

## Unregulated child care

Today, there is an enormous gap between the number of children of parents in the paid workforce, and the availability of regulated child care that is trustworthy, affordable and convenient child care that is safe and of high quality. Thus, many parents across Canada use unregulated child care out of necessity.

### **Not a real choice**

In Canada, there are only enough regulated centre-based child care spaces for less than three in ten children aged 0-5. The situation is not much better for 6-12-year-olds. At the same time, more than three out of four mothers whose youngest child was 3-5 years old were employed in 2016. Thus, the gap between parents' needs for child care and the availability of regulated services remains wide.

### **Only limits on number of children and sometimes restrictions with respect to age**

Unregulated child care (sometimes called "unregulated family day care" or "informal care") is an arrangement between parents and caregiver(s) that operates without public or government oversight. Each province/territory sets a maximum number of children that may be cared for in an unregulated setting, and most governments provide age restrictions. Beyond this, there are no regulations; unregulated home child care is treated as a private transaction between families and caregivers.

### **No health and safety standards; no regular monitoring**

There are no required health and safety standards, and no regular monitoring occurs. Government inspection might occur but only following a citizen complaint (and only in some provinces). Parents have sole responsibility for assessing the quality of the child care, managing the relationship with the caregiver and are on their own in finding a caregiver or a new caregiver if the arrangement ceases.

### **Unregulated child care can operate any where**

Unregulated child care is usually located either in a caregiver's home (a family child care home, or a "day home") or in the child's own home. There are, however, no stated limitations in most provinces/territories about where unregulated child care may operate. Recent Ontario analysis of unregulated child care pointed out that unregulated child care may operate in a rented house, apartment, office space or storefront.

### **Unregulated child care not compatible with well-developed child care systems**

There is only limited research about unregulated child care in Canada (or, indeed, elsewhere), in part at least due to the intrinsically private nature of these arrangements. However, an international study of regulated family child care pointed out, unregulated child care is not commonly used in countries with well-developed child care systems.

### **What's the difference between regulated and unregulated home child care?**

In Canada, every province and territory has a mechanism for regulating family or home child care in the provider's home but all province/territories also allow unregulated home child care.

Across Canada, there are two models of regulating home child care: a direct licensing model and an agency model.

Under the direct licensing model, which most jurisdictions use, the province/territory licenses/approves and monitors individual home care caregivers and their home. Under the agency model, family child care agencies (licensed or approved) are responsible for recruiting, approving, supporting and monitoring individual providers in their own homes, who are not individually licensed. As the provincially responsible operator, the agency is legally responsible for ensuring that the caregivers they recruit, monitor, supervise, and often train meet the regulations.

### **Regulated home child care meets standards and is monitored**

Regardless of the regulatory model, regulated home child care is subject to many requirements and standards beyond the maximum number of children and age restrictions. These include: health and safety of the premises, environment and practices, the adults in the household, food handling, physical space and caregiver requirements. In addition, they are regularly monitored (inspected). Agencies may have additional requirements beyond the provincial/territorial requirements, for example, caregiver training and qualifications. Most provinces/territories now require at least minimal training for caregivers.

### **Regulations set the stage for quality child care**

In the 1980s, landmark US research established a clear link between child care quality and regulatory status. Subsequent Canadian and US studies have affirmed that regulatory status is a precursor to quality.

One Canadian researcher explained that “although licensing providers does not on its own guarantee quality, research in Canada and the U.S. suggests the importance of enhanced regulatory, supervisory, educational, and network structures for all home child care providers.” Indeed, regulatory status has been termed "the single best indicator of quality in family child care", as being regulated is strongly associated with other important predictors of quality in home child care such as training, membership in family child care networks, program planning, sound business practices, doing family child care for child-focused reasons, and choosing family child care as an occupation--all factors that combine to promote sensitive, responsive care.

A sizeable Quebec study confirmed “a wide gap between regulated and unregulated services”. Thus, the research evidence consistently points to clear differences between the quality of regulated and unregulated home child care.

### **Risky businesses**

Recently, Ontario researchers examining the risks associated with unregulated child care observed that because of the absence of government oversight, “we have no idea how many children are cared for or by how many unlicensed providers” and know “virtually nothing about what is going on in these homes”, aiming to understand why Canadian governments continue to let these businesses — which care for one of our most vulnerable populations — operate outside public oversight.