



*“I Should Have Applied  
Before I Was Pregnant”*

## HOW CHILD CARE IN TORONTO FAILS MOTHERS





The Mothers' Task Force on Child Care is a project of Mothers for Child Care. Mothers for Child Care members who were active in the Task Force include Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services, Campaign 2000, East York East Toronto Family Resource Centre, Family Supports Institute of Ontario, Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, South Asian Women's Rights Organization, Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care, Toronto Women's City Alliance, YWCA Canada and YWCA Toronto. For a full list, please visit the Mothers for Child Care website: [www.mothersforchildcare.ca](http://www.mothersforchildcare.ca).

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## HOW CHILD CARE IN TORONTO FAILS MOTHERS

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### **The Mothers’ Task Force on Child Care**

On Mothers’ Day, 2011, the Mothers’ Task Force on Child Care launched a community consultation process to gather information from mothers on what works and what doesn’t in child care in Toronto. “I Should Have Applied Before I Got Pregnant” presents the findings and recommendations for future provision of child care services in Toronto.

*A survey was carried out between May 8 and June 3, 2011. 794 Toronto respondents were:*

▫ 92.3% mothers      ▫ 80.7% married or common-law

▫ 17.1% single parents    ▫ 47.2 % worked full-time 9to5

*Mothers reported working several part-time jobs and juggling full-time studies with full-time work.*

#### **Findings: What Mothers Reported**

Mothers who responded said the quality is the most important factor in choosing child care, followed by location and cost. City-run and non-profit centres were most trusted for quality, unlicensed home daycares least trusted, but sometimes the only available affordable option.

#### **Availability: “Simply no spaces available”**

A panicked, hopeless tone resonated throughout mothers’ narratives as they spoke about the availability of child care spaces. Waiting lists are by far the biggest concern. Parents are required to place names on multiple lists and wait years to secure a space in a licensed municipal or non-profit child care facility.

*“Availability. There is none. It doesn’t matter what the cost is – there just isn’t any space.”*

- Mother of 3 & 5 1/2 year olds, downtown Toronto

#### **Affordability: Prohibitively Expensive Costs, Subsidy Shortage**

Costs are taking a financial toll on families. Many parents are paying as much for child care as they do for their mortgage. Some have re-mortgaged their homes. Subsidies are too low, in short supply and not well-coordinated with spaces.

*“The cost is the biggest issue for me, I’ve had to refinance my mortgage in order to pay daycare”*

- Mother of 4 year old, East York

## Quality of Care

Quality, availability and affordability are intertwined. Only 31% of respondents felt that most child care programs are high quality enough to meet their children's needs. A high percentage of participants - 69.9% - were in favour of government regulations to ensure quality on behalf of Toronto's child care centres.

*"I would want higher quality child care for my son than he has now and care that is regulated and non-profit. I toured expensive, for profit centres and was really not impressed at all with the quality."*

– Mother of 4 year old, Scarborough

## Quality of Life

The way child care is provided in Toronto impacts the quality of life of their families. Rushing from long work days to closing centres, children in multiple centres and little availability near home or work means more time in transit and less time with children.

*"They do not offer later hours than 6:00pm, I work shift work and don't finish until 11:00pm, we have had to sacrifice my husband and I seeing each other with no days off together to make sure someone can pick up my son. My son does not often see his parents together; it's like being a single parent."*

- Mother of 2 1/2 year old, Scarborough

## Recommendations:

### What Mothers Want

Mothers report that changes are needed. Over 85% of mothers said the current cost of child care in Toronto is not affordable, and it is not easy to find the child care you need. In terms of solutions, mothers are clearly looking to government to step up their role - more than three quarters of respondents - 80.9% - felt that governments do not do enough to provide affordable and available child care options for working mothers.

### What do Mothers Want?

- **More Affordable Child Care – Lower Fees, More and Larger Subsidies**
- **More Child Care Spaces**
- **More Public and Non-Profit Child Care Centres**
- **Support from All Levels of Government for a Comprehensive System**
- **Good Government Regulation to Ensure Quality**
- **Flexibility and Longer Hours – Extend Hours of Operation**
- **A Modern Child Care System with Universal Coverage**
- **A Central Registration System**
- **Fair Compensation for Child Care Workers**

### Conclusion: Mothers speak with the knowledge of experience

Clearly, Toronto mothers have a lot to say of value with regard to their struggles for child care services in Toronto. In a short time, the Mothers' Task Force on Child Care was able to gather information because mothers were interested in being heard from and having their concerns taken into account by decision-makers. It is time to include mothers' voices and perspectives in policy discussions and solutions.

