

DAY CARE COMES OUT OF THE CLOSET

The past year has seen an enormous surge of interest in day care as a political and social issue. Last week, a federal task force released a report advocating universal free day care by the year 2001, with a price tag of \$11.3-billion to be paid by the provinces and the federal government. If implemented, this child care system could permanently alter the way in which we conceive of child raising. At the same time, the press has also been following the investigation of a recent fire in Bolton which took the lives of a babysitter and the children she looked after. Whereas the day care task force's report points to the possible future of day care in this country, the inquest into the fire in Bolton has attracted interest for what it has to say about the present state of child care in Ontario. In view of the topicality of the day care question Excalibur's Stephen Milton takes stock of the state of day care in Ontario.

At present, the vast majority of working parents do not use day care centres to care for their children. It is estimated that 85 percent of working parents place their children in what is called 'informal' care, which means that a relative or sitter cares for them. Sitters are more common than relatives as caregivers, and usually provide the service for money, whereas relatives often do not. The vast majority of these arrangements are for more than 30 hours a week, thus the caretakers are rarely teenagers who provide what is usually known as 'babysitting.'

Of the 15 percent of parents who use day care in Toronto, the majority of the day care spaces are offered by the private sector. Municipally-run day care centres accounted for 10 percent of all day care centres in 1983, with non-profit centres comprising an additional 47 percent, and the remainder being provided by for-profit day care firms. Despite the presence of municipal day care centres, parents receiving subsidy in Ontario are allowed to place their children in private centres as well. In 1983, all three types of day care had around 30 percent of their spaces being used by subsidized children.

The informal sector remains dominant in child care provision for cost and availability reasons. At present, the demand for day care far exceeds supply. In Toronto, the waiting list is equivalent to one quarter of all the children in day care. Of those waiting, 40 percent are eligible for subsidy. This degree of demand appears to provide a golden opportunity for the commercial day care providers, yet in reality their potential is limited. Although private day care centres are growing, it is a business whose profitability is limited by the cost of the service it may provide. Government regulations limit the number of children per caregiver to five in the interest of ensuring that quality child care is preserved. Profitability is also limited by the fact that wages form the largest portion of operating costs. For-profit centres traditionally offer the lowest wages of all forms of day care, yet even here there is a floor on the level of wages that can be accepted to maximize profits. Finally, the largest impediment to expanding commercial day care provision is the cost of the service to parents. Even the cheapest day care centres charge rates which are prohibitive for most families. In 1982, full-time placement in a day care centre for one child ranged from \$3,263 in a non-profit centre to \$4,267 per year in a municipal centre. For most parents, especially those with more than one pre-schooler, day care is simply not a viable child care option for financial reasons.

Nonetheless, 71,000 children are in day care centres in Ontario.

The current scarcity of day care spaces is largely a consequence of the policies which govern state funding for day care subsidy. It is a complicated phenomenon as it involves all three levels of government. At the federal level, day care funding comes from two sources: the first is the Canada Assistance Plan which was initiated in 1966. It promises to fund 50 percent of provincially sponsored day care on the condition that those people receiving subsidy be screened according to either an income or means test. In practice this stipulation has restricted day care funding to those who are considered needy from a welfare perspective, such as low income families, children who were 'at risk' in their present home environment and the mentally and physically handicapped. A second source of federal funds is the child tax credit which permits families to deduct up to \$1,000 per child for child care expenses. Unfortunately, most parents use informal child care where sitters are reticent to declare their income, thus they often refuse to give receipts.

At the provincial level, Queen's Park provides funding for capital grants to promote construction and renovation, as well as for subsidy to families that fulfill the welfare criteria. Under the terms of the Canada Assistance Plan, provinces will pay for thirty percent of any day care subsidy, with the municipalities paying the remaining twenty percent. The onus is on the municipalities to initiate the construction of government-funded day care centres, although in those municipalities where there are none available (of which there are many, especially in rural areas), the province may place subsidized children in private day care centres.

