

CHILDCARE TOMORROW

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Helping parents survey their options, develop their strategies and make their choices (revised by CCC-NS)

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For most of us, the joy of having a baby quickly turns into the responsibility of being a parent. It's a fulfilling time, but a challenging one as well. Childcare is one of the biggest challenges you'll face. If your financial or professional circumstances make some form of daycare a necessity, you'll need good information on what your options really are. This article can help. And remember, you are not alone.

According to a 1988 Statistics Canada report, almost 60 percent of mothers with children under the age of 16 held paying jobs, the vast majority in full-time positions. Forty-one percent of these mothers had children aged four or younger. Many mothers surveyed said they would like to be working but they are limited to family responsibilities; 80 percent of these had preschoolers.

In households where both parents work full time outside the home, the need for care can be a constant throughout the child's infancy, preschool, and most of the grade-school years. If you require care on a constant basis, you also need a long term child care strategy that encompasses the philosophy of child rearing, the manner and area in which you live and your job requirements.

In forming that strategy, most parents envision an ideal childcare arrangement, then realize the ideal does not exist -- at least not in their neighbourhood or at a

price they can afford. you must be prepared to be flexible and make realistic compromises that do not affect quality of care.

This article should help you develop your childcare strategy by describing some of the parental leave and childcare options available, and by touching on the models of care that may be accessible and suitable for consideration. Nothing can really replace parental care, but if you must work, some well-invested time and effort on your part **can** result in quality childcare and give your child stability and attention he so needs.

PARENTAL LEAVE

The first step in formulating your strategy is to decide how long you or your partner will be staying home with your new baby. Leave provisions vary by province and employer. Check with your own employer and your partner's. You may be able to take consecutive leaves of absence from work to be at home with your child.

Typically in Canada, the woman is entitled to a 17-week leave of absence without pay to care for a new baby and must have worked for the same employer for at least 12 consecutive months. Be sure to submit your request in writing in plenty of time for your employer to make arrangements for your leave. Some provinces are more generous, and special provisions may be made if you have a complicated pregnancy or an early delivery. You are usually entitled to return to the same or a comparable position. If your employment is governed by the *Canada Labour Code*, leave provisions will also vary. Find out more from your employer or your provincial ministry responsible for employment standards.

<**BENEFITS** (updated by CCC-NS to fit the new federal Employment Insurance law)

Naturally, you should consider the financial costs of your strategy. Maternity leave benefits are available to qualifying individuals under the new federal Employment Insurance plan. To qualify, the mother must have worked at least 700 hours. (This breaks down to 20 35-hour weeks.) Benefits equal 55 percent of her usual wage, and are payable for a maximum of 45 weeks across the country -- 42 weeks in Halifax. You do not receive these benefits automatically when you go on maternity leave. You must apply for them on forms available from your local Canada Employment Centre. When planning your leave, contact the centre for more information.

WORKSTYLES

This may be the opportunity to reconsider your "workstyle" -- to evaluate how you as parents wish to balance your work with your personal lives. Perhaps one or both of you can work less than full time, job-share, or even work at home.

Flexibility is key here, both for employees and their employers. During 1988 and 1989, the Conference Board of Canada surveyed 1,600 organisations and 11,000 public- and private- sector employees to explore how Canadians cope with work and family responsibilities, and how Canadian corporations are responding.

Almost half the employers surveyed had instituted flexible working hours; almost 30 percent offered the option of part time work with same benefits; more than 25 percent had compressed work week schedules; almost 20 percent offered employees the option of job sharing; 11 percent had implemented work-at-home arrangements. Find out what options are available at your workplace.

However, keep in mind the flip-side of working less than full time. Will your career aspirations be affected by the perception that you are less than committed to your work? If so, communicate to your colleagues and your boss that you will remain "on track". Will you be able to survive financially? How difficult will it be to arrange part time childcare? And will the potentially higher cost be worth it?

