

Child care a struggle for many Barrie area families ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Kids are worth it.

And for Crystal Stokes, quitting her job and moving to Barrie was the price she paid because she and her husband both couldn't afford to work and pay for childcare.

She quit her job as the tourism and economic development coordinator for the City of Kenora and convinced her husband Mike to move here, closer to his parents and where there are more resources for children.

Fortunately, their oldest – Sarafina, 4 – is in school and they pay for part-time care so Stokes can work from home as the Barrie Farmers' Market manager.

"We pay \$800 a month," she said of the part-time spot at Discovery Child Care, where staff care for her three-year-old son Patrick, who has a hearing delay and Autism.

"I'm playing close attention to the child care debate. We have a long road ahead of us."

Locally, fees in a licensed centre average \$1,100 for a toddler and \$1,000 for a preschooler, said Simcoe Community Services preschool services manager Michele Kapetyn, who encountered a mom recently who was struggling with the costs.

"She and her husband both have professional jobs and they'd be considered middle class. They wouldn't qualify for subsidy. They both went to university and still have student debt," she said. "It's pretty tough."

For school-age children, before and after-school programs can add \$22 a day and \$40 for PA days. So even for parents with two school-age children, the costs can be over \$800 a month for just before and after-school care.

"Families are paying a huge part of their income for child care. That's what I'm most concerned about," said Kapetyn.

Stokes added she doesn't know how families with two working parents afford the childcare bill, even when kids are in school and they require before or after-school care.

"If you have two children to put into before and after care, I can't see how a middle-class working family does it," she said.

Statistics Canada reports Barrie is a younger-than-average community, with an average age of 38.5 years.

In 2011, almost one in five of us was under age 14, while one in eight was over age 65.

Simcoe County's early learning and childcare manager Jan Janssen noted the county offers a subsidy program designed to offset the costs of licensed childcare. What each parent pays depends on income and number of children.

As of June 30, the program supported 3,114 children, but still, there were 189 children on the wait-list.

"Bringing fees more inline with family income would be important," said Kapetyn, as would-be MPs discuss how to help families.

"In Sweden, they have a universal child care system. Parents pay a flat fee. There's a lot we can learn."

It can be tough to figure out which party knows best.

"The Universal Child Care Benefit is the only plan that allows parents to make the best decisions for their family," said Barrie-Innisfil Conservative candidate John Brassard.

"The Conservative government has increased the UCCB to nearly \$2,000 per year for each preschooler and extends \$720 for every child six through 17."

He added income splitting further reduces the tax burden.

Barrie-Innisfil Green Bonnie North, however, said that's misleading.

"The UCCB is taxable at both the federal and provincial levels. The net impact of the \$720 added income, after taxes, is quickly reduced to \$158.22 per child or a pitiful \$13.18 extra per month. With an average cost of \$721.33 per child per month for child care in Ontario, the UCCB is glaringly inadequate," North said, adding she'd like to see the government encourage businesses to partner with parents.

"Workplace childcare has many advantages: enhanced parenting time and access to children through the work day, extension of breast-feeding opportunities and improved employee productivity. These benefits extend to improving the convenience of public transportation as parents and kids share their mornings.

Barrie-Springwater-Oro-Medonte Green Marty Lancaster would "accelerate" workplace child care through a direct tax credit to businesses.

New Democrats Ellen White and Myrna Clark said a national \$15/day program is a cornerstone.

"We're committed to providing 1 million day care spaces at \$15 per day. We recognize daycare costs are prohibitive for many parents and this would allow them to return to and continue in the workforce knowing that their children are safe, secure and well cared for. A worker with peace of mind is a productive worker," White said.

Barrie-Innisfil Liberal Colin Wilson blamed the New Democrats for the continuing issues around childcare.

"If the NDP had just supported the Liberal national child care program in 2005, we would have the program in place today," Wilson said.

"People who want to argue over whether a one-price national program is fairer than a National Child Benefit that is non-taxable do not realize the difference between living in our large cities or smaller towns. One price does not fit all."

Canadian Action Party Barrie-Innisfil candidate Jeff Sakula said child care needs to be a universal program.

"We believe children are our future and we need to invest what we can in families so that the children grow up well nourished in mind and body. We will fund child care for all but concentrate on where it is most needed," he said.

"We will raise families out of poverty so that their children have the same opportunities as others to live happy, productive lives."

But still, a father of two youngsters, Conservative Alex Nuttall said the government now gives parents choice.

"Our plan gives the choice of childcare to the real experts – Mom and Dad."

But still, Stokes doesn't buy what the Conservatives are selling. She's waiting to see the impact of the Universal Child Care Benefit – which boosted her cheques by \$60 per child – at tax time.

"I'm paying close attention. We have a long road ahead of us," Stokes said.

-reprinted from Simcoe.com

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