

Child care over summer break a struggle for Calgary parents during downturn ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Summer break is supposed to be a fun, carefree time of year — the season of vacations, road trips and camp.

But for some Calgary parents it's not much of a break at all as they struggle to budget for child care during the economic downturn.

"It can be very stressful on parents," said Calgary United Way CEO Lucy Miller. "In the summer there's a new wrinkle in things when the children are at home all day. So maybe they can't be out looking for work or maybe they are working and they're not making enough to provide childcare or to send their kids to camp."

Eva Oczkus would like to enrol her eldest daughter, who is almost four, in swimming or gymnastics lessons, but money is tight this summer.

Oczkus is getting fewer hours at her retail job. Her husband, who fixes printers, has also had his hours cut back during the downturn.

"To enrol in different day camps or swimming camps, they're very expensive and we don't have the money to do that, now that the groceries and everything is up," she said. "And, well, our income doesn't allow us to enroll them in those things. It's better for me to take care of them instead of taking them to a summer camp."

Oczkus is planning to take advantage of city water parks and library programs when her daughter finishes preschool.

Chris Dingman, a heavy equipment operator, says he's going to have to get resourceful when it comes to activities for his children, aged three and seven.

"I spend most of my time with my kids right now because I'm out of work," Dingman said. "Just with the economy — everything's been down."

Work dried up for him about eight months ago.

"We're all trying to find stuff that's inexpensive for our kids to do," he said.

Spike in demand

Non-profit agencies are seeing a spike in the number of families applying for subsidies to cover their kids' camp fees.

The Calgary YMCA's Strong Kids fund helped 20,000 kids take part in camps and other programs last year. Demand is expected to increase by about 14 per cent this year.

"They don't necessarily want to ask for help, but they do know that this is a good place for their children. And so we try to make sure that we're as supportive as possible," said Brigitte Edwards, who oversees day camps for the YMCA in Calgary. "We know that people are going through tougher times. And that's what we're here for."

More affordable options needed

"I think there's a real lack of childcare and especially affordable child care," said Leslie Brooks, who has a seven-year-old son and runs a parenting blog.

"A lot of families have to think well in advance what they're going to do, what they're going to be able to afford, and whether or not that's going to be enough to take up their whole summer. If you think an average week-long camp can be \$250 — times eight weeks, that adds up," said Brooks.

"I think this year a lot of people are just doing what they can do and what will be able to fit into their schedule and what will be able to fit into their budget," she said.

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