Women in particular move to part time employment after the birth of children, but sometimes find later that it's difficult to break back into the full time workforce. Leaving paid employment entirely for a time may prevent you from keeping up with developments in your field.

CHILDCARE CHOICES

Your childcare options break down as follows:

1. In-home care in your or a neighbourhood mum's home
2. Out-of-home care provided in a group-care centre

There are advantages and disadvantages to both, and the sponsorship and quality of either type can vary a great deal.

IN-HOME CARE

Having a "nanny" come into your home to look after your child may appeal to you. The nanny may be from abroad, entering the country as a domestic, or you may hire her locally. Many nannies also take on household duties such as laundry, cleaning, and meals. However, her primary responsibility is your child, so she should like children, have an aptitude for childcare, and some training or experience.

A nanny's continuing care for a child can provide great relief to parents, but that care is usually expensive. And there are other factors to consider. When you hire a nanny, you are an employer rather than a client purchasing a service. As an employer, you have additional responsibilities regarding her benefits, sick pay, and so on. You are your nanny's backup in case she is ill or has an appointment. Since you are the decision maker who is delegating care to your nanny, it is very helpful if you can establish a friendly rapport with her. That will make it much easier to communicate necessary information, and give her a sense that she is a valued member of your household.

Daycare may also be provided by a individual in her home and is popular for very young or school aged children. This type of care may be supervised by an agency or may be a straightforward agreement made between you and your caregiver. A caregiver with an agency may have the advantages of training, supervision, backup and equipment. Whether or not an agency oversees your home-care arrangement, keep the following things in mind.

The caregiver should not be looking after more children than the law will allow (this varies provincially -- see The Nova Scotia [Day Care Act](#)) or more than you feel she can mind adequately. For example, in group care for infants aged six weeks to almost two years, the ratio is generally one staff member to every three or four children. No matter how competent the provider, there are limits to what one person can do.

When checking references -- and this is a must after interviewing a prospective home care provider -- try to get a sense of her commitment to caring for children. Has she done this for some time? Are there indicators that she has a genuine interest in children? For example, does she have her own and is she involved in their activities? Is she warm towards the children in her care? Does she understand their needs at different ages and stages? Spend some time in a relaxed atmosphere with her and her charges, if possible. Observe how your child relates to her and how she responds.

On the more practical side, does she provide a daily routine that balances active play with quieter play? Does she use television, and how does that suit you? Does she have the toys and equipment she needs for the job and if not, will you provide it or will she acquire it?

Keep the lines of communication open from the beginning. This is imperative in matters of nutrition, discipline, safety and cleanliness. Are you confident that she can handle emergencies and minor childhood illnesses? Look around to satisfy yourself that the home is childproofed. Discuss who else may be in contact with your child -- her husband or teenage children for example -- and if she ever uses them as a backup. You have a right to screen anyone involved in the care of your child.

Draw up a written contract concerning hours of work, payment of fees, holidays and illness, both hers and your child's. How sick is too sick to be at her home? Making these decisions in advance will help you avoid a last-minute scramble and a possible conflict.

Finally, don't forget that childcare is hard work and your caregiver needs and deserves respect and recognition for it. That respect should be mutual, and you must build from it a strong sense of trust, the basis of a successful professional relationship.

DAYCARE CENTRES

Daycare centres provide organised programs for groups of youngsters most commonly in their toddler and preschool years. The programs are designed to maximize the child's development and provide full time quality care. Centres are licensed by the provincial office responsible for daycare (in Nova Scotia, the Department of Community Services). There are provincial guidelines regulating the ratio of children to staff, the training of daycare workers, the amount and types of food served to children, the toys, the equipment and space needed, both indoors and outdoors, for children to play happily. (see [Day Care Act regulations](#))

You may choose a daycare centre in your neighbourhood, or you may prefer one closer to where you work. The centre may be located in a school, community centre, or commercial building. Whether it is operated for profit by a private individual or corporation, or on a non profit basis by an incorporated parent board, your town, or the YMCA, it must meet provincial standards.