# ***“I Should Have Applied Before I Was Pregnant”***

## **Report of the Mothers’ Task Force on Child Care**

### **The Task Force**

On Mothers’ Day, 2011 – May 8 – Toronto organizations launched the Mothers’ Task Force on Child Care for mothers to share their experiences with child care in Toronto, including experiences with the affordability, accessibility and quality of child care.

Through community consultations - including hearings, discussions and focus groups - and an online survey, the Task Force gathered information from mothers on what works and what doesn’t in the way child care works currently. *“I Should Have Applied Before I Was Pregnant”* presents the findings of the survey and recommendations for future provision of child care services in Toronto.

While an enormous body of research exists on the lack of accessible, affordable and high-quality child care, most enquiries start from a top-down approach. To the best of our knowledge, this project is the first to document mothers’ voices in this way and include their perspectives in policy discussions.

### **Child Care Services Today**

Toronto is home to 268,575 children aged 0 to 9. Licensed child care spaces can only accommodate 21% of these children (City of Toronto, 2010). This service gap has led to soaring numbers of children on waitlists and leaves parents looking to informal and unregulated child care arrangements.

The current patchwork of child care ignores the increased number of women participating in the labour market. Sixty-eight percent of Ontario mothers whose youngest child is aged 0-2 are in the workforce, as are 79% of those with a youngest child aged 3-5 (Beach et al, 2009). Between 1980 and 2000, the number of women with a university degree entering the labour market, quadrupled (Schellenberg & Hou). According to the 2006 Census, 60% of university graduates aged 25-29 were women (Decter, 2011). These demographics point to the need for a quality child care system to support mothers’ workforce participation. Research has consistently shown that public and non-profit child care centres provide a higher quality of service (Cleveland, 2008; Prentice, 2009) and that good quality child care, in addition to having positive effects on children’s social, emotional and academic development (Guhn, Goderman & Zumbo, 2010) is also an effective tool in poverty reduction (Hughes, 2008; Prentice, 2009).

*“I have only wanted my kids to be happy and engaged. Instead I’m blamed for having them, told that I should have expected the endless waitlists and unbelievable expenses, and that my mom should take care of them for me for free.”*

# WHAT MOTHERS REPORTED: FINDINGS

## Mothers' Task Force Survey

The survey was carried out between May 8 and June 3, 2011, using the online survey tool, surveymonkey.com, to collect data. Electronic invitations were emailed and paper copies were distributed through the networks of partner organizations. Many volunteers helped with additional outreach efforts. The 17 item questionnaire included both open and closed questions. Queries asked about basic demographic information (parental status, children's age distribution, marital status, languages used at home) parents' occupational commitments, their current child care arrangements, and gathered responses about challenges and barriers encountered, subsidy applications, as well as proposed improvements and general observations. Eight hundred and sixty-five parents completed the survey. Responses from participants with children over the age of 12 – not child care age - were excluded from the quantitative analysis, leaving a total of 794 respondents. Out of the 794 respondents:

- **92.3% were mothers<sup>1</sup>**
- **7.7% were fathers**
- **57 (7.2%) were parents of children with special needs**
- **80.7% were married or in common-law relationships**
- **17.1% were lone (single) parents**

Almost half of the mothers participating in the survey (47.6%) had one child. Another 38.3% reported having two children, followed by 9.8% with three children, 2.8% with four children and 1.3% with five children. Respondents were asked to report the age of their children. While most parents had children in each age category, the majority - 63% - had school aged children (6-12 years old). A further 51.5% were parents of pre-school children (3-5 years old), while 43.2% were parents of toddlers and infants.

A very high percentage of survey respondents -78.3% - indicated that English is their first language. Other languages most frequently used were Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), Somali, Bengali, French and Spanish.

