

## **Dirty little secrets: Abuse in daycares**

*You're not supposed to know it, but children in licensed centres endure filthy conditions, **bad food** and physical and emotional harm*

May 28, 2007

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Children in provincially licensed daycares have been hit, kicked, allowed to play in filthy conditions and fed allergy-triggering food that nearly claimed their lives.

A *Star* investigation based on thousands of never-before-released daycare incidents and inspection reports has uncovered a myriad of serious problems including children wandering off unattended, being forcibly confined in closets and storage rooms as punishment, and **served meals prepared in mice-infested kitchens**.

But even in the most egregious cases, the provincial Ministry of Children and Youth Services is often slow to act.

Daycares with a pattern of problems are allowed to operate for months or even years on provisional licenses, while children are exposed to substandard conditions, internal government documents show.

"The conditions you highlight are unacceptable and we take it seriously," said ministry spokesperson Tricia Edgar.

"It is a concern. We're going to be looking at this. I can give you our assurance that we will do that. It isn't consistent with the health and well being of kids."

The records are typically kept secret. Parents who trust their children with a licensed daycare have no way of finding out if their daycare is exemplary or riddled with problems.

The *Star* obtained the records – which relate to the last three years – following a series of freedom of information requests that took more than two years.

They revealed serious problems at several hundred of the 4,400 licensed daycares in the province.

The highest rate of reported problems was in Toronto, but that may be because the city's daycares are more tightly regulated than others in the province.

While the majority of daycares appear to be well run, child care in Ontario suffers from a lack of funding that often translates into troubling conditions and poorly trained or unqualified staff.

"We've had an avalanche of problems," says Bobby Bhar, who operates two Etobicoke daycares that have had repeated problems.

The inspection reports on his two Children's Corner Day Nursery locations are a parent's worst nightmare.

One centre is at Royal York Rd. and Wilson Ave.; the other is on Kipling Ave. south of Steeles Ave.

The reports detail allegations of abuse and mistreatment of children, filthy conditions and child injuries. Repeated problems have meant the daycares have operated beneath minimum legislated standards for much of the past three years.

Despite repeated visits from provincial inspectors, threats of closure and deadlines to make fixes, the two daycares have continued to look after more than 120 children.

Bhar said he would like to provide better care but lacks the funds.

The *Star's* research is based on four types of information: reports by provincial and city inspectors; serious occurrence reports made by daycares when there is an injury, an allegation of abuse or a child gone missing; enforcement actions by city or provincial authorities; and complaints made by parents.

Since 2000, nearly 500 licensed daycares have received provisional licenses, which are granted to centers that do not meet minimum standards on the condition that they will correct serious problems. The ministry has shut down only 13 daycares during that period.

Daycares in Ontario are operated by non-profit organizations, colleges, municipalities and for-profit companies.

Of the nearly 4,400 licensed daycares in Ontario, 78 per cent are non-profit and the remaining 22 per cent are for-profit centers.

Many daycares with the most serious problems, according to provincial and municipal records obtained by the *Star*, are for-profit operations. Studies have shown higher quality

childcare is most often provided by non-profit organizations – findings that are disputed by organizations representing private commercial daycares.

## **At one commercial daycare in Brampton, a 2-year-old almost died of an allergic reaction to peanuts because the daycare did not call 911.**

Instead, staff at Rise-N-Grades Montessori School and Daycare monitored the child and eventually called the parents. When Sylvia and Neil Miggiani arrived they found their daughter covered in hives, eyes nearly swollen shut, vomiting and choking. Sylvia ordered staff to call paramedics who saved the girl's life.

"I went through so much to have a child and to think that in one meal at a daycare centre, that it could have all ended," says the mother.

"I can't even begin to tell you how horrible that was."

Contacted by the *Star*, Tim Waghorn, who runs the daycare with his wife Karen, declined to comment on the allegations, saying they now have a clear license to operate.

Experts say problems in Ontario daycares are the result of a childcare crisis in Canada caused by chronic under-funding and the lack of a national program for funding.

A major international study last year ranked Canada at the bottom of a list of 14 industrialized nations when it comes to spending on early childhood education.

The study, conducted by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), found Canadian child care services rely on underpaid child care workers who receive little support for training, high parent fees and small subsidies.

The Conservative government's decision to scrap funding for a national daycare program in favor of direct payments to families has failed to address what child care advocates call a "mounting social problem."

"We're not even in the game," says Martha Friendly, a child-care advocate and co-ordinator of the Toronto-based Childcare Research and Resource Unit. "We're the lowest spender, which shows how much value we place on it."

The chronic shortage of daycare spots leaves parents with little choice.

Nearly 17,000 families are on waiting lists in Ontario – nearly 9,000 in Toronto alone.

The children's ministry's spokeswoman said that while daycare spots are in short supply, the ministry does not tolerate poor conditions in order to keep substandard centers open.

"The issue of child safety is not a balancing act or something we would waver on. In a situation of immediate danger to health or well-being (a daycare) would be closed immediately. And that does happen."

One harrowing example is Weeza's Wee Ones in Emsdale, Ont. It lost its license in 2001 after the ministry alleged staff yelled, kicked, slapped and spanked children and even shoved an eraser in the mouth of a child who refused to "shut up."

The operator did not appeal the closure order.

It's legal to operate an unlicensed daycare as long as there are fewer than five children. More than five children in an unlicensed daycare is illegal.

Last month, the operator of an illegal daycare with 26 children in a small Riverdale row house was charged with criminal negligence after a 22-month-old child was allegedly bitten 18 times by another child.

Fewer than 20 per cent of Ontario children attend licensed facilities. The rest are cared for by their families or are in unlicensed daycares.

Even those who are in regulated programs have no guarantee of high quality care.

The provincial Day Nurseries Act sets only a minimum level of care and although the legislation requires daycares to voluntarily report serious occurrences within 24 hours, provincial inspection records contain numerous examples of serious incidents that went unreported.

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