

A look at Toronto's childcare needs ^[1]

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Source: Torontoist

Format: Article

Publication Date: 1 Mar 2016

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Parents are going into debt, young mothers are delaying their careers, and low-income families are waiting for government subsidies. Childcare in Toronto is in a state of crisis.

Securing a spot for a single infant or toddler can run parents more than \$20,000 a year, and licensed care for children up to the age of 12 is higher in Toronto than anywhere else in the country.

While the City of Toronto offers childcare fee subsidies for parents who pass an income test, money isn't the only issue. There are 25,116 subsidies available in Toronto, but over 17,000 children currently on the subsidy waiting list.

Verjinia Hassekian was one of the names on this list until a spot opened up at the Ryerson Early Learning Centre, where her three-year-old daughter now attends daycare. Hassekian applied for the subsidy in May, 2014 when her daughter was two years old, and spent four months on the waiting list.

"Finding a spot in a daycare is the number one challenge," Hassekian says of her experience as a working mother. "I had to call literally 30 centres and none had spaces."

The waiting period was especially difficult for Hassekian, who had to pay \$1,300 a month to send her daughter to daycare at the only downtown facility that had a spot available.

"It was 10 kids with one teacher, toddlers falling down on each other," says Hassekian, who paid for the daycare as a last resort, despite what she felt were poor conditions for her daughter.

Hassekian says if she remained on the subsidy waiting list any longer, she would have ended up on welfare. Her daughter now receives subsidized care at Ryerson, but her family is still at risk of losing their subsidy. One of the conditions of the funded spot is each parent must be working full-time, but Hassekian's husband is currently working part-time.

"[The case worker] tells my husband, if you don't find a full-time job, we will pull the subsidy," Hassekian says. "If they do that, he will end up not having time to find another job."

Still, Hassekian considers herself one of the lucky ones. She knows that thousands of other families are still waiting for subsidies, and while in limbo, they face a daunting dilemma: they can stay home with their child and put their career on hold to avoid high childcare costs, or keep their job and go into debt to pay for daycare.

Statistics Canada reports that one-third of women aged 25 to 54 who wanted to work but were not employed cited "personal and family responsibilities" as the reason. Among women aged 25 to 44 who work part-time, 32 per cent said the reason they are not working full-time is so they can care for their children.

The percentage of women who cite childcare as the reason for part-time work is lowest in Quebec, the province with the most affordable childcare fees, which are capped at \$174 a month.

While Quebec's flat-rate model covers a range of services, Toronto's subsidy system fails to accommodate the needs of parents who work irregular hours. The city's lack of comprehensive subsidized care forced Hassekian to take a job outside of her field and a smaller salary in order to match her daughter's schedule.

Priya Dhawan, a Scarborough resident and single mother, was facing a similar prospect shortly after her daughter was born. Dhawan applied for a subsidy when her daughter was less than a year old, right before she planned on returning to work.

"I definitely needed the subsidy. Otherwise the cost for the daycare is \$65 a day," says Dhawan, who couldn't afford the cost on her current salary. The subsidy, which is determined by the recipient's income, covers most, but not all, of Dhawan's fee.

Dhawan's daughter attends the Scarborough daycare for eight hours a day, Monday to Friday. One of the requirements of the subsidy is

that the child must attend the daycare facility full-time. This requirement fits Dhawan's work schedule, but she still thinks it's a major limitation of the city's childcare policy.

"In my scenario it was based on the fact that I was a single parent and you have to be working in order to get the subsidy," she says. "But for other parents, even if they both are working, sometimes they can't afford the daycare with the full cost."

Families who cannot afford the high cost of childcare and also don't qualify for the subsidy are forced to find alternatives like part-time work or live with family members who can take on childcare responsibilities—both options Dhawan was considering had she not received a subsidy.

Situations like this are why Janet Davis (Ward 31, Beaches-East York) argues changing conditions for subsidies is a necessary solution.

"One way to address affordability is to change the subsidy system, and make it more and more generous," says Davis, emphasizing that subsidized childcare in Toronto should cover a comprehensive range of services. "There should be full-time, part-time, home childcare, centre-based childcare, there should be after-school programs, there should be half-day nursery programs—plus parental benefits and leave," says Davis.

Davis closely watches Toronto's childcare system. She's spent her career pushing for a national childcare plan, and has personally received the subsidy. "I went through it because I was a single parent," says Davis.

"I wouldn't have gotten here without a childcare subsidy."

-reprinted from Torontoist

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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