The pressure to establish some form of universal day care system has been a consequence of both the expanding participation of women in the workforce, and the governments' reluctance to consider day care as a right, rather

than a welfare provision. With three levels of government involved, it is difficult to make generalizations which hold much weight, except perhaps that the current structure of financing has resulted in a radical shortage of day care spaces. The attitude of each level of government, however, is different. At the federal level, the day care situation has been complicated by the appearance of the day care task force report, headed by Katie Cook, a sociologist from British Columbia. The task force was commissioned by the federal Liberal party near the end of its tenure as the government. Consequently, the Federal Tories have little stake in the report, and it is feared by day care activists that the report will be ignored. Brian Mulroney's failure to come to grips with the issue of day care provision was illustrated last year when his wife proposed to bring one of her children to the office with her. The occupants of 44 Sussex Drive stated that they thought that this was how most working women dealt with their child care problems. "I think the Tories are really out of touch in the urban areas," says Sue Colley of the Ontario Day Care Coalition. "I think they think that everyone lives like they do." Among the indicators that the Tories will ignore the report's recommendations is the appointment of a new day care task force that will start its hearings in Newfoundland on March 17. The new task force is being headed by Shirley Martin, "who I think is the only female member of parliament to have come out against day care publicly," comments Colley. The Liberal report is comprehensive as it stands, and it appears quite likely that the Tory report is an effort to avoid confronting its recommendations.

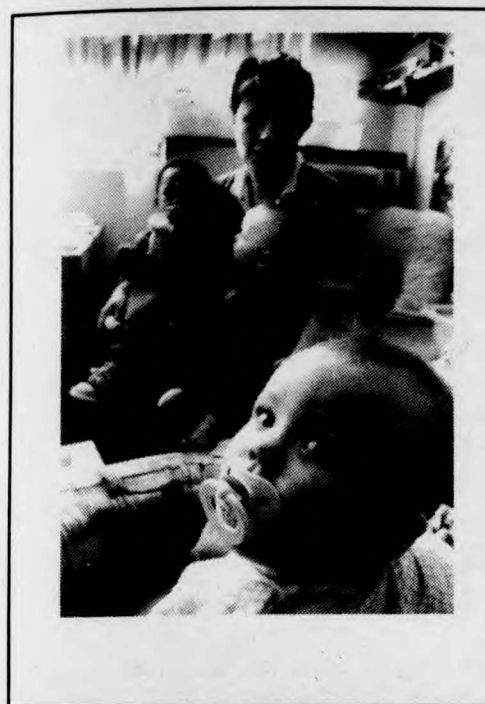
The redundancy of another day care task force has been recognized by the city of Toronto, which has traditionally been Ontario's most progressive municipality with regard to day care. In conjunction with the day care advocacy groups in the city, Toronto is planning to declare a day care day in the week preceding the beginning of the hearings by the new task force in May. The day will be aimed at raising the city's awareness of the necessity for greater day care availability, as well as impressing the Tory task force with the city's commitment to such a goal.

At the provincial level, the Ontario Liberals appear to be warming to the idea of expanding subsidized day care availability. Since 1980, day care funding has tripled and the present government is currently trying to find ways of manipulating the terms of the existing federal-provincial agreement to accommodate more families in the eligibility criteria.

A factor in this willingness to consider better day care alternatives has been the public pressure which emerged from the fire in Bolton where a sister and the children in her home were killed. The Bolton fire reminded the press that this sort of tragedy is a direct outcome of the government's current stance on day care funding. As the laws presently stand, anyone can care for up to five children in their home for pay without being subject to provincial guidelines for child care. The care is unlicensed, and does not have to comply with the same rules which apply in day care centres, where regulations dictate fire and safety standards, as well as child/staff ratios, curriculum and nutrition requirements. As a consequence, thousands of children are in homes which are ill-suited to the task of full day child care.