## Juggling Work, Family and Studies

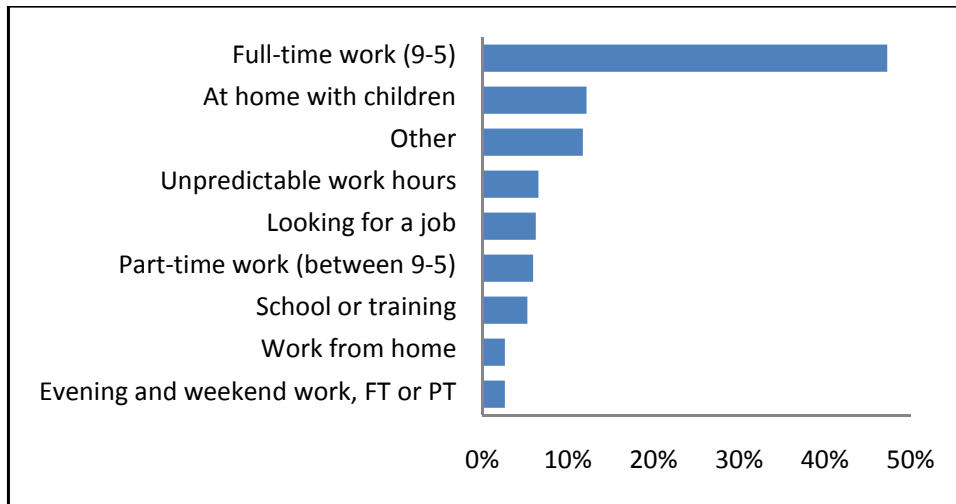
Respondents were asked to describe their work and educational commitments. Out of 790 who responded to the question, 47.2 % indicated they worked full-time 9am to 5pm. Another 12.2 % are at home with their children, while 11.6 % specified other options. Less popular working arrangements included commitments that entail unpredictable hours, part-time working positions within the 9-5 time frame and a combination of evening and weekend work. Additionally, some parents were full-time students while others were actively looking for a job (Figure 1).

Data disaggregated by parents' marital status showed significant differences. Sole support parents were more likely to be in school, looking for a job and work unpredictable hours. Conversely, married or common-law mothers were more likely to be at home with their children or to work from home.

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<sup>1</sup> As over 90% of respondents were mothers, for the remainder of this report, when the term "mothers" is used in this report, it represents all survey respondents.

**Figure 1. Parents' Work and Study Commitments**



The mothers' descriptive comments reveal that an average working day does not always finish at 5 pm. Many complained that, despite having 9 to 5 jobs, they often find themselves "stuck" at work longer.

**What mothers said:<sup>2</sup>**

*"I work full-time and my husband does too. Our day doesn't always end at 5 (rarely in fact)... Those are bad days because, of course, ideally we would never work late and we would always get home in time to make healthy dinners for the kids."*

*"My job frequently has me working above and beyond 9am-5pm hours..."*

When prompted to specify other work arrangements, the answers mirrored current labour market trends, where contract, low-wage and precarious forms of employment prevail. Many parents admitted being forced to work several part-time jobs or having to juggle full-time studies with full-time work to support their families.

**What mothers said:**

*"I have two jobs - I work 9 to 5 year round. My second job is also year round - I work from 11pm to 7am every other week year round and have done so for 12 years!"*

*"I work full-time and I am in school full-time..."*

A few mothers mentioned alternative work schedules such as 8am to 4pm or 7am to 3pm. Several parents were working rotating shifts and expressed their frustration that child care service is unable to accommodate their schedules.

*"I am a shift worker who works 7 days in a row, day shift (leave house at 5:30 am), then off for 6 days, 7 evenings in a row, off for 5 days, then 7 midnights in a row, off for 4 days... I need someone to look after my kids not only while I am at work, but also while I sleep after a night shift etc...not much out there for people like me...unless you can afford a Nanny."*

<sup>2</sup> Quotes are as submitted by respondents and have been left in their voices.

Participants also expressed complaints about the lack of child care for those who are looking for work.

*“I need subsidy because I am looking for a full-time job and it is very difficult to maintain my job search process without child care.”*

## Mothers Using Formal and Informal Child Care Arrangements

Respondents were asked to identify their child care or early childhood education arrangements. A combination of formal and informal agreements is employed by Toronto mothers to accommodate the needed care of their children. A not-for-profit child care centre was the most utilized form of care, mentioned by 213 respondents. Parental and care by family members was also common amongst participants. Less common options were all-day kindergarten (not available in most of Toronto at the time of this survey), licensed home child care and nursery schools. (Figure2).

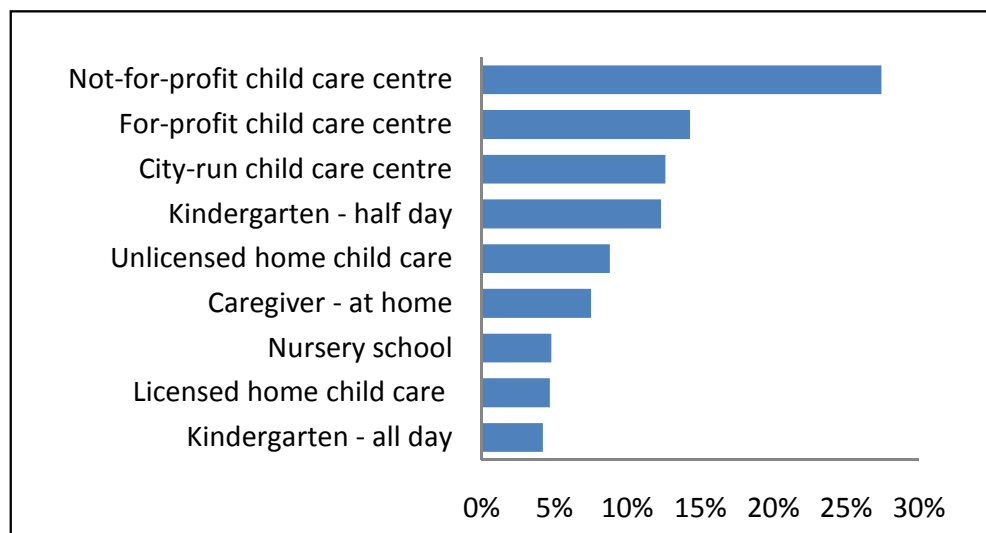
When probed to describe any other child care arrangements they might make use of, the lack of affordable child care and the long backlogs for spaces leave parents with very few adequate options. A large number of working mothers were forced to rely heavily on informal child care arrangements: grandparents, cousins, older siblings, neighbours and family friends as occasional helpers.