Since daycare space in centres are limited, get your name on the waiting list well before you need to place you child. Before you do, visit the program while the children are present. Sit quietly and observe how the children interact with

each other and with the staff. Are staff attentive to their requests? Do they make eye contact and respond in pleasant tones to the children? Are they aware of the entire group or focused on a child who's acting up?

Staff members should know how to help children use the toys and equipment effectively. Children use play materials to learn, and the value of positive preschool experiences, including receiving tender loving care, cannot be overestimated. When talking to staff, pay attention to how they respond to you; they should be skilled at dealing with parents.

Watch out for potential problems, too. Frequent staff turnover may indicate unhappy relationships among the adults at the centre. Ask staff members how long they have worked there and if they are happy. Constant changes in staff place a strain on children, who thrive on consistency of care. The centre should be clean and observe hygienic practices for diapering and toileting. With so many children together in the same space, playing on the floor and mouthing toys, the potential for transmitting infectious diseases such as colds is higher than with other forms of childcare. Pay attention to the centres health policies. It may be inconvenient for you to pick up your child when he appears only mildly ill, but remember this: If all parents follow health policies, it reduces the risk of spreading infections.

HOW TO FIND CARE

For licensed care in group centres, and supervised family daycare homes, look in the Yellow Pages under Day Care Centres and Nurseries, or contact your local provincial day care office and ask for their directory. You can also use the interactive referral section of this web site for the Halifax Regional Municipality. For home care givers and nannies, ask friends, neighbours, and other nannies for leads. Advertise in newspaper want ads or put flyers on bulletin boards in community centres, libraries, and supermarkets.

PAYING FOR CHILD CARE

Your child is the most precious thing in your life. If you can't be there to care for her, you'll want high quality care that allows her to thrive and be happy, alert, and involved. Expect to pay a reasonable amount for this relatively high-ticket item (fees vary widely from region to region) and budget for it as you would for your mortgage, rent, food, and other payments.

The spouse with the lower net income before taking off childcare expenses is the one to deduct them. You deduct whichever is the lowest: the amount

actually spent for childcare services; two-thirds of your earned income; or the total of \$4000 for each child 6 years and under on December 31 of that year, plus \$2000 for each eligible child seven to 14, plus \$4000 for a disabled child up to age 14.

Government subsidies are available for parents who cannot afford to pay full fees. Depending on the province, parents must meet an income or a needs test and the child must be in either a licensed daycare centre or a daycare home that has been approved by the local subsidy office. Although the federal government shares in the cost to provinces providing daycare services, the provinces determine the actual expenditure. There are waiting lists for subsidies in some provinces. Speak with your daycare provider or provincial department responsible for childcare to find out more about subsidies.

YOUR PART IN CHILD CARE

You are your child's mainstay, you are his first and most important teacher and you are the one who knows him best. Therefore, you are the one best qualified to choose the best situation for him and to introduce him to it in such a way that it will be an enjoyable, successful experience for him, for the caregiver and for you. This can take a bit of time and effort in the beginning.

It is best to introduce your child to the situation gradually, spending time with him and the caregiver and withdrawing as he gets to know him or her. Initially, you may want to talk to the caregiver everyday, discussing your child's activities, what he ate, how much he slept, and so on. Centres must keep records, but every caregiver should have a way of communicating the day's events, either verbally or by keeping a notebook.

Once your child and caregiver have become well acquainted, it's good to take time once or twice a week to discuss your child. Remember that he or she is with your child most of his waking hours and will notice changes in the areas of growth, development, and behaviour.

However, the caregiver isn't the only one who needs to communicate: if you have concerns, it is important that you express them. If he or she is doing something that you don't like, such as letting your child sleep so long that he doesn't want to go to bed till late, it will help everyone in the situation if you let him or her know. He or she may not know that it is causing you problems, or may have a good reason for doing it. Discussion should help you agree on a course of action. If you have both tried to compromise but he or she is unable to

provide you with what you want, parting should be mutually agreeable and handled professionally, with two weeks' notice.

