

Affordable daycare a make-or-break election issue for many Canadians^[1]

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It's the modern-day catch-22 for many working parents.

To settle for one of the limited affordable daycare spots or have one parent quit a job to take care of the kids?

Often the stay-at-home task falls on mom's shoulders. And it shouldn't, says Martha Friendly, founder and executive director of the Child Care Resource and Research Unit, which is working to secure affordable, quality daycare for all families.

"Women are well-educated and are an important part of the labour force, and child care is an important factor if we want women to participate in the workforce," said Friendly.

A national daycare strategy has been on and off the federal parties' platforms since the 1970s. Paul Martin all but secured a national child-care program in 2004, before Prime Minister Stephen Harper won the 2006 election and scrapped the plan.

This election campaign, only the New Democrats have explicitly promised an "affordable universal national child care program."

The Liberals are promising a "new National Early Learning and Child Care Framework," while the Green Party wants universal child care for at least 70 per cent of children age six or under. Instead of a child-care plan, the Conservatives would expand the Universal Child Care Benefit to \$160 a month for newborns and children up to six years old, and \$60 a month for the remainder of the age bracket up to 18.

For Jackie Hansen, a single working mother living near the small town of Wakefield, Que., the parties' child-care plans are too focused on middle-class, nuclear families.

"For me, it's how can daycare strategies get women into the workforce, keep women in the workforce and allow us to be successful in the workforce?" said Hansen, a women's-rights campaigner for Amnesty International.

Hansen, like many in the area, commutes to her full-time job in the City of Ottawa, which is about 35 kilometres away. She needs an affordable daycare that's open 10 hours a day, but Quebec child-care centre (CPE) spots are limited. Her toddler, Gabe, has been on the waiting list since birth. He's now 3-1/2 years old.

Even if she were to move closer to work, the search for quality, affordable daycare would still be a challenge.

Last April, there were 3,242 children on the waiting list for a child care subsidy in the City of Ottawa. Even new working parents who don't qualify for the subsidy, like public relations consultant Cynthia Waldmeier, have struggled with finding a spot.

When Waldmeier learned she was pregnant, she immediately signed up for the city's competitive centralized childcare list — even before sharing the exciting news with her parents.

Because many centres in the city start accepting children at 18 months old, finding an early daycare spot proved difficult. They settled for a centre that charged \$1,900 a month, which was more than their mortgage payments, but worth it for the short term. Their boy has since moved to a new daycare that's substantially less — \$1,243 a month or about \$62 a day.

Her advice for the federal party leaders: Meet the daycare demand.

"The stress, when you're newly pregnant, is already there," she said. "Already feeling worried about childcare when you don't have a child that's even arriving for another six to seven months — that is just something where if it can be avoided, that would be all the better."

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