

Surrey looks to tackle 'crippling' child care costs ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Next week, Jackie Porcina heads back to work after a year of maternity leave with her second child, almost-one-year-old Bianca.

The young Cloverdale family is trying out modified work schedules and sacrificing time together in order to avoid the "crippling" cost of child care.

Porcina's husband will work at his job at a trucking company from 6 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday to Friday, and she will work for an electronics company from 4 p.m. to midnight. That will give the family just one hour together a day during the week, but that's what they've had to do in order to make their finances work, Porcina said.

With their first child, they paid for daycare.

"It was great for socialization and that, but it was expensive," she said.

"That was already a bit of a struggle and with two kids now, my paycheques would basically be going to daycare."

In fact, she expects she would bring in less than when she did while on maternity leave.

"And never mind if one or both girls got sick and I had to stay home with them," she added, "because we all know that kids don't just get sick for the amount of vacation or sick time you are able to take off from work."

The couple and their children have lived in Cloverdale for three years. They used to rent until a year-and-a-half ago purchased a home in the area with her husband's sister's family. They live in the home's basement suite with their two daughters.

"If I didn't go back to work we would be in a very difficult place financially," she explained.

"I'm not sure if five hours in weekdays for our family being together is going to be worth it for the money as well as lack of sleep," she said.

"We knew there would be some sort of struggle but we never thought we'd have to split our time like this.

"The whole situation is very frustrating from all angles," Porcina added. "(Child care) shouldn't have to be crippling."

The issue of accessible, affordable child care has become so prominent in Surrey that the city decided on Monday to co-chair a task force to try to tackle the issue. The task force's goal is to develop a Child Care Action Plan for Surrey.

There are only 12.4 spaces for every 100 children in Surrey aged 12 and under, with a particular shortage in after-school care and for those under three, according to a city report. And child care fees have become the second largest expense in a family's budget.

To complicate matters, few facilities are serving more than one age group, the report states, forcing parents to pick up their children from different locations.

Parents have reported missing work or even quitting their jobs over child care. And low-income families on subsidy and with children who require extra support are often turned away.

The situation isn't new, and is particularly troubling in Surrey.

According to a study, The Parent Trap, released by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in 2014, Surrey mothers spend the biggest chunk of their income on child care in the province. In Canada, Surrey came in second to Brampton, Ont.

The study found nearly 35 per cent of a Surrey mother's income goes to child care.

Median child care fees for infants and toddlers is \$977, slightly lower for pre-schoolers (\$868).

The study measured affordability by looking at the median cost of child care as compared to median income for women aged 25 to 34 in 22 of Canada's largest cities.

"Affordable child care is an important issue not only for parents but also for the Canadian economy as it plays a significant role in labour force participation," noted the study. "When parents are given an affordable choice, they choose to work, which increases incomes for all Canadians."

-reprinted from Surrey Now

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