

Erin Chalmers: A 13-month-old with a skull fracture and no one can explain why? ^[1]

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Source: Global News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 28 Jun 2016

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

My son Logan is a happy, healthy five-year-old. He's smart, compassionate and growing like a weed. Four years ago though, as my husband Chris and I sat in the emergency department and a doctor told us Logan's skull was fractured, we were concerned that wouldn't be the case.

Logan was born in 2011. The first year flew by and before we knew it, it was time to find him care. We considered a day care but liked the idea of a day home better. We had our checklist and questions ready and in one week visited more than a dozen day homes. Some were accredited, some were not.

Toward the end of the week, we arrived at Indira's day home. It looked great! It was so clean, there were numbers and the alphabet up on the wall and she had all the recommended toys to advance a child's learning. She even offered us a schedule of what the kids would do every day, how much time would be spent outdoors and the homemade meals they would be fed. She was so organized.

Monday, Feb. 27, 2012, was Logan's fourth full day at the day home - my second week back at work. When I arrived to pick him up, he was already in his winter jacket, which wasn't unexpected. His toque was on and the hood of his jacket pulled up over it. He was crying quite a bit and Indira told me it was because she had had to wake him up from his nap. I believed her - why wouldn't I?

I put him in his car seat and the whole ride home, he continued to cry. As I lay with him in bed trying to calm him down, I rubbed the back of his head and that's when I knew something was wrong. It was swollen. So swollen I questioned whether I just didn't know the shape of my own son's head. I called Chris and asked him to come home from work. The second he looked at Logan, I knew something was seriously wrong. I called Indira to see if something had happened at the day home. Maybe he fell? Kids fall; it happens. Nope, nothing.

We rushed to the hospital, wondering if it was a tumour or some other sort of medical issue. After some x-rays, a doctor sat us down to tell us his skull was fractured, from the left side behind his ear all the way over to the right side. She said some police officers would be meeting us at the Stollery Children's Hospital. I was so confused. Why would there be police officers? We couldn't tell them how this happened. We didn't know.

Logan was very lucky. There was no bleeding under his skull and he was able to come home with us the next day. But we didn't even get to spend the day together. Instead, we were at the Zebra Child Protection Centre being interviewed by police. Chris and I were separated and questioned for hours. He had to explain every minute with Logan that morning. Did they stop anywhere on the way to the day home? What time did they leave the house? Did he know for sure there was no bump on Logan's head before he dropped him off?

Then it was my turn: when did I notice the bump? Did I stop anywhere on the way home from the day home? Was I sure nothing happened when we got home? Could he have fallen at the house? I was so overwhelmed. It took me at least two hours to get through my interview. There really is nothing worse than someone thinking you could have hurt the most important person in your life.

A few days later, two officers came to our house and took video of Logan going up and down our stairs. I knew they believed us. They wanted to figure out how his injury happened.

Almost a year later, and after being charged with criminal negligence causing bodily harm and child abandonment, Indira finally admitted that Logan fell, backwards down her wooden stairs, smashing his head. She hadn't put up a baby gate. Instead, she just told the kids to stay downstairs while she went upstairs.

She was sentenced to two years probation, during which she couldn't operate a day home, and 150 hours community service. At the time, she said she had no plans to ever open a day home again. But the fact is, she could be running one right now.

Four years later, when it was time for me to go back to work after my second parental leave, you may be surprised to hear we decided to go with a day home again. I do believe they are great options and the one the boys are in now is amazing. But when we looked for a day

home this time, we had different criteria. Yes, the home's cleanliness, the menu and the education offered was important.

But our main concerns were safety and care: would this person actually care for our kids or were they just out for a paycheck?

So, here's my new checklist:

1. Baby gates. This is a must. I know some providers say they don't need them because they're always with the kids. I don't buy it. People pee, doorbells ring, life happens. Baby gates should always be up.
2. Make sure there is at least one child at the day home who can talk. When Logan was hurt, no one could really tell us what happened because the kids were all so young.
3. Open-door policy. Make sure you can come in at any time. Indira always had the kids ready and waiting at the front door for pick up. I thought this made things more convenient. After talking with police, I learned it was not a good thing. Unless you ask for the provider to have your kid(s) ready, he or she should want you to come in and see what they're doing.
4. CPR and first aid. We asked Indira if she was up to date on her CPR and first aid training and she said yes. Again, we believed her. It wasn't until we were sitting in the courtroom during her sentencing that we found out she hadn't updated it in years. Please, ASK TO SEE THE DOCUMENTATION.
5. Layout. At Indira's, the play area was open to a sitting area. I didn't even realize, until police pointed it out to me, she had breakable vases and glass on the tables. This area was fully accessible to the kids. Police have their own beliefs on how she was able to keep the kids out of the room but nothing was proven in court, so I won't go into that. Just double-check that any area the kids can access is child friendly.
6. Ask questions. I didn't want to be that crazy, first-time mom; I wanted to be cool and relaxed about childcare. In my mind, that would make the caregiver like me more and in turn, she'd like my kids more. These are your kids: ask questions and make sure you get the answers you want. And if you don't, continue to ask the questions or go somewhere else.
7. Licensed and approved versus private. Indira's was a private day home. She told us since she had so many great references, there was no need for her to be part of an agency. I know how hard it is to find care and you may have found an amazing private day home that your kids love. That's fantastic because I'm sure there are tons out there. My one suggestion is that you do the checks that an agency would. Pop in unexpectedly and see what the kids are doing, ensure baby gates are being used and that the caregiver's CPR and first aid training is up to date. Knowing our sons' day home is licensed and approved gives us that security of knowing someone else is watching. Someone else is keeping track. Someone else cares.

I will never forget what happened to Logan and I will never fully forgive myself for making the decision to put him in that day home.

I can't go back in time and change things. What I can do is offer the kind of advice I wish I'd had when I was first looking.

Be proud to be that crazy mom or dad. These are your kids. They rely on you to make the best decisions for them and to keep them safe.

Don't let them down.

-reprinted from Global News

Region: Alberta ^[3]

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