensed childcare programs simply because the subsidy is so completely out of date with the actual cost of the fee."

Summer camp is out of reach for many kids

Indeed, more and more parents who can't afford licensed daycare are using creative ways to find cheaper child supervision; a quick search on Craigslist reveals dozens of local families in need of care providers, sitters, and live-in nannies.

It's sad when parents resort to online advertisements, says Gregson, who believes hiring through search engines like Craigslist can bring unknown, unqualified strangers into the home.

"That should not be the kind of care that British Columbian families depend on just so they can go to work," she explains. "It would be a misnomer to call it a 'choice'; there's no choice when you have to use the only childcare arrangements you can afford."

It's a harsh reality for many families, including Barker and her son. For weeks, she's had her eyes on a summer sailing camp she knows he would love but instead she's looking at inviting a student tenant into their home in order to afford basic daycare for August.

There is a fairly large wealth gap at her son's school, and in the summertime, he starts to notice.

"It becomes the haves and the have-nots," she explains. "Kids are going away on vacation, and he asks, 'How come we don't go away?' He is aware, and will bring certain things up."

But she emphasizes how lucky her family is; even when times are tough they have everything they need. Not all Vancouver parents can say the same, especially single mothers.

In Vancouver, up to 29 per cent of a woman's income is spent on childcare, a rate only surpassed by nine other Canadian cities. Factor in the 30-per-cent wage gap between men and women, and the burden of childcare becomes even heavier.

"I'm basically the working poor," says Barker. "I work my tail off and pay my rent, put food on the table and pay for car insurance and gas. I have pretty much nothing at the end, and I pay for childcare."

But there may be light at the end of the tunnel for B.C. parents; more than 6,000 people have signed the CCCABC's \$10 a Day Child Care campaign, which proposes a cap on provincial childcare costs. A similar model has worked successfully in Québec, where less than seven per cent of a woman's salary goes towards childcare thanks to government subsidy. It would be a great solution to the B.C. childcare crisis, says Viveca Ellis, co-founder of the Single Mothers' Alliance BC.

"The \$10 a Day Child Care plan will hugely benefit our entire economy overall by boosting women's labour force participation and strengthening early childhood development," she explains. "Our children do not deserve to be left in unregulated childcare settings, and it is our fundamental responsibility as a society to provide the highest quality childcare possible."

As of press time, the Ministry of Children and Family Development did not return media requests on the viability of the \$10 a Day Child Care plan, or whether it would consider such an option.

Until it does consider greater subsidy however, Vancouver children will continue counting the days, while their parents continue counting their cash on the brink of the city's summer holidays.

- reprinted from the Vancouver Observer

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