

'Not enough spaces': Families share child care wait-list nightmares ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Three-and-a-half year old Evie was the size of a plum when her parents placed her on child care wait lists in Toronto.

"We didn't even know it was a girl at this point," said her dad, David Scanlon. "We put, 'we have a person who will soon become a person' on the waiting list."

They signed her up the day after the first ultrasound. Evie was just a three-month-old fetus at the time. Yet the 18-month-long notice still barely got her a spot.

"They should tell you at the doctor's office when you find out you're pregnant that you should put your name down," said Evie's mom, Aislinn O'Loughlin.

"Basically you need to put your name down as soon as you see a little pink line on the pregnancy test."

Evie was waitlisted (under her dad's name) at three centres. That's fewer than the dozen-or-more lists other parents have admitted to putting their unborn children on. But because Evie's parents had applied for a child-care subsidy, their options were limited.

Still, all three centres assured them there'd be a space when they needed it. Then — two months before O'Loughlin was set to go back to work — all three said they were full.

The parents begged the centre closest to them to reconsider.

"We brought Evie up there and we just told them the truth," Scanlon said. "We were told we'd get into one of the places, everyone's now said no. And we need this."

"We have no family here, no car. We're both working and want to keep working. So we just asked if there was anything they could do, if they could help."

It worked. Others haven't been as lucky.

"I signed Grayson onto wait lists once he was born. Clearly that was too late," said Vancouver mom Megan Hooft.

Her three-year-old is still waiting for a spot at a city-run daycare. And over the past year, his position on the wait list has only gotten worse.

"We used to be in the 300s and now are in the 600-700s," Hooft exclaimed. "How is this possible? I'm not sure."

She thinks it's because she lives a block outside the "priority" boundary.

Some daycares reportedly took months just to get back to her and tell her where he was on the list. As he waits for a spot in a licensed daycare, Grayson has already been in two part-time day homes. His mom had to find another one when the first caregiver moved.

For the three days a week that he goes, she's had to pay between \$65 to \$80 a day. That's more than triple the \$20-day maximum a Quebec parent pays for child care.

City daycares would be cheaper, Hooft pointed out.

Vancouver's director of social policy, Mary Clare Zak, admitted there's a "significant lack of spaces."

The city doesn't have a centralized wait list, but says there are 3,200 kids waiting for a spot at one of 14-city-owned downtown facilities run by the Vancouver Society of Children's Centres (VSOCC). The non-profit organization is the city's single largest child-care operator.

In 2014, a commitment was made to create 1,000 new child-care spaces in the city by 2018. Of those, 700 have already been delivered. But "it's not enough," according to Zak.

Nor are all spaces created equally.

Manitoba has 15,078 names on a child care wait list. New research about the state of the province's child care is about to get underway.

Ontario pledged last month to create 100,000 new spaces over the next five years. Wait list fees were also scrapped as of Sept. 1. Until then, parents had been charged anywhere from \$10 to \$200 to put their child's name on a waiting list.

The changes are welcome news in Toronto, where more 17,600 are waiting for a child care fee subsidy alone. The number of those simply awaiting a spot is likely even greater (the city doesn't track).

Shanley McNamee, Toronto's director of children's services, encourages parents "to apply as soon as possible" for both a spot and subsidy.

She admits parents of older children, particularly those of kindergarten age, may have to wait years for a subsidy.

While Evie's parents were fortunate to get financial relief quickly, their child care nightmare was far from over.

They had to go through it all over again with their second baby, Liam. When the 17-month-old was born, Evie had to be taken out of full-time care because subsidies don't apply during maternity leave.

Her child-care centre again assured the parents there'd be a space for both kids when O'Loughlin's mat leave finished. It turned out that wasn't the case.

Only one spot freed up. So O'Loughlin was forced to take two months unpaid leave from work and wait.

For a while, the kids had to go to two separate centres until two spots opened up together.

That meant two drop-offs and two pick-ups before and after work for the parents with no car.

They stress the daycare wasn't the one at fault. It's hard for staff to predict availability because people put themselves on so many lists, Scanlon said.

"Daycares don't know how many of those names on the list are real," he reasoned.

"The system is the problem. There's just not enough spaces."

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Region: Ontario ^[3]

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