



MIRA HALL

## Child Care in Rural and Remote Communities

### Thoughts from a daycare-dependent mom

**I**n the year 2000 I celebrated the first spring of the millennium by birthing my daughter, simultaneously joining the ranks of the 21.5% single female-headed households in the Northwest Territories.

At 21 years old, I was thrust into the world of parenthood and adulthood in a place where, compared to other communities in the Territories, there were a lot of daycare centres — none of which I would be able to afford. I would have to work multiple jobs in order to scrape by, and would be precariously reliant on friends and relatives to care for my child in order to work hours outside of 7:30 am to 5:30 pm.

As a single parent I would have to manage all of that while also trying desperately to foster a healthy relationship with my daughter, and create the best possible family environment for her. I was pretty overwhelmed at the time, and I still am a lot of the time today, in spite of now having two school-aged children.

Rural areas experience unique challenges regarding the provision of child care services. Many rural women may have to work far away from where their daycare is located. There may also be issues of health and safety for child care facilities. In addition, costs associated with operating child care programs

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in rural areas may be much greater than in the urbanized south.

The lack of child care services is national — on average there are only licensed spaces for 20% of Canadian children. While it clearly isn't fair to assume that only licensed services are high quality, it is fair to say that at least licensed spaces are accountable for providing quality and safety to their customer base. Throughout my parenting experience to date, I have accessed licensed and non-licensed, home- and centre-based services and have experienced positives and negatives with each of them.

My first day home experience came as a result of finding part time work that wouldn't interfere with my maternity leave benefits. I had read a lot about the pros and cons of child cares and day homes and interviewed potential caregivers. Since there was no such thing as a part-time space in the local child care centres, I realized I would have to rely on a mom wanting to stay home with her own children and hoping to subsidize her lifestyle by providing care to other children.

In spite of my best intentions at the interview screening process, at eight o'clock in the morning I found myself dropping my six-month-old off at an apartment literally stuffed with children. The caregiver was watching *Coronation Street* on the CBC as a gaggle of children grazed on Cheerios, with stimulation provided by an array of brightly colored plastic objects on the floor. I returned at 4:00 pm to find the caregiver in the same spot on the couch watching *The Young and the Restless* while intermittently yelling at a toddler just outside her grasp to come and get her diaper changed. Needless to say, I did not return. Nor did my daughter. And as a direct result, I couldn't work.

In contrast to that experience the next day home that my daughter attended was completely ideal. For about a year she was cared for in the home of a mother of one of my co-workers. That particular caregiver was a Catholic mother of nine who cared for my daughter in her home along with her own two-year-old, and occasionally her eight-year-old autistic son. I found the woman's input into my own parenting to be invaluable. I know that she genuinely cared for my daughter, and she provided a stable and loving environment. Occasionally I would have to take a day off work because my daughter's care-giver was ill, and on one day that I remember particularly well, her eight-year-old

disappeared and the whole family had to go looking for him. But while this day home provider wasn't able to accommodate me with the substitute teachers that I would have access to through a child care centre, the intimate environment that my daughter experienced within the home was certainly beneficial to her emotional development.

When licensed spaces are not available, many women have to rely on relatives or unlicensed spaces with professional babysitters to provide care for their children. While this can often be a crapshoot of sorts as to the type of services that are provided, it is important to note that licensed facilities can harbour danger for our children as well. In 2007 a Montessori program was closed in Yellowknife amid an RCMP investigation into reported "child protection" issues within the centre.

Significantly, the service fees being charged at this centre were hundreds of dollars lower than what was being charged at the other centres in the city. Unfortunately, many women face limited options or are caught between needing to work (and therefore requiring child care) but not having enough money to pay higher prices for reputable care; consequently the level of safety provided to their children can be compromised.

Women with children have not achieved economic equality with their male and childless female counterparts. And while debates rage on about whether children benefit or are harmed by being in child care during their early years, what is irrefutable is that women require access to quality, dependable child care if they work — and many need to.

During my daughter's early years it was often necessary for me to work incredibly long hours. I tried to create a balance by having her with a formal day home during the traditional working day, and then with a babysitter or relative after she went to sleep at night so that I could return to work. Many of the daycare centres that I hoped could look after my daughter required payment for the month up-front, but I never had the extra s\$700 dollars lying

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around to be able to afford them. Even if I accessed the child care subsidy program, I still would have had to pay the fee up-front, which made that program completely irrelevant.

And to be honest, I was scared of the subsidy program. A young single mom who worked in the same mall as me had constant horror stories, the worst of which included the executive director of her daughter's daycare harassing her for money in the grocery store parking lot after the subsidy program fell behind in payments. I know for a lot of people it might seem far-fetched that the *government* program was the one to fall behind, but in the land of the North, it is sadly all too common.

I won't defend the behavior of this centre's ED, but I can certainly sympathize with the motivation after having served on the board of a daycare that was on the absolute verge of bankruptcy for years. Most of this centre's problems emerged as a result of having to operate as a not-for-profit organization under Territorial Legislation, and then having to deal with consistently late transfer payments (based on the previous month's attendance) from the Department of Education, Culture and Employment. Additionally, a significant amount of money for the daytime care of foster children is consistently late from the Department of Health and Social Services.

It works like this: as a parent, I pay for a space for a month, in addition to which the Territorial Government provides a transfer payment to the daycare based on spaces used. When I pay, the daycare is obligated to have that space available for my child, but if my child doesn't attend all the potential days, the transfer payment is affected, in spite of operating costs which are largely unchanged by temporary absences. Therefore, unless the daycare is housed in a government building (which would provide them with subsidized rent in addition to transfer payments), daycares frequently fall behind in rent, and are unable to stay afloat in the harsh economic climate of the North, where rents are comparable to those of Vancouver and Toronto.

So in a sense I can understand the fear and frustration of daycare centres that are financially reliant on government for not only transfer payments, but service fees as well. In order to deal with this unfortunate state of affairs some daycares have purposefully made accessing service through the subsidy program

very difficult by setting their rates above what the subsidy will pay, and by requiring application fees.

Daycares in the North only run slightly before and after typical business hours, usually from 7:30am to 5:30pm, making them a relatively insignificant option for any worker who needs shift work care: nurses and doctors, bar and restaurant staff, mine workers, and a lot of other workers. I was lucky to have my mother, whom I love (although no amount of love would have enabled her to allow me to work lucratively in the mines while she assumed all child care, but she responsibility for those weeks) as a free source of child care who was unfortunately also in the paid labor force. There were many times I sat panicked and tearful on the couch by the window waiting for her to come so that I could get to work. There were many shifts that I was late for and some jobs that I feared for because my free family-based child care was unreliable. On the upside, my mother was a safe care giver: I wouldn't have to worry about physical and or sexual abuse which in the Territories we experience at levels five times the national average.

In spite of my mother's help, the child care bills frequently made me worry whether or not I would be able to put food on my table or make rent. When my son entered into a licensed daycare facility the monthly cost was \$650. I worked in a coffee shop as a manager and my take-home pay at this time was about \$1,400/month. Although I frequently dreamed of being able to land some job up in the mines where I could easily triple my income, finding a reliable sitter for an evening posed too much of a challenge — never mind handing my children over to a paid caregiver for 14 straight days.

Although my children have both entered their school-aged years, I am still plagued by a need for child care to allow me to work. My dependence on a child care service isn't as intense as it once was, but during the peak years I frequently imagined where I could be working if I could have afforded the child care to allow me to work shifts. I imagined what my life would have been like if I had been able to afford child care and postsecondary education at the same time. I am painfully aware that through the earlier years of my children's lives I was incapable of living up to my working potential because I didn't have supports in place that would allow me to do so. I am also painfully aware of many other

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mothers in my community and in the nearby community of Behchoko who are not able to participate fully in potentially lucrative opportunities because they are burdened with a lack of access to safe, affordable and accessible child care.

While I can see quite clearly how my life has flourished and how the contributions I can make to my community and my work are now of much greater value, I sincerely feel that as long as those supports are not in place society is effectively restricting that 20% of single female-headed households from achieving their full productive potential. It is especially important to support those families in the achievement of the great potential of which they are capable and which they represent. It is the difference between children and families wasting away under the incredibly unreasonable and crushing expectations placed on their households, or helping those families flourish and have a greater chance of long term financial and emotional success. Single female heads of households should have equal opportunity to access opportunities that increase their likelihood of achieving economic equality, independence and living up to their personal potential. Having safe, affordable and accessible child care is essential to the wellbeing of these women and their families, and it's good for our economy too.

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