The extent to which informal standards fall below government guidelines was revealed in *Who Cares?*, a study by the Social Planning Council of Toronto which was released in 1977. The study provided an exhaustive account of the type of care and caretakers found in the informal child care sector in Toronto. According to the report, informal caretakers (sitters) are generally married women who are having difficulty finding regular employment, and would usually prefer to be doing regular wage work. Half of the caretakers interviewed were of the poorest economic level of society, measured by their husbands' income, with half never having been educated beyond the elementary school level. Moreover, most felt that women should stay at home with their children. The latter finding suggests that the care received in these situations is sometimes quite poor, a conclusion which was confirmed by subsequent interviews with caretakers. Television was often used to occupy the children's attention for hours at a time, and the lunches provided were frequently of negligible nutritional worth.

The standard of care which is provided in the informal sector varies from home to home, and it is quite clear that some sitters are conscientious in their duties, and some even have formal child care training. Unfortunately, the sector attracts those women who are having trouble finding work elsewhere, and as such the criteria for recruitment is not one's qualifications, but the force of economic circumstance. This situation cannot help but create an undesirable environment for children, whether it's caused



by the poor layout of the dwelling for child care, fire and safety hazards, to poor child care at a time when children should be developing their minds through play and educational stimulation.

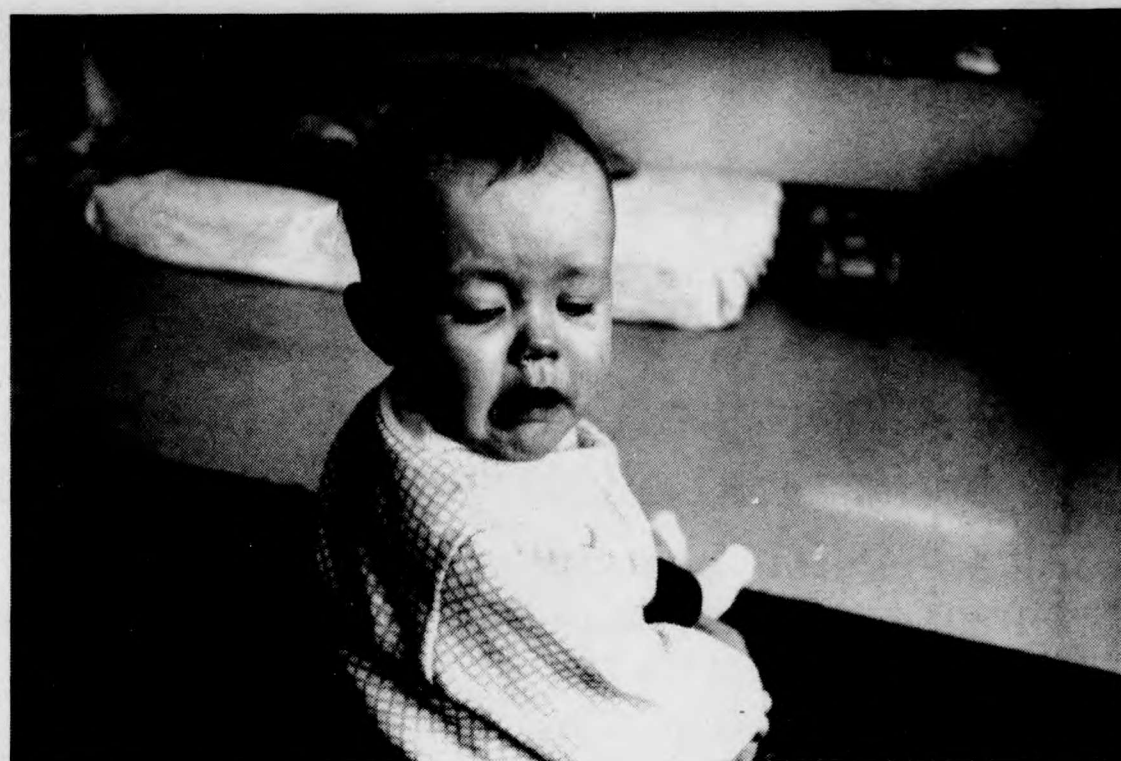
The informal care sector provides a much needed source of caretakers for working parents, yet it is also notorious for being the most unstable form of child care. Parents who are forced to use sitter care report a higher turnover of caretakers than those children who are placed in day care centres. In 25 percent of the cases it was changes in the sitter's life-situation which caused the termination, while an additional 10 percent were caused by parental dissatisfaction with the care their children were receiving. This feature of sitter care and the general absence of day care spaces has been found to have prejudicial effects on the capacity for mothers to participate in the workforce with the same continuity as men. The absence of child care forces many women to take part-time jobs when they would prefer full-time work, while the cessation of existing child care arrangements often prompts women to withdraw from the workforce suddenly. In 1980, a Labour Force survey by Statistics Canada found that 121,000 working mothers left the workforce for this reason, while a study on women part-time workers in Saskatchewan found that 47 percent cited non-availability of child care as the obstacle to full-time work. As

