

Daycare nightmare forces mom to take unpaid leave ^[1]

Author: Monsebraaten, Laurie

Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 7 Mar 2016

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Toronto market research specialist Erinn Meloche was just over a month away from her April 4 return to work when she got the call no parent on maternity leave wants to get.

Her daycare had closed.

“I couldn’t believe it,” said Meloche, who began putting her name on daycare waiting lists near her Riverdale-area home the moment she became pregnant.

Even though she and her husband Glenn Attridge were prepared to fork out \$3,400 a month for child care for their baby and pre-schooler – more than their monthly mortgage payments – the need far outstrips supply.

“The biggest stress in our lives has been finding child care and we are not alone,” she said.

The couple thought they had struck gold last fall when they discovered the local Mighty Kids Daycare was set to open a second location at the corner of Carlaw Ave. and Gerrard St. E., close to their home.

They enrolled Spencer last November and secured a spot in April for baby Drew. They believed the bright, airy centre that boasted an on-site cook and double the required number of fully-trained early childhood educators, would receive final provincial licensing approval within weeks.

But when ministry officials discovered the for-profit daycare was operating without a licence with 23 children on Dec. 11 again on Feb. 8 with 37 children on-site, the province issued a compliance order to close. On Feb. 18, the ministry rejected the centre’s licence application. As an unlicensed centre, just five children are legally allowed to remain.

Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care isn’t surprised so many parents would put their kids in an unlicensed setting. “This just speaks to the real need that is not being met by the province,” she said.

She is shocked last month’s provincial budget offered nothing more than “re-announcements of past capital investments and wage enhancements” for child care.

But more perplexing for Ferns was the budget’s neglect to mention child care in a 15-page chapter on Ontario’s priorities for intergovernmental co-operation with the new Liberal government in Ottawa.

“Families that believed Ontario would be eager to work on a national child-care plan will be disappointed by this reversal,” she said.

A spokeswoman for Education Minister Liz Sandals said Ontario has doubled child-care funding to more than \$1 billion annually since the Liberals took office in 2003. A federal-provincial-territorial meeting that touched on child care in February was “an important first step in a pan-Canadian dialogue that Ontario expects will continue to unfold,” Nicole McInerney said in an email.

Meloche and Attridge, who say they “aren’t nanny people,” and want their kids in high-quality licensed child care, can’t believe Ottawa and Queen’s Park aren’t doing more to help “parents who want to work and pay taxes.”

Without daycare, Meloche has been forced to take an eight-week unpaid leave to care for Spencer, 3-and-a-half, and Drew, 1, while she looks frantically for alternatives.

Mighty Kids lawyer Justin Jakubiak, said the daycare opened without a license under the belief that any outstanding licensing issues were minor and that full licensing was imminent.

All parents who registered their kids with the centre were told it was not yet licensed, he added.

“With the severe shortage of daycare spots in the area, Mighty Kids believed children attending the centre, even though it was not yet licensed, would be in better care than alternatives available in the neighbourhood,” Jakubiak said.

The operator “fully acknowledges her mistake and wants to do everything to correct the situation,” the lawyer said in his submission to Ontario’s Licence Appeal Tribunal. All city fire, building code, health and safety approvals are in place, he added.

Local MPP Peter Tabuns (NDP Toronto Danforth) said a huge demographic shift in the area, combined with the city’s soaring real estate prices, has put enormous pressure on child care.

And while he does not condone unlicensed daycares, he understands why parents use them.

“They are desperate. They have to pay their mortgages and they need both parents working to do it,” he said. “If a place looks clean and well run and the children are treated well, as far as they can tell, then they are going to use it.”

“Until you have a much larger supply of licensed care – preferably public and non-profit – you are going to have these kinds of conflicts.”

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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