### What mothers said:

*“When I’m not home my older children take on the responsibility of taking care of their younger siblings.”*

*“I am asking for both my cousins and my father to take care of my son because the infant care in a licensed child care is too expensive.”*

**Figure 2. Current Child Care/ECE Arrangements**



In some cases, parents hired babysitters or arranged what was often called “nanny sharing.” While considered far from satisfactory, many respondents were compelled to use the services of unlicensed home daycare. Some working parents were left with no choice but to alter their work commitments in order to accommodate care for their children. Others were simply left to struggle with impossible choices.

### What mothers said:

*“As we were not able to afford city-run daycare, we teamed up with some friends and hired a nanny to take care of both of our sons.”*

*“We initially had our son in an unlicensed home child care but after two days our 12 month old son was giving us cues that he didn’t want to be there...Thank goodness we listened to him. We pulled him after 4 days...”*

*“My partner took on a night job so that he could take our son to school in the morning and pick him up in the afternoon after a night’s sleep.”*

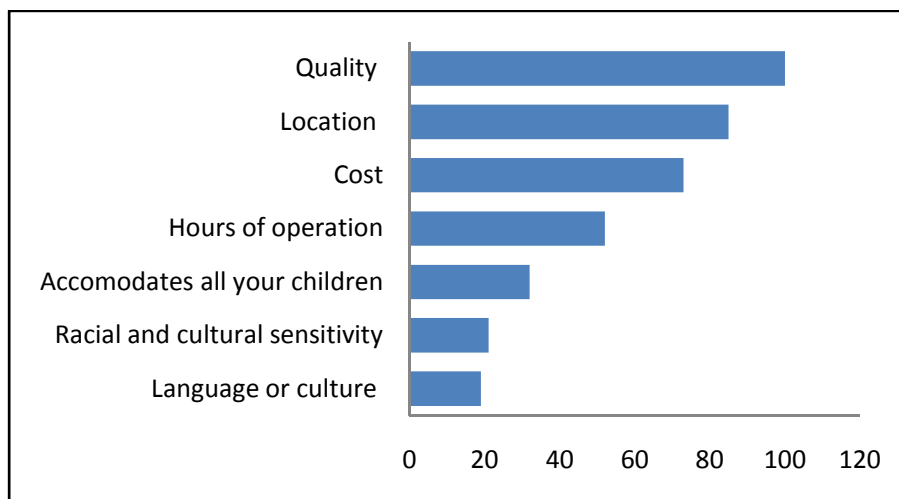
*“We had to take our children out of child care last month. We could no longer afford it. So our current arrangement is two parents in full-time employment, with no child care.”*

### What Matters Most in Choosing Child Care

Mothers were asked to rate the most important factors that shape their decisions about child care arrangements. The three highest rated factors on a weighted score were quality, location and cost. Quality is the most important factor for Toronto mothers (Figure 3). Location is next, with mothers rating highly a child care space close to their home, work or school. Cost was the next most significant factor and also highly rated. Hours of operation and accommodation of all children within one setting were next in importance for survey respondents, respectively. Less important were the sensitivity to racial and cultural issues and a common language to be shared by the caregiver.

However, there were differences between English speaking and non-English speaking on the sensitivity issue. When compared with English speakers, twice as many respondents who used a language other than English rated the sensitivity to racial and cultural issues as their third most important factor. Similarly, three times as many respondents who did not use English selected a caregiver that shared their language and culture as the second most important factor.

**Figure 3. Importance of Factors in Choosing a Child Care Arrangement (weighted score)**



# What Works and What Doesn't in Current Child Care

When asked to describe whether their current child care situation meets their family needs, mothers were not shy to identify what works and what doesn't within their current child care arrangements. High costs, time constraints, the quality of care, age-focused program restrictions and inconvenient locations were some of the concerns expressed time and time again.

