

Proposed Ontario daycare centre changes concern local parents

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EXCERPTS

The Ontario government is recommending making changes to daycares across the province, but some of those changes are not sitting well with parents and registered early childhood educators.

"We need to start looking at the children and thinking more about what's best for them as opposed to how can we pack as many of them into these warehouses as possible so that we can make this work," Waterloo mom Natasha Kocher told CBC News in an interview. She runs Red River Early Learning Centre out of her home and she said she is concerned about changes to the age grouping for children in daycare centres.

Currently, children up to 18 months of age are considered infants, 18 months to 30 months are toddlers and over 30 months are preschoolers.

The groupings would change under the province's proposal to make lower the infant designation to 12 months old and younger, toddlers would be 12 to 24 months old, and children would be considered preschoolers at 24 months.

Changes to help meet demand

The proposed changes would also alter the number of staff watching children. Instead of three adults watching 10 children in the infant age group, it would be one adult for every three. As well, the ratio would go from one adult for five children to one adult for four in the toddler group, while preschool will remain the same with one adult for eight children.

"We're actually requiring two qualified ECEs in a class of nine, plus another staff, so we're actually upping the qualifications for the people who will be taking care of those newborns," Ontario Education Minister Liz Sandals told Craig Norris, host of CBC KW's The Morning Edition.

She noted the new age groups are meant to meet the demand. Starting the toddler group at 12 months old, for example, is "when the demand (for daycare) takes off," makes sense, she said.

"What we're actually trying to do is create categories that actually fit the demand," she said.

Developmental differences

Kocher says the age range in the toddler group is concerning because the developmental differences between 12-month-olds and 24-month-olds is "vastly different."

"Twelve-month-olds can be talking and walking or they can be crawling and still very young," she said.

"Even with the additional oversight (of staff) it's going to be hard to manage," she added. "In essence what they're doing is raising infant ratios. They're putting 12-month-olds at a one-to-four ratio instead of one-to-three."

It's a sentiment echoed by Marianne Leslie. She has worked in a licensed childcare facility for seven years and currently runs a daycare in her Kitchener home.

"My biggest concern would be the developmental range of children. So you're taking a 12-month-old who may or may not be able to walk, may or may not have verbal skills ... and you're going to take them and put them into a room with a group of two-year-olds who can walk, and run, and climb, and jump and physically do all those things and don't need a second nap," she said.

"They can communicate, they have language skills and you're going to put them all in a room together and expect that it's going to go harmoniously," she said. "It's not feasible. It's not realistic."

Leslie also noted it will be a challenge for educators in the toddler room because their focus will more often be on the younger children.

"That takes away from the two-year-old, it takes away from the quality of care that you're trying to provide to the group as a whole," she said.

April 1 deadline for feedback

The Ministry of Education said in a statement that ensuring families have access to safe and modern childcare is a top priority, and that's why the government has invested millions, including raising the rate of pay of child care workers.

"A number of our current provisions in regulation need to be updated to be more responsive to the child care needs of families and to better reflect best practices and research as to how to best support children's health, safety, and well-being while they are in child care," the statement emailed to CBC News said.

If the changes are made, they would take effect Jan. 1, and most of the changes could be implemented by centres over a three-year period.

The province is currently seeking feedback on the proposed changes.

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