

Daycare dilemma forcing unreasonable sacrifice on parents ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Kathy Allagas DaSilva knows daycare is expensive.

But the big surprise for the mother of two young boys was her struggle to find space in a high-quality centre after her second child was born.

And DaSilva works in child care.

“I thought being in the field, with my networks in the city, that it would have been easier,” she says. “But it didn’t make a difference.”

With her name on multiple waiting lists near her home and work, she still wasn’t able to secure two spots in the same centre, or in daycares close enough to pick up both children on time.

So DaSilva turned to her mother-in-law, Teresa, who at age 62 agreed to take care of the boys.

“Thank goodness she could do it. But not everyone has that luxury,” she says.

Teresa loves caring for Michael and Matteo, now age 4 and 6. And the boys have developed a wonderful relationship with their grandmother, says DaSilva, 37.

But the arrangement has its drawbacks. DaSilva, who lives in the city’s northwest end, has to drive her sons to Teresa’s downtown home every morning, then to work in the Don Mills area.

“It’s a two-hour trip in rush hour both ways, every day,” she says.

Governments need to build a system that supports high-quality child care in every neighbourhood for every parent who needs it – at a cost families can afford, she says.

DaSilva says she hasn’t heard much about what the parties are proposing beyond the NDP’s Quebec-style system, with fees capped at \$15 a day, and the Conservatives’ plan to continue to send families money. She is less certain about what the Liberals and the Greens would do.

“I have to do some research,” she says. “High quality, affordable child care that’s accessible to every family. That’s what I’m looking for.”

Small business owner Jessica Amaral has juggled nannies, daycare and family help in her quest to find care for her two children while she works.

“At the end of the day, I had to take a step back. I actually sold my business,” she says.

Now the Markham hair dresser works four days a week in the salon she used to own and is home two days with Mia, 2 ½, and 5-year-old Manuel, who started senior kindergarten this fall.

Two days a week, Mia attends the local YMCA child-care centre and one day she is with Amaral’s mother, who lives nearby.

“We have a really good balance now,” says Amaral, 36.

She cringes when she recalls having to pay \$2,200 a month for a live-out nanny when she had to go back to work when Manuel was just three months old.

As Manuel grew, Amaral began to look for a daycare where he would have more structure and opportunities for socialization. But she was shocked at the lack of quality centres in her community and described some as “horrific.”

By the time Mia was born, Amaral and her husband were in a bigger house with room for her mother-in-law to move in part-time during the week to care for her.

And a year ago, Mia started daycare. “Fortunately, the Y was able to offer us a part-time space,” she says.

Amaral is against paying parents money to hire nannies and other forms of non-regulated care. Instead, government funds should go toward building more high-quality daycare centres, paying daycare workers better salaries and keeping parent fees low.

“I know I only have two years left of daycare,” she says. “But I would love to see a change in the daycare situation. One day my kids are going to need daycare.”

Michelle Kwan has two daughters, ages 2 ½ and 5 months, and is a stay-at-home mom by choice. “You could say we’re the poster family for the Conservative government’s policies,” she says, laughing.

Ottawa sends Kwan and her husband, Steven, \$320 a month in child-care benefits. With an annual income of about \$100,000, the East York couple qualifies for another \$80 a month through the National Child Benefit.

The Kwans also profit from the Conservative government’s recent income-splitting policy. “The math works out well for us,” she acknowledges.

But Kwan, 32, who says she quit her marketing and communications job, in part, because of high daycare costs, still believes child care is an important service for families.

“We are very fortunate that I am able to stay home,” she says. “But there are people who don’t have that option and have to work. And they need child care.”

“For them, even to get a spot, let alone pay for it, is so hard.”

Kwan plans to return to work when her daughters, Audrey and Violet, are in school. But she says she might not have opted to stay home if she had been able to find meaningful part-time work.

“And if finding a \$15-a-day spot was easy, then that would also have helped in that decision,” she says.

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