When respondents were asked to identify the biggest challenge related to the provision of child care services, their qualitative responses were very rich and descriptive. Mothers widely recognized the numerous barriers they face when trying to secure their children's care arrangements. Many of their comments mirrored complaints about the costs, hours of operations and the quality of care.

## AVAILABILITY OF CHILD CARE

A panicked, hopeless tone resonated throughout participants' narratives as they spoke about the availability of child care spaces. The lack of available spaces, and the backlog of families on waitlists, turns Toronto's mothers to despair. Waiting lists are by far the biggest concern brought up by participants. Panic was a feeling often mentioned. The current approach seems to cause parents a great deal of stress, as they are required to place their names on multiple lists – paying a fee to do so in some instances - and wait years to secure a space in a licensed municipal or non-profit child care facility.

### What mothers said:

*“Availability. There is none. It doesn't matter what the cost is - there just isn't any space.”*

*“The waitlist at our school-affiliated daycare was long - we waited about 5 years before getting in.”*

*“SPACE for children. Unbelievable. I put my child on a waitlist in Nov 2009 for a spot in late August 2011 and we are #25 on the list. Insane. The other few waitlists are the same issue. Full and way down the waitlist.”*

*“Not enough spaces in neighbourhood - was on 6 wait lists by the time I was 4 mths pregnant and only got into 1 program - but it was still 8 weeks later than we wanted, so had to scramble to find something for that time.”*

*“The ridiculous waiting list process, with which you have to engage before even being able to come fully to terms with the idea of becoming a parent. You have to become an advocate for your child before they are even declared a 'fetus'...”*

*“I applied for a spot at my day care as early as my second month of pregnancy; yet, my child was 18 months old when she was finally offered a spot. The reason for the long wait? I was told I should have applied BEFORE I got pregnant. That's just ridiculous. How was I supposed to know that?”*

Many parents felt at the mercy of an archaic system that is not transparent and lacks equitable provision of child care services. The apparent arbitrary nature of how it works leaves them feeling suspicious about how spaces are given out. Concerns related to the lack of communication were also articulated when mothers complained about how difficult it is to navigate complex waitlists.

### **What mothers said:**

*“A big challenge was getting the child care centres to call me back, or to get someone on the phone when I called.”*

*“Wait list...preferential treatments, daycares not being transparent with intake opportunities...”*

*“I should not have to bake cookies for the administrator, phone weekly/monthly leaving wooing messages about how their daycare is our first choice (leaving the same message at 3 daycares), etc...”*

*“Navigating the waiting list system which is completely based on who you know and how much the supervisor likes you and how nicely you treat them and if you happen to have called on the right day.”*

*“...full voice-mail boxes to accommodate waiting list requests - can't even leave a message!”*

*“Why is it that some people are able to jump the line-up while others wait forever on the wait list?”*

### **Infant Care**

Mothers say spaces for infant children (0-18 months in Ontario) are that much harder to find, leaving them struggling with unfeasible choices. Furthermore, parental benefits only last up to 12 months, and there is a shortage of spaces for infants between 12-18 months.

### **What mothers said:**

*“There are very few spaces for children aged 12-18 months. We were able to get a part-time space only because I discovered our centre when it first opened.”*

*“...was on 10+ lists all over the city when I was 4 months pregnant and when I went back to work (when my child was 10 months) we could only find one spot...There should be one centralized waiting list for the whole city! And it shouldn't cost anything to get on the list. We paid \$50 for 3 different places and none of them ended up having infant spots. Also, there should be more infant spots mandated by the City/province...”*

*“Child care needs to be cheaper and more available in general, but in particular for infants under 18 months. It's incredibly expensive for mothers to return to work after maternity leave, whether they take a few months or a whole year off.”*

### **Failure to Support Work Schedules**

And again, time concerns were raised as very few child care centres are able to accommodate parents' working schedules.

### **What mothers said:**

*“School times are from the 50s. Who can pick up their kids at 3:20?”*

*“Hours, hours, hours. We have been made to feel that we're awful parents because our work hours go until 7pm. It so happens, we don't necessarily need early morning drop off - but a later end to the day is our need.”*

## **AFFORDABILITY: PROHIBITIVELY EXPENSIVE COSTS, SUBSIDY SHORTAGE**

Numerous positive comments were made about the service quality of city run and non-profit child care centres, but costs are taking a toll on families financially. Shockingly, parents without subsidies ended up paying fees as high as their mortgage payments to support their children's care arrangements.

