**Child Care at the Margins**

 **Martha Friendly**

The last year or two has seen a surfeit of media stories across Canada about unregulated (or unlicensed) child care —that is, no public oversight at all—in which children died, were injured, or otherwise put at risk. Ontario has a long history of reportage of these incidents. These have usually begun with a flurry of media activity followed by an inquiry or inquest (less often a trial) but by-and-large, by the time these are concluded, media and public interest has pretty much faded away—until the next tragedy.

Successive inquiries and inquests going back to the 1980s[[1]](#footnote-1) in Ontario have issued recommendations about strengthening public oversight or improving access to regulated child care but the responses of the provincial government officials who are responsible have been tepid at best. For example, the Toronto Star reported that—in response to the 2011 death of two-year-old Duy-An Nguyen—the minister responsible (at the time) asserted that “the onus of ensuring good practices are in place belongs to the parents”.

The interest generated by the most recent Ontario toddler death in unregulated child care (July 2013) —in a private residence in Vaughan where 27 children were warehoused—seems to have some staying power however. The media has continued its interest in the issue of unregulated child care for some months, asking repeated questions about why it’s so prevalent, what the alternatives are, and what needs to be done to ensure that this doesn’t happen again and again.

At the same time, there is considerable public confusion about which kinds of child care arrangements are regulated, which are legal, and which aren’t, as well as what kinds of assurances can be—and cannot be—provided through the public oversight that good regulation provides. This was verified by a national survey conducted by CBC’s *Marketplace* of Canadians with children aged 0-12 years,which found that almost half of those surveyed said that all child care must meet government standards, while another 30% said they didn’t know[[2]](#footnote-2).

However, there is also growing public recognition that unregulated child care is a problem because it isn’t regulated—as *Marketplace* termed it “a patchwork with no rules, potential dangers, and people breaking the law.” And that so long as regulated child care is in exceedingly short supply and financially out of most families’ reach, tragedies in unregulated child care will continue to occur. And that parents are on their own.

Thus, the solutions lie with the Ontario government, which has the jurisdictional responsibility for early childhood education and child care and the power to put a real child care system place.

Overall, there are probably two main reasons that so many parents use unregulated child care: first, there isn’t enough regulated child care, especially for infants, toddlers, children with special needs and rural communities; it may not be located where it’s needed; and may not work schedule-wise for some parents, such as shift workers. Second, for ordinary parents, and low-income parents on lengthy municipal subsidy waiting lists, regulated child care is usually too expensive (the Ontario median infant fee in a centre was almost $1200 a month in 2012). There are undoubtedly some Ontario families who would choose to have the child’s grandmother, aunt or friend provide child care, even if terrific low cost child care were available right down the block, but this is neither the reality nor the choice for most families. Citing the *Marketplace* survey again, more than half the parents surveyed who said they were using unlicensed child care would prefer licensed child care.

So what’s the solution? I’ve called on the Ontario government to review and transform[[3]](#footnote-3) Ontario’s unplanned, market-based child care situation—to bring in a real publicly-managed, publicly-funded child care system so that eventually parents won’t need to find their child care on the internet or a supermarket bulletin board. This would include more well-regulated, affordable home child care, as well as more centre-based child care, nursery school, kindergarten-aged extended days, and before- and after- school child care for school–aged children. This is not new, and certainly is not a unique position—it would merely be completing what was begun when a transformation to “full-day early learning “ (which became instead “full-day kindergarten”) was initiated back in 2007.

This kind of transformation would match the statement made last month by a spokesperson for the Ontario Minister of Education who reiterated that the provincial government had “set out a vision for a responsive, high-quality, accessible, and increasingly integrated early years system that better supports Ontario's children and families." The point, however, is to get started on this now, as there is a new urgency motivated by new (or re-) awareness about the mess of unregulated child care arrangements on which Ontario families are forced to rely.

In the meantime, some ECEC advocates and groups have called on the provincial government to begin to require all paid child care to be regulated through Ontario’s existing agency model for regulated home child care. Other elements—some of them quite basic—seem to be “givens” for provincial action, for example ensuring that complaints about unregulated child care are followed up by the designated authorities. Publicly publishing data on complaints may also be an element, although this is by no means any more than a small part of a real solution. It has also been suggested that all home child care providers be required to post a sign, and that a public parent education campaign should be mounted. Obviously, addressing the issue of unregulated and illegal child care is a complex problem, which simplistic solutions won’t solve.

Also in the meantime—until we have the high quality, universal child care system that families and children deserve—the Childcare Resource and Research Unit has developed a new public education tool for parents in all regions of Canada—a website aimed at helping parents find and access quality child care. *Finding quality child care* is available in English and French. It explains why it's hard to find good child care, details about regulated and unregulated child care in each province and territory, a check list for visiting potential child care, what the best evidence says about quality, and how to improve the chances of accessing high quality child care. It includes a 20-minute video that shows what good quality looks like in centre-based child care. (You can find it at <http://www.findingqualitychildcare.ca/>).

But—while parent and public education is an important component of any full ECEC system, it’s no substitute for good public policy. While the current privatized/marketized child care situation prevails, it’s essentially “buyer beware” for parents. But it shouldn’t be this way—and in many other places, it isn’t. Indeed, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) assigns the responsibility for assisting parents, who are the primary caregivers, in their child-rearing responsibilities by providing child care, and ensuring that it is good quality. Ontario, like the other provinces and the federal government, are signatories to the CRC.

So—time to get started – no time like fall, 2013.

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1. See http://www.cbc.ca/marketplace/episodes/2013/02/inquest-recommendations.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See http://www.cbc.ca/marketplace/media/episodes/2012-2013/whoswatchingthekids/documents/daycare-survey.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/13/07/ontario-child-care-review-needed-wake-tots-death [↑](#footnote-ref-3)