

'Total gong show': Parents reveal flaws of child-care subsidy system ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A single dad in Nanaimo, B.C. was shocked by what he was told this summer when he tried to get a daycare subsidy for his four-year-old daughter, Avaline.

"I had one lady tell me they'll give me more money if I quit my job," said 24-year-old Scott Collins. "It's insane."

Collins works retail at Best Buy full time and has no desire to go on welfare.

Yet that seemed to be the suggestion when he finally got through to someone in the subsidy department, after two weeks of constant calls.

He was approved for only five days of child care every two months.

"I make, I think, \$1,300 a month and have to pay \$1,400 in child care."

That's still less than what some parents have to pay in other provinces. But it's way more than what he can afford.

The new Canada Child Benefit does help, he said, but he'd rather spend that money on "food or clothes" for Avaline.

In his situation, the problem reportedly boils down to the fact that his changing work schedule includes weekends. The assumption is that he can sometimes stay home with his daughter during the week. Collins says even when that's the case, he still has to pay the daycare fee — whether or not his daughter attends.

Avaline started kindergarten in September and is now on an after-school care wait list. And Collins's father was recently able to change his work schedule to help out, but it's not a permanent fix.

Collins would like to see improvements to the complicated off-line subsidy system, which he describes as "a total gong show."

"Maybe if more word gets out and they kind of pay attention to this issue, maybe they'll reform it. Because it definitely needs a lot of reform."

'It's just really frustrating'

Penny Edmonds, who's operated a day home in Calgary for the past decade, has struggled with the bureaucracy as well.

The 41-year-old's two daughters live with her and she looks after their two kids. The only issue is that her grandkids take up two out of six child care spots she's legally allowed to offer.

Considering she makes only \$17,000 a year, two fewer cheques adds up to a considerable chunk of change.

Both her daughters were denied child-care subsidies. They were told they could get financial help only if they put their kids in a different day home.

"It makes no sense to me at all," Edmonds said. "I'm being penalized for being a caregiver."

Even if her grandkids went elsewhere, she explained they'd still be counted as being part of her day home under current regulations because they live in her house.

'I wouldn't have known about it'

The biggest complaint David Scalon and Aislinn O'Loughlin have about child-care subsidies, is just how little information exists about them for parents.

"I wouldn't have known about it," Scalon said. "That needs to be communicated to people in some way."

Had a friend not mentioned it as an option, the Toronto couple would've had to pay close to \$1,800 a month for their daughter Evie's daycare.

The subsidy they were awarded dropped the monthly fee by roughly \$700. They say there's "no way" they would've been able to afford child care without it.

"It would be cheaper for me to stay home," O'Loughlin said.

As O'Loughlin and her husband learned, there are some limitations to subsidies, too. Only select centres accept them, for one. There's also a limited number of subsidies available (26,059 in Toronto to be exact). And families might have to wait a long time to get one.

A city spokesperson admitted a child might be in school by the time a subsidy is given out (there are currently 17,600 families in Toronto waiting for one).

The other thing the couple learned is you don't get a child-care subsidy while on maternity leave.

So they had to pull Evie out of day care when her little brother Liam was born, thinking there'd be a spot for both of them when the mat leave was over.

They thought wrong.

O'Loughlin was forced to take two months unpaid leave while she waited for two slots to open up together at the daycare.

"The system is the problem," Scanlon said.

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