### **What mothers said:**

*"The care is great, but it costs the same as a mortgage payment which is absurd."*

*"We find it very expensive and it drains our finances...we are never able to save money between our mortgage and our child care costs, saving money and not living pay cheque to pay cheque is impossible."*

*"On my 2010 Tax return I spent just under \$30,000 for daycare for 2 children aged 3 and 4.5. This cost is ridiculous..."*

*"I adored my city run daycare space for my first child. I have 3 kids. That would be something wild like \$3,600 per month..."*

*"My child's daycare is more expensive than my mortgage. It's over \$1500/month...obviously paying 2 mortgage payments a month puts a considerable strain on my family finances making purchasing clothing and food more difficult."*

*"It's very expensive. We are going further into debt each month."*

Comments reveal mothers' frustration as they speak about the challenge of earning an income and affording child care. Unreasonable prices are overwhelming and many parents felt they were working just to pay the child care service fees.

### **What mothers said:**

*"The cost is the biggest issue for me, I've had to refinance my mortgage in order to pay daycare."*

*"COST!!!! Would be working solely to pay for child care..."*

*"Child care in this country very expensive and all the talk about Canada being a social country is just an empty talk...our government should be ashamed of how little it does to help the children."*

Child care in Toronto is perceived as a luxury. Prices are so high that even middle income families feel unable to afford the costs of child care. Many parents are frustrated that they cannot qualify for subsidies, and can barely afford child care, or have to forego it entirely.

### **What mothers said:**

*"We simply cannot afford child care and yet we do not qualify for any subsidy. We do not have big loans, or spend in any extravagant manner and yet we cannot afford child care."*

*"...child care is way too expensive. Subsidy is only for low income families...what about medium income families that are not qualified for subsidy but are not earning enough to pay for the day care?"*

*"...price is a challenge when you are middle class, you earn too much for subsidy but not enough to pay for child care without a struggle..."*

## The Subsidy Struggle

Even parents receiving subsidies articulated comments about the high costs of child care services. For low-income mothers and single parents, child care subsidies available sometimes did little to relieve their financial stress. Some low-income and single mothers report how inadequate subsidies are, especially when compared to the fees of child care centres.

### What mothers said:

*“As a single mom, I’m eligible for partial fee subsidy from the city but there’s still very little left of my paycheque by the end of the month. This makes it hard to save so we can move into a bigger place where my daughter can have her own bedroom.”*

*“Child care fee is high. Subsidy only covers 1/8 of the fee.”*

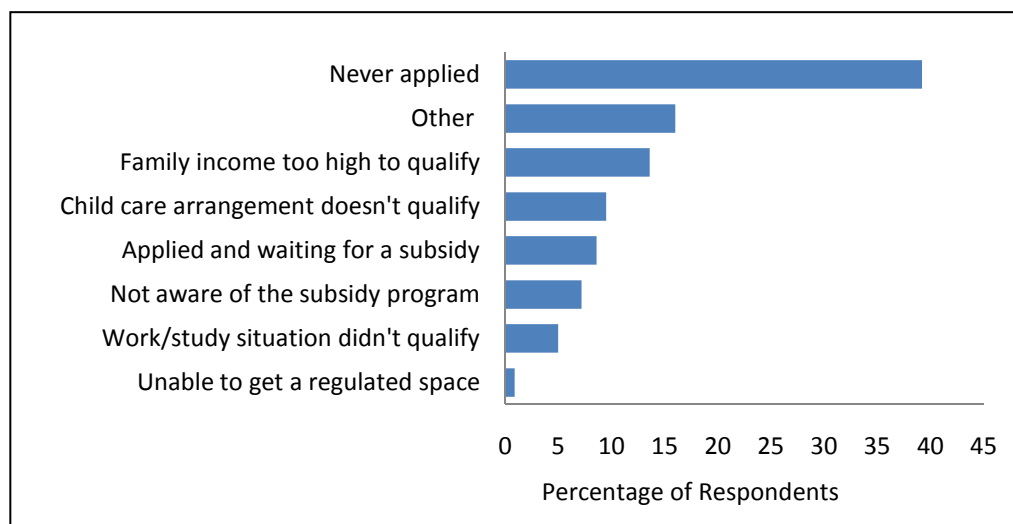
*“The biggest challenge is the lack of affordable quality child care. At over \$50/child (we have a second child in daycare entering JK), the majority of income is designated to providing care for our 2 children. Fortunately, we were lucky enough to receive a very small subsidy to offset the high cost, but the amount saved through our subsidy is negligible.”*

*“Although subsidized, daycare fees are still too high as rent and other basic needs costs are not considered.”*