For the nanny who comes into your home, encourage her to get in touch with other nannies nearby, to visit drop-in centres and toy libraries, to take the child to library programs and parks, and to read. Let her know that other caregivers and children are welcome in your home.

HOW TO MONITOR CARE

Unless your child is at a sensitive stage of adjusting to daycare and gets very upset when she sees you, the caregiver should be comfortable with you dropping in unannounced to check on your child. If you have taken time and effort to find the right situation for your child, you should be happy and reassured by what you see.

If you're not, look to your child's behaviour. If she whimpers or exhibits fear when you drop her off, if she shows a real reluctance to go, other than the normal desire not to be parted from a parent, if she shows loss of appetite or significant change in sleep patterns, and there has been no major change at home, discuss these with the caregiver. If the caregiver hasn't noticed anything or seems evasive, there may be cause for concern. Remember that harsh words or neglect can be as harmful to your child as physical abuse, and they are harder to prove. Unexplained burns, bruises or rashes require your investigation.

Remember that licensing is no guarantee of quality. It's your job to monitor your child's care.

CHANGING YOUR CHILDCARE ENVIRONMENT

Although it is time consuming and can be stressful for both parent and child, a change in childcare arrangements is necessary at times and even beneficial. Terminate the arrangement immediately if you suspect poor care, neglect or abuse. If you change jobs or move, it may simply be impractical to continue with the old situation, no matter how good it is. As well, your child's age and temperament might suit him better to a different kind of care. For example, a very sociable toddler might benefit from an organized program and the peer interaction that a centre has to offer. Another child may blossom in the cozy atmosphere of a neighbourhood mum's home.

CARE FOR MORE THAN ONE CHILD

If you're having a second or third baby, you may need to rethink your childcare arrangements. It can be tricky setting up care for children of different ages, so plan a year in advance. The needs of a lively three year old, who craves a variety of new experiences, are far different from those of a baby who is still learning to master her body.

While you might prefer to have a nanny, or have both children full time at a daycare centre, it simply may not be affordable. One solution is to enroll the preschooler in a half day program at nursery school or kindergarten so she gets the benefit of peer group activities, and to find a home daycare with the flexibility to take her half a day and the baby all day. (Nursery Schools are licensed like daycare centres and their programs are similar. Kindergartens are under the jurisdiction of your provincial ministry of education. Their focus is on education rather than care.)

SCHOOL-AGE CARE

This is an area of rapid growth, since many parents of preschoolers are in the workforce. Some schoolboards routinely provide space for daycare centres in response to need and in hopes of attracting families to their particular system.

However, despite their growth, there is still a shortage of school-age care. The awkward hours, from 7:30 until 9 a.m. and from 3:30 until 6 p.m., make staffing very difficult. As a result, many children are in so called "self-care" with no one to look after them when school is out.

School-age care differs widely from province to province. Hours of school-age care vary widely as well. Some programs start before school and continue until 6, others cover the lunch period and some only start at 3:30 p.m. You should ensure that your arrangement covers the summer and all holidays during the school year, as well as teachers' professional development days.

In addition to licensed school care, there are unlicensed recreational programs after school in many districts. They may be operated by Parks and Recreation, or by parents.

SPECIAL CASES

Difficult as it may be for most parents to find "ideal" care -- high quality, convenient, affordable and suiting their philosophy to a T -- some groups of parents find it even harder. Parents of children with special needs -- that is, physical, mental, emotional or developmental disabilities -- members of

minority cultural groups, and people living in rural areas may be frustrated by lack of childcare.

The prevailing thought among childcare experts is that everyone benefits by integrating children with special needs into existing childcare homes and centres. Many provinces support this philosophy by providing grants to childcare centres and homes for special equipment, transportation, renovations, and for hiring and training additional staff.

Contact provincial childcare offices or ministries of social services to find out which centres or homes are equipped to handle special-needs children. You can approach centres that do not include the disabled, make them aware of your situation, and urge them to integrate.

