

Why are wages for Toronto's early childhood educators so low? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It's no secret that childcare costs have—and continue to—skyrocket in Toronto. These days, the median cost of childcare for an infant is now more than \$1,700 per month, and that number seems to be growing steadily. In fact, Ontarians pay the most for childcare in the country.

But what of the people who provide the services? How much of that money gets passed onto them?

As it turns out, not much.

Early childhood educators, or ECEs, perform the work of childcare—from changing diapers to teaching toddlers how to share, and helping older children with their homework. The work can often be gruelling, with long hours and fussy kids to look after. And the wages of workers—who the Ontario Coalition for Better Childcare says are 97 per cent women—seldom make up for the amount of time, energy, and dedication they put into the job.

Both private and public sectors are rife with underpaid workers. Kristen Varley, a 2014 graduate of George Brown's Early Childhood Development program, currently makes \$18.50 an hour working at a public daycare facility. And Chanequa Cameron, who trained to become an ECE in 2006, makes just \$16 at the private facility where she works.

Even worse, both Varley and Cameron are saddled with thousands of dollars of student debt from training to work in the childcare field. After completing undergraduate and graduate studies at Ryerson, Cameron's debt load is approximately \$70,000. Even though she has worked in the field for years, her earnings still cannot provide her with "a good quality of life."

The combination of high student debt and a lack of appropriate compensation can prove frustrating. But even more so, it means Torontonians who provide a necessary service in the city are being shortchanged.

Aislinn Shwartz, a recent graduate of George Brown, says she paid \$6,000 in total to complete her training. "We are professionals, we have professional development requirements we have to meet, we have a regulatory body," she says. "Yet, our field, which is predominantly women, is one of the most underpaid."

With the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in the city now more than \$1,000 per month, early childhood educators' wages render it difficult to make ends meet.

But why are wages so low in a city where parents pay so much for childcare?

According to the Ontario Coalition for Better Childcare's Victoria Bitto, the high costs of childcare and the low wages of ECEs are related. Running a daycare centre in Toronto is an expensive project. Between high rents on spaces for private facilities, maintaining those facilities, and purchasing necessities like food or cleaning products, public daycare centres are frequently too strapped for cash to pay workers more. Because daycare costs and budgets at the city's public centres are typically decided by boards of parents, they can be reluctant to raise prices in order to raise ECEs wages, lest their childcare costs skyrocket even further.

At private daycare facilities, there is a similar motive to keep wages down for ECEs for greater profit. The simple math is that the more its staff are paid, the harder it is for the centre to be profitable.

The solution to the problem of low wages for ECEs, Bitto says, is provincially run subsidized daycare. Such a system already exists in Quebec. Similar reforms in Ontario have been pledged—particularly by the OCBC—though no changes are imminent. In the meantime, ECEs are paying the high price for Toronto's dysfunctional childcare system.

Most of these ECEs love the work they do. "For as long as I can remember, I have known that I wanted to work with children," Varley says. Cameron echoes her sentiment: "My main deciding factor was to find a role that would be meaningful to mankind, something necessary." But these women's dedication is not reflected in their compensation—as it should.

-reprinted from Torontoist

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