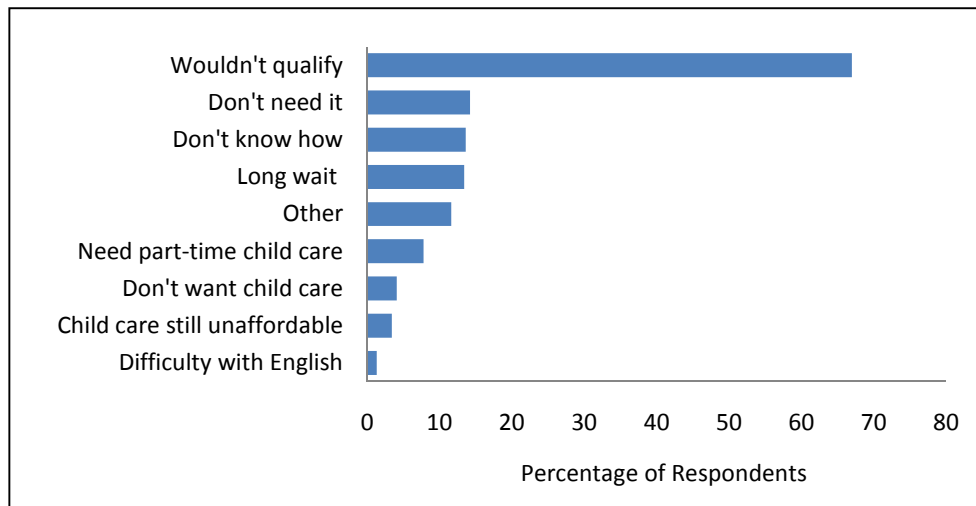
Nearly three quarters of our survey participants (80.3%) did not have a fee subsidy from the City of Toronto to help pay for their children child care. When asked why they do not have a subsidy, almost half of respondents stated they have never applied (47%). A further 16.3% had incomes above the subsidy requirements, another 10.9% had unqualified child care arrangements, 10.5% were in the midst of the application process, 8.5% were not aware of the subsidy program while 5.8 % did not qualify because of their work/study situation (Figure 4).

At the time of the survey, more than two thirds of respondents (67%) choose not to apply for a subsidy since they thought they would not qualify (Figure 5). Others did not really need it (14.2%), did not know where to apply (13.6%), or were intimidated by the lengthy application process (13.4. %). A further 11.6% did not indicate any of the options provided, 7.8% only needed child care on a part-time basis and 4.1% of respondents did not want child care. Some applicants (3.4%) were not even able to afford child care despite the subsidy amount. A handful of respondents did not apply because of language barriers (1.3%).

**Figure 4. Reasons for not having a Child Care Subsidy**



**Figure 5. Reasons for Not Applying for a Child Care Subsidy**



## Subsidy Waiting Lists

The subsidy waitlists build-up, and the incongruence between subsidy allocations and space distribution further complicate the affordability problem. Parents often feel pulled in two different directions. They are left with little to choose from, sometimes having to refuse a subsidy if unable to secure a space, or sometimes being forced to accept a space without a subsidy, and therefore being left on the hook for paying the entire costs. Sadly, parents are compelled to choose between basic needs and child care provision. Since child care is time and time again a priority, working mothers frequently sacrifice their fundamental family needs in order to pay for their child care arrangements.

### What mothers said:

*“When I got called for the subsidy interview, I still could not find child care space for my child and therefore the city put my child back on the waiting list again. By the time the day care centre called us for an open spot, the city did not have the funding for us. So when the city is ready again, the day care centre may not have an open spot as they give the spot to the next available family...”*

*“...waiting for fee subsidy to kick in. We paid full fee for 4 months and had to remortgage our house, cancel cable, and trim to a very bare bones budget and we still had to rely on our line of credit to make ends meet. We are scared come August when we’ll be reassessed...”*

*“We were on the subsidy list but the space in the daycare across the street became available three months before our subsidy was approved. We decided not to risk losing the daycare space and paid full fee for three months. This wiped out our savings.”*

Several mothers, particularly the ones new to the City, stated they felt confused by the rules of the subsidy system, and felt it is not explanatory enough.

### What mothers said:

*“First of all figuring out how to arrange for child care was a challenge. I learned I was eligible for subsidy by accident. Seems there is not enough common knowledge on the subject. More info is needed, especially for new parents.”*

*“That is a huge challenge for parents who are not confident...or who are new to the country...”*

## Availability and Affordability Inextricably Linked

In the light of such findings it is clear that the issues of availability and affordability are inextricably linked. One respondent suggested securing an affordable child care space has the same odds of winning the lottery.

