

# Ontario tweaks controversial daycare regulations <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Monsebraaten, Laurie

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## EXCERPTS

Ontario's education ministry is tweaking daycare regulations amid outrage that an earlier proposal would have wiped out 2,000 desperately needed infant and toddler spaces in Toronto and sent parent fees through the roof.

The new regulations, posted Monday and set to take effect in Sept. 2017, will allow daycares to maintain existing infant, toddler and pre-school age groups and staff-child ratios.

But centres that require more flexibility will have the option of applying to field-test two new age groups: One for children from birth to age 2 and another for those between the ages of 2 and 5. A third "family" age group would allow smaller centres to care for up to 15 children of different ages.

Currently, babies under age 18 months and toddlers to age 2 ½ must be cared for in separate rooms.

The new option, which would allow centres to use existing space to accommodate the changes, would be treated as a pilot project. Participating daycares would be required to work closely with the ministry to evaluate program viability and quality, government officials said.

"The ministry of education developed these regulations after extensive consultation with stakeholders and the public," officials in a statement.

Education Minister Liz Sandals has said changes are needed to reflect the introduction of year-long maternity leaves in 2000 and full-day kindergarten in 2010.

But she came under attack in March for suggesting changes that would have put some babies, toddlers and preschoolers in larger groups at younger ages and with fewer adults without providing any research to show how it would impact child care centres, parent fees or program quality.

The City of Toronto, which collects a wide range of detailed data on the 669 centres it oversees, including the number and ages of children served, centre occupancy, quality measures and parent fees, cautioned the education ministry against a similar untested proposal in 2014.

In a report last month, city staff noted the province's earlier plan to reduce the age for infant rooms from 18 months to 12 months would likely have forced most of those programs to close at a time when Toronto is spending millions of tax dollars to create more of the high-demand spots.

Academics, early childhood educators and parents from across the province staged protests and signed petitions against the plan.

Child care experts said the earlier proposal ignored group sizes and adult-child ratios recommended by both the American and Canadian pediatric societies, as well as the American Public Health Association.

Since staff-child ratios and group sizes are key components of daycare quality, the proposed changes would have put Ontario in a "race to the bottom," in Canada, said Martha Friendly of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

Under the pilot project, rooms for children from birth to age 2 would be capped at 12 kids and staff-child ratios would range from 1:3 to 1:4, depending on the ages of the children

In the older age group, which would be limited to 24 children, the staff-child ratio would be 1:8.

Centres that choose the new options would have to boost the number of fully-trained early childhood educators from one per room to two, according to the ministry.

In addition to new rules for age groups, group sizes and staff-child ratios, the government also posted updated regulations for various other aspects of licensed child care including before- and after-school programs for 6- to 12-year-olds, sleep monitoring and playground

safety. They take effect on a range of dates beginning July 1, 2016.

Meantime, NDP MPP Peter Tabuns has introduced a private member's bill to ban daycare waitlist fees in Ontario. (Toronto passed a bylaw last summer that will ban non-refundable waitlist fees as of January, 2017.)

Tabun's bill, which passed first reading last Thursday, would require daycares to publicly post waitlist policies in their centres and on their websites and allow parents to see where they stand without disclosing personal information about other families.

Tabuns said he is responding to parents in his Toronto—Danforth riding who say the serious lack of daycare forces them to put their names on numerous waitlists to secure a spot. With between one-third to one-half of daycares charging non-refundable wait list fees of \$20 to more \$200, it puts even more pressure on cash-strapped parents, he said.

"There is a strong case for a bill like this," he said. "There is huge desperation."

Sandals vowed to act on April 1, hours after a Toronto Star story highlighted the problem, saying she would "be looking into how we can regulate or prohibit child care wait list fees."

Last week, after Tabuns introduced his bill, Sandals said she will "continue to work with parents and child care providers to move forward on our commitment."

"Many things are promised," Tabins said. "Hopefully introducing a private member's bill will spur them on."

Since 2003, the Liberals have doubled child care funding to more than \$1 billion annually. The number of licensed child care spaces in Ontario has grown to nearly 351,000 spots, an increase of 87 per cent, according to ministry statistics. The province is creating 4,000 new child care spaces in schools under a \$120-million three-year plan announced in 2015.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** quality <sup>[4]</sup>

legislation and regulation <sup>[5]</sup>

group sizes <sup>[6]</sup>

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