

Ontario considers changing daycare ages and staff-child ratio ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ontario's proposed changes to daycare rules could force some providers to stop accepting infants under one year old, the City of Toronto's top childcare bureaucrat is warning.

The province is proposing to reduce the age at which infants move up to the toddler room to 12 months from the current 18 months, and to reduce the staff-child ratio for infants under 12 months to three adults for every nine children from three adults for every 10 children. The province will also require that toddler rooms be larger.

"What we think now is most operators will opt out of providing infant care if this is passed," said Elaine Baxter-Trahair, the City of Toronto's general manager of children's services, which directly operates 50 daycare centres and subsidizes thousands of other spaces in childcare centres operated by other agencies.

Some Toronto daycare centres that are in older buildings or schools will not be able to enlarge their toddler rooms, she said, and the new lower staff-to-child ratio will leave some of them financially strapped. She said the "unanticipated consequences" of the proposed changes could cancel out the 300 new infant spaces the city has recently created.

Ms. Baxter-Trahair said the changes will also make infant care more expensive for parents and for the city, while making care for children older than a year cheaper.

Education Minister Liz Sandals defended the proposed changes, contending they will dramatically increase the number of daycare spots in licensed providers for one-year-olds from 11,000 to 30,000 by putting them into the toddler rooms. She said the province is simply re-jigging the age groups to match demand.

Ms. Sandals said that, because of full-day kindergarten, four- and five-year-olds are leaving daycare earlier than before, while one-year parental leaves mean fewer children under a year are in care. This has thrown the current system's numbers out of whack.

"The most common point at which parents are starting to look for childcare now is as they reach the 12-month point. So we know that the old ratios don't actually match the practice of what parents are asking for," she said at Queen's Park on Monday. "What we're doing is we're responding to the demand from parents to have more spaces available at the 12-month mark."

She also countered suggestions that one year and two years is too great an age gap to have in the same room by pointing out that the age gap is even bigger on the other end.

"If you stop and think about it, if you've got a little newborn who can't do anything and an 18-month-old, they're actually quite different people in the groupings we've got now," she said.

But Ms. Baxter-Trahair said the average age of a baby entering Toronto's childcare system is still eight months, as many single mothers, or those with low-paying or precarious jobs, cannot afford to take their full 12-month leaves.

Those children would spend just four months getting used to new caregivers in the revised system before they graduated to toddler rooms with different staff. And critics warn that, once they were sent to toddler care, the wide age gap between 12-month-olds and two-year-olds would result in degraded service.

Toronto City Councillor Janet Davis, a long-time childcare advocate, called the changes to infant age groupings unacceptable: "What this is going to do is put babies, who are not yet walking for instance and haven't reached other developmental stages, in with older children in a way that will, I think, really jeopardize the quality of care for those children."

She said the province is clearly trying to improve access for parents, but should not do it by compromising quality: "I suspect the province is trying to reduce the price and improve access, but it shouldn't be done at the expense of quality and the developmental needs of young children."

The city is consulting daycare operators, experts and parents on its official response to the province's proposal.

-reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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