### What mothers said:

*“There are two [challenges]: finding a spot in a quality centre that is near home or work, and affording the fees. Even as a two-income household, the cost of daycare is a real strain, and because there are so few spots, we feel that we can’t shop around at all for better prices...”*

*“It’s like trying to win a lotto. You panic, lose sleep and then miraculously sometimes something falls into place.”*

## QUALITY OF CARE

Quality, availability and affordability matters are intertwined challenges. Despite being a number one concern for parents, only 31% of respondents felt that most child care programs are high quality enough to meet their children’s needs. Similarly, a high percentage of participants - 69.9% - support government regulation to ensure quality on behalf of Toronto’s child care centres. Mothers were eager to comment on the quality of child care programs. While mothers preferred using municipal or non-profit child care facilities, they often felt it was impossible to get good quality services within affordability limits in Toronto. Yet, such a trade-off becomes the norm. Unlicensed home child care seems to offer lower rates, but many mothers are not comfortable with the quality of the services offered.

### What mothers said:

*“I would want higher quality child care for my son than he has now and care that is regulated and non-profit. I toured expensive, for profit centres and was really not impressed at all with the quality...”*

*“ It is important for us to have our children in a well supervised place with quality care...”*

*“I wasn’t comfortable sending my child to a homecare situation and was willing to pay almost anything for a registered space...”*

## Special Needs

Parents of special needs children reported that their children’s needs were not being met in child care in Toronto. Both appropriate spaces and accommodations are hard to come by.

### What mothers said:

*“Special Needs Support for my area is terrible. Spent time trying to convince me that my children needs were in my head and a ‘parenting capacity issue’ rather than looking at the assessments and taking the time to learn/understand children with various needs.”*

*“...child possibly has mild sensory integration issues, so I need alternatives to noisy crowded daycares...”*

*“To suit my special needs child. Her first daycare kicked her out as they could not accommodate her needs anymore.”*

## The Quality of Unlicensed Care

Concerns were expressed over the quality of care within the unlicensed home day cares or within the informal care arrangements. Mothers reported feeling uneasy about leaving their children in these unregulated child care settings, but often felt helpless since such options were the only affordable ones.

### What mothers said:

*“... the quality and healthfulness of lunch/snacks seems to be much lower (than my own standards anyway).”*

*“Most that I visited were not up to my standards. I have been to at least 10+ and we are talking dark basements, a TV running ...it was clear that the children do not go outside or they are basically a house with a box of toys.”*

*“She is unlicensed, but is the only way we can afford child care - she does not give receipts...”*

## QUALITY OF LIFE

Mothers reported that the way child care is organized in Toronto impacts negatively on the quality of life of their families.

### Time Constraints – The Daycare Dash

Frustrations were also expressed in relation to the hours of operation at child care centres. Mothers felt that such schedules are not reflecting the realities of living in Toronto, where long work hours and lengthy commutes are daily facts of life.

### What mothers said:

*“They do not offer later hours than 6:00pm, I work shift work and don’t finish until 11:00pm, we have had to sacrifice my husband and I seeing each other with no days off together to make sure someone can pick up my son. My son does not often see his parents together; it’s like being a single parent.”*

*“I still have to pick up my son from school and transport him to daycare, so I have arranged a late lunch to do this. I also had to do this for 2 years during JK and SK, so rarely ever do I have a real lunch break and am always hurrying, and hurrying my kids so I can get back to work...”*

Such time constraints were further amplified for the parents having to work statutory holidays and parents unable to find alternate child care arrangements during the summer period. Some also felt frustrated by not having the option to withdraw their children during summer months in order to enrol them in season specific programs.

### Coping with More than One Child Care Arrangement

The availability issue is further amplified by the lack of child care facilities that can accommodate various age groups. Parents reported it is easier to have all their children in the same child care setting. For respondents with two or more children in need of child care, the age-focused programs at particular centres can be an additional barrier. As a consequence, many parents with more than one child need to use different child care providers, adding to commuting time and complicating life.

### What mothers said:

*“Our kids are in two different centres, which means 2 pick ups and drop offs.”*

*“Because my children are in two separate locations and both my husband and I work in two other locations, transportation to and from nursery school/ school/ work etc is a big challenge.”*

*“Would prefer that my children are at the same location (one is toddler and one is half day kindergarten). This is probably not feasible for a child care centre, but would be a great convenience for our schedule, especially in the winter.”*

*“If you have two children, it is so difficult to get two spots at the same facility...”*

*“The child care and early education we want is unavailable. So we either send them to two different places or not at all. And cost for 2 is more affordable with two at the same location but only if there is room for them...”*

### Inconvenient Locations

Respondents showed their concerns as they spoke about not having many choices for child care settings close to their homes, a consequence of the limited availability of child care spaces.

### What mothers said:

