

Daycare legislation threatens to nix day camp for tots ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

At age 3, Samantha Fox is a summer camp veteran.

The Toronto preschooler has attended Bayview Glen Day Camp for the past two summers where she has enjoyed daily swimming lessons, outdoor sports and the thrill of roasting marshmallows on an outdoor fire.

“We absolutely love the program,” said her mother Sara Fox. “It’s been just a wonderful experience for her.”

But the mother of two was shocked last week when she got a letter from Bayview Glen informing her that summer camps now fall under Ontario’s new child care legislation and can no longer accept kids under age 4 without a daycare licence.

“Samantha’s been going to camp since she was 22 months old and now she’s got nowhere to go,” said Fox. “It just makes no sense, especially since she turns 4 at the end of August and will be starting kindergarten.”

The province introduced tighter child care legislation in the fall of 2014 to provide more safeguards for children in non-parental care, including in summer camps where there have been injuries, said a spokeswoman for Education Minister Liz Sandals. The legislation took effect last August.

“Camps offer kids an excellent opportunity to learn and participate in different activities, while staying active,” said Alessandra Fusco.

“Younger children are a more vulnerable population and we want to do everything we can to keep all kids safe,” she said in an email.

“Requiring a child care licence for camps in Ontario serving children under 4 ... places an emphasis on standards and protections.”

More than 43 day camps in Ontario — most in the Toronto area — serving about 3,000 children under age 4, are affected by the new legislation, said Heather Heagle of the Ontario Camps Association which accredits both overnight and day camps in the province.

“Parents are hysterical,” she said. “But we have been negotiating with the ministry since last fall and we hope something can be resolved by March.”

Day camps provide a different kind of experience for children than daycare, said Heagle, a trained early childhood educator who used to work for the city of Toronto.

They have higher staff-child ratios than licensed daycares, she said, noting that for children between the ages of 2 and 4 there are as many as one staff member for every two or three kids. In licensed child care the ratio is 1-to-8 for that age group.

To be accredited by the association, camps have to meet more than 400 health and safety standards, she noted.

What’s particularly frustrating for the camps, Heagle said, is that children who turn 4 by Dec. 31 this year are eligible for kindergarten in the fall, but they have to be 4 by the start of camp to avoid being excluded by the child care legislation.

“At least make the cut-off the same as school so children won’t be separated from their school friends,” she said.

Bayview Glen Day Camp has been serving children from age 2 to 14 since the program opened more than 50 years ago, said director Dara Kahane, who attended as a camper when she was 2.

The camp, at Bayview Glen private school near Don Mills Rd. between York Mills Rd. and Hwy 401, hires mostly early childhood education students from Ryerson University and George Brown College for its youngest campers, she said.

About 450 staff care for about 1,200 campers who attend from two weeks to eight weeks over the summer, she said.

The sticking point for camps is the way child care legislation regulates the use of space, Kahane said.

“The room they say should be carpeted with sterilized toys doesn’t exist at camp,” she said. “It’s a room where they put on their sunscreen and change into their bathing suit. And then they are off to the firepit area roasting marshmallows and then to a playground.”

Kahane hopes ministry officials can give Bayview Glen and others camps serving kids under 4 a provisional licence for this summer while working with them to see if the daycare legislation can be tweaked.

“We’re not saying this is a poor piece of legislation,” she said. “As a mom who has had kids go through the daycare system and nursery school system, I welcome this immensely. What we’re asking for is some time. We want the ministry to work with us on this.”

Fox has her fingers crossed.

“If Samantha can’t go to camp this summer, I have no idea what we’ll do.”

-reprinted from Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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