

Parents and advocates balk at new daycare regulations ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

New mother Megan Ramsey is looking forward to returning to work this spring as an early childhood educator with the Halton District School Board.

But she is terrified by proposed changes to provincial child-care regulations that would mean her daughter, who will be 12 months old in May, would enter child care as a “toddler” instead of an infant where she would spend her days with babies up to 18 months old.

“The thought of her being in a room of 12 children, some of them 2 years old, makes my heart hurt,” said Ramsey, who worked in child-care centres for more than a decade before moving to full-day kindergarten in 2012.

“A lot of 1-year-olds are not yet walking. Most 2-year-olds are running. This will make for a very unsafe environment,” she added.

Ramsey is among hundreds of parents, child-care experts and advocates who are outraged Ontario’s education ministry is suggesting babies, toddlers and preschoolers in licensed centres should be cared for in larger groups at younger ages and with fewer adults.

It is the third time in six years the province has floated the idea as a way to address the financial squeeze facing child-care programs in the wake of full-day kindergarten and 12-month maternity leaves. And it has been touted as a way to make parent fees more affordable.

But for the third time, advocates say ministry officials have yet to show any provincial data to support the move.

“Quality isn’t great in child care as it is,” said Martha Friendly, head of the Toronto-based Childcare Resource and Research Unit. “If they bring this in, Ontario will be leading the race to the bottom.”

A spokesperson for Education Minister Liz Sandals said the proposed changes “strengthen quality, increase access and reflect the feedback we received from child-care licensees and other early years-partners in response to past consultations.”

But from a developmental standpoint, the changes make no sense, Friendly said, noting the significant difference between a 12-month-old baby and a 2-year-old. Both the American and Canadian pediatric societies, as well as the American Public Health Association, recommend smaller group sizes and smaller adult-child ratios than Ontario is recommending, she added.

The “recycled regulatory proposals” run counter to the provincial budget’s stated goals of “setting higher standards for health and safety of children,” said Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, which represents non-profit centres in the province.

A proposal to lift the 25-home caseload cap for home child-care agency inspectors will reduce oversight and undermine both quality and safety, she added.

“This is especially concerning because home visitors provide front-line support to regulated home child-care providers and are responsible for ensuring provincial regulations are met,” Ferns said.

Some municipalities and daycare operators predict centres will opt to close infant programs for children under age 1, which would make daycare less accessible for self-employed parents and lower-income families who are unable to take a full year of maternity and parental leave, she added.

In Toronto, where the city oversees 69,000 child-care spots, the proposed new age groups are “a worry,” said Elaine Baxter-Trahair, general manager of children’s services.

“It would require significant capital expenses for most centres and some simply don’t have the space to accommodate the changes,” she said.

Since the average Toronto family looking for daycare enrolls their child at 8 months, the changes would also mean more transitions for very young children who would be forced to move to the toddler room after just four months of care, Baxter-Trahair added.

The city will be consulting with daycare operators, early childhood educators, academics and others over the next two weeks before

submitting its response to the province, which is accepting feedback until April 1, she said.

The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario is pleased the proposed regulations would increase the required number of ECE's from one to two in each of the age groups.

"But any benefit to the addition in the number of trained staff would be outweighed by the change in age ranges and group sizes," said co-ordinator Lyndsay Macdonald. "We are worried about more needless transitions for our youngest children, and more burnout for the child-care workforce."

The association and the child-care coalition are staging a town hall at Ryerson University on Tuesday to discuss the changes.

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