THE PARENT AS ACTIVIST

Finally, there's a big plus to society if all parents, no matter what their views on childcare, let those views be known. More public debate will create better public awareness, and should eventually bring about more help for parents.

Many people believe that the time has come for a childcare policy that makes daycare accessible to all, that is publicly funded like our education and healthcare systems and that offers both home- and centre-based care. A standardized childcare system would allow women more access to education and employment, and could also deliver a more consistent quality of care. At this time, the quality of care and how it is delivered to parents varies tremendously across Canada, so daycare activists lobby to raise the quality from a different base in each province.

What can you do encourage more and better daycare across the country? The first step is to lobby for more funding overall. Childcare is funded jointly by the federal and provincial governments; in jurisdictions like Nova Scotia, where municipalities are involved, they also pay part of the cost. The capital and start-up costs of new programs in most jurisdictions are borne strictly by the provinces. Through subsidies, the federal government shares 50 percent of the eligible expenses related to the operation of daycare.

The second focus of your lobbying efforts should be on raising standards of care within your province and across Canada. Many activists believe that the highest quality of childcare cannot be delivered in a for-profit system. Take time to investigate and decide how this affects care in your province or territory.

You can also sign petitions, speak out at public forums, join coalitions of people concerned about childcare, or form your own.

HOW YOU CAN CONTRIBUTE

Meanwhile, there are ways you can contribute to quality childcare. If you perceive a need in your workplace or community, you may want to be involved in initiating a program -- a group-care arrangement, parent-child resource centre -- or become a caregiver yourself. Your provincial ministry responsible for childcare can supply you with relevant information and legislation, as can this website.

A resource-centre is the least labour intensive project, since it does not provide childcare but rather social support and information for parents and caregivers in the community. Resource centres may have a play area, a lending library of materials on childcare, a registry of caregivers' names, a guide to other community resources, and a toy library as well.

You will need an adequate space, which might be in a house, school, or community centre. You can ask for donations of materials, or check with your municipality or appropriate ministry (Social Services in Nova Scotia) for funds to purchase them and to hire the appropriate staff. Depending on the size of your resource centre, at least one knowledgeable employee should be there at all times and volunteers can play an important role.

CHILDCARE IN YOUR HOME

If you find that being with children is satisfying and rewarding, you may want to provide care in your own home. This may benefit your child or children as it provides social contact and stimulation. However, they may have some negative reactions too, so introduce other children gradually and make sure that you have some special private time for your own.

Make sure that your house is safe. Set up a special area for the children with plenty of materials and toys. Organize a routine that alternates quiet and lively activities for the children. Don't take on more children than you can handle, and don't expect to get all your housework done while they are in your care. Stay in contact with other adults, have a backup in case you are ill, and get out of the house from time to time.

You may wish to affiliate yourself with a licensed agency. It would support you by handling administrative details and acting as a liaison between you and parents. It may provide insurance, equipment, training, and backup.

If you want to be involved in starting a daycare centre, you and other interested parents should first approach a consultant from the childcare branch to find out if your project is feasible (a similar proposal may have been turned down because of zoning, for example) and for guidance through the maze of legislation. You may need to survey your target group, be they new parents in your workplace or in your neighbourhood, to find out whether they would use your program if it existed.

You must find a location: Newer schools and workplaces may have space designed for childcare, but you will still need permission from local fire, health, and safety officials to proceed. Get your group incorporated; when applying for funding or licensing for a centre, you must be a recognizable entity to deal with. Apply to your provincial ministry for funding to renovate your space, buy toys and equipment, and perhaps cover the cost of spaces until they are filled.

As your board of directors operates it faces the challenge of hiring the right people and keeping them, filling the spaces with the right-aged children, setting its philosophy and running a business. If you want to go this route, you must be committed, specific about what you want, able to operate as a team with other parents, and organized and persistent. As well, you must get the support of local, provincial and federal elected representatives.