a consequence, the current hegemony of informal care in the child care market has effectively prohibited women from being able to participate in the workforce on an equal footing with men.

The scope of the damage done by this form of inequality in the labor market can be better understood if it is realized why most women work. Although television commercials would have us believe that women work because they have interesting and satisfying careers, in reality most women work because they have to. In 1979 the *Women and Poverty* report of the National Council of Welfare revealed that 50 percent of married women kept their family's income above the poverty line. Add to this figure the 12 percent of women who are the sole support for their families, and it is clear that women cannot just take or leave their jobs, nor can their families get along without them. Seen in this light, the present shortage of day care spaces and government funding for subsidy effectively forces working mothers to place their children in the informal sector where their status in the workforce is negatively affected, at the expense of their incomes and their ability to participate equally in the labor market. This fate is no longer reserved for a minority of mothers as it was 20 years ago, for now 59 percent of the mothers of pre-schoolers are in the workforce.

As such, objections to expanded day care which try to contrast day care to the 'natural' care of the mother are being outdated by events. The choice is no longer between day care and letting women stay in the home with their children. The fact is that most preschoolers are going to be cared for by someone other than their mother, and the question is whether that care will be of haphazard quality and dependability.

As long as day care policies restrict subsidy to only the lowest income families, then the governments are tacitly encouraging the proliferation of poor quality child care. As the fire in Bolton demonstrated, this is leaving children open to tragic accidents which may be prevented. There does seem to be reason for hope, however, as the Bolton fire made people realize that the government's policies were to blame. "This is something that wouldn't have happened five years ago," says Sue Colley of Action Day Care. The perils of the underground child care market are being recognized such that day care is beginning to be seen in a new light. "People are looking at day care in much the same way they did at health care in the 1960s," Colley argues. Now the federal government's latest task force has to be convinced.



Workplace Child Care and York

One of the more attractive and frequently discussed forms of day care is workplace child care, yet in reality it is relatively rare. This form of day care is usually situated at the workplace or nearby, with some degree of financial support from the employer. Workplace day care has many advantages as it allows the child and parent to travel together, and visit each other during the day. In the case of mothers who wish to breastfeed their infants, this arrangement can be ideal. Unfortunately, there are very few employers who offer such an arrangement. In a 1983 report prepared by the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, it was found that there only 11 workplace day care centres in Ontario, most of which were provided by government institutions such as hospitals and universities.

York's day care centre at 22 Moon St. is among these university-sponsored child care facilities, and was established in 1972. Staff and students were responsible for pressuring the University into opening the centre, originally located in a common room in one of the residences. At present it serves 110 children. The

University provides funding that covers the rent of the building, and 28 man-hours for cleaning on the condition that 60 percent of the day care spaces be available for the children of students. Currently, 70 percent of the spaces are being occupied by the children of undergrad and grad students. The remaining spaces are open to staff at York.

According to Jane Bertrand, director of the centre, the University and government have provided ample funding for the centre's operation, yet it cannot expand as it would like for lack of space on campus. "There's lots of start-up money available that we have access to," says Bertrand, with the Ontario government willing to fund renovations for greater infant day care provision. The need for expansion is manifested each year in the waiting list, which presently has 289 names on it. Nevertheless, Bertrand comments, York's day care history is relatively peaceful compared to the situation at the University of Toronto where parents had to occupy a building for six months before the administration capitulated.



PHOTOS BY GARY BLAKELEY

FEATURES

