

From costs to waiting lists, Toronto's child-care numbers are alarming ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

If you're a parenting-aged adult living in Toronto, there are two big topics of conversation you hear, from the postpartum yoga classes to beer-league hockey dressing rooms: real estate and child care. Specifically, the utterly unimaginable cost of both.

Never mind buying a house. The cost of paying rent and paying for licensed daycare for two kids will eat up the entire income of the median Toronto family, and it comes as a shock.

People are told from the moment they become parents to start saving for university, but arts tuition at the University of Toronto is about \$6,000, while the average annual cost of a Toronto daycare spot is more than triple that. That is, if you can even find a licensed spot for your kid when the day rolls around.

There are subsidies to help those who are struggling, but not nearly enough (about 7 per cent of Toronto children get a child-care subsidy).

The effect of this has been widely observed. Relatively affluent parents Liam and Angela Cole told the Star this month that even with an income of about \$100,000, they plan to move from High Park to Milton with their new twins so the grandparents can look after the kids.

For low-income parents, this "keeps us in poverty," according to Sultana Jahangir, of the South Asian Women's Rights Organization in Scarborough. She estimates that 80 per cent of the unemployed women she serves stay jobless primarily because of the cost of child care. And no wonder: if you're a hotel chambermaid, a single licensed spot could gobble up your entire paycheque.

Some people find cheaper, unregulated care providers. Others take on shift work. Many put their careers on hold because child-care costs would eat up most or all of their salary.

Statistics Canada says one-third of women aged 25 to 54 who wanted to work but were not employed and not looking for work cited personal and family responsibilities as the reason.

Among women 25 to 44 working part-time, 32 per cent say the reason they aren't working full-time is so they can care for their children — by far the most common reason given.

The price of child care often delays the decision to have children, delays or disrupts careers, and acts as a potential lifelong drag on earnings. It keeps the poor impoverished, threatens the middle class with poverty, and even presents a significant burden to those with relatively high incomes.

For virtually everyone, it's a struggle.

By the numbers

Approach #1: Give parents money

Where the parties stand on child-care income supplements

The argument

If the cost of raising children, especially as it relates to child care, is a burden on society, then one possible approach to the problem is to give parents money. An advantage of that approach is its flexibility: those who choose to delay their careers to care for their own children still get help defraying costs; those who work shift work and can arrange off-hours care can pay for it directly outside of a licensed daycare program; poorer people who already qualify for existing daycare subsidies or have relatives who help get a boost in paying for food and rent.

Critics of this approach point out that it can act as an income supplement for often wealthier stay-at-home parents who have no child-care

costs, that it can encourage people to seek out cheaper (and lower quality) unlicensed care, and that the income supplements have to be unrealistically large to make a dent in the staggering child-care costs.

Conservative Party

“Our party understands that child-care decisions are best left in the hands of the real experts, mom and dad. That is why we introduced the UCCB in 2006 and expanded it in 2015.” – Stephen Harper, in a Conservative child-care announcement this summer

The Conservative government introduced monthly cheques for parents under its Universal Child Care Benefit program in 2006, and this year increased and expanded the payments to \$160 per month for each child under 6 and \$60 per month for each child aged 6 to 17. The program is universal, meaning all parents get the same benefit regardless of their income or their child-care arrangement. This program, already in place as of this year’s budget, is the Conservative child-care platform – the party proposes no changes to it.

NDP

“Let there be no doubt, we’ll keep the recent additions to the child-care benefit.” – Thomas Mulcair, in January of this year

The NDP have been big critics of the Conservative cheque-mailing strategy, but have promised to keep it in place as is – in addition to their centrepiece direct child-care subsidy program.

Liberal

“Liberals understand that for most Canadians, balancing work and family responsibilities is a daily challenge. We believe that government has a responsibility to ensure that all families have a real and fair chance to succeed.” – Justin Trudeau, in a mid-September announcement

The Liberals propose combining the existing benefit with several other existing tax credits aimed at parents to create one new tax-free Child Care Benefit program that would send larger cheques to lower- and middle-income parents (to a maximum of \$533 per month per child) and less or no supplement to wealthier parents. ,

For instance, parents with two children under 6 who earn Toronto’s median family income of \$56,381 would receive \$760 per month; \$90,000 earners with two kids under six would receive \$572.92 per month.

A family with an income of \$90,000 with one child under 6 and one child between 6 and 17 would receive \$490 per month, while a family earning \$200,000 with one child under 6 and one teenager would receive nothing.

Approach #2: Pay for child care directly

Where the parties stand on subsidized daycare programs

The argument

The other main approach to dealing with child care costs is to directly subsidize it, as we do public schools or health care.

This has the benefit of ensuring licensed child-care spots are actually created and available to parents – a key problem being shortage of spaces. As most prominently proposed by the NDP, based on Quebec’s existing system, it assures parents the benefit will cover most of the cost and remaining fees will be fixed.

The Quebec program has been shown to lead to greater workplace participation by women.

Some critics point out that this provides no benefit to those who prefer to stay home with their children and would probably provide no new benefit to lower-income families already receiving full subsidies.

Others say it may penalize those who work off-hours shifts common in jobs such as retail. Some economists have said that in practice a universal program is more likely to be used by white-collar workers, and therefore disproportionately benefits those who are already better off.

NDP

“Moms and Dads have waited long enough. Affordable, quality child care is just an election away.” – Thomas Mulcair, in the NDP program pitch

The NDP proposes a program directly modelled on Quebec’s that would deliver 1 million licensed child-care spots across the country available to parents at a maximum cost of \$15 a day (the NDP estimates there are currently about 1.4 million children in Canada in need of care, and right now only 505,000 children with licensed spots). The program would take eight years to be fully implemented, but Mulcair recently said he expected it to be 60 per cent in place in four years. Implementation would be worked out with provincial governments.

Liberals

“Thomas Mulcair talks about child care needing an urgent solution, yet his program is back-loaded, will be delayed for years, and is significantly underfunded.” – Justin Trudeau, in a September child-care announcement

The Liberal Party has not promised anything as specific as the NDP when it comes to creating and funding child-care spaces, but it does have a promise to create a new “National Early Learning and Child Care Framework” as part of its \$20-billion social infrastructure platform. The details of such a framework, which the Liberals say would create new affordable child-care spaces, would be developed with provincial governments.

Conservatives

“Thomas Mulcair would implement a one-size-fits-all, bureaucratic daycare scheme that ignores the preferences of individual families.” — Stephen Harper, in a Conservative child-care announcement this summer

The Conservative Party has no proposal to directly create or fund child-care spaces.

Child care by the numbers

\$20,619: Average annual cost of licensed full-time daycare fees for one infant in downtown Toronto

34%: Percentage this represents of Toronto’s median household income

98%: Percentage this represents of a Canadian hotel or restaurant worker’s income

346,320: Children younger than 12 in Toronto

64,700: Licensed child-care spots in Toronto

87,590: Children under age 12 living in low-income households in Toronto

25,116: Child-care fee subsidies available in Toronto

16,802: Children on the waiting list for a child-care subsidy in Toronto

1: Rank of Brampton among the least affordable cities for child care in relation to women’s income, as calculated by the Centre for Policy Alternatives

1: Rank of Toronto among cities with the most expensive child-care fees in Canada, as calculated by the Centre for Policy Alternatives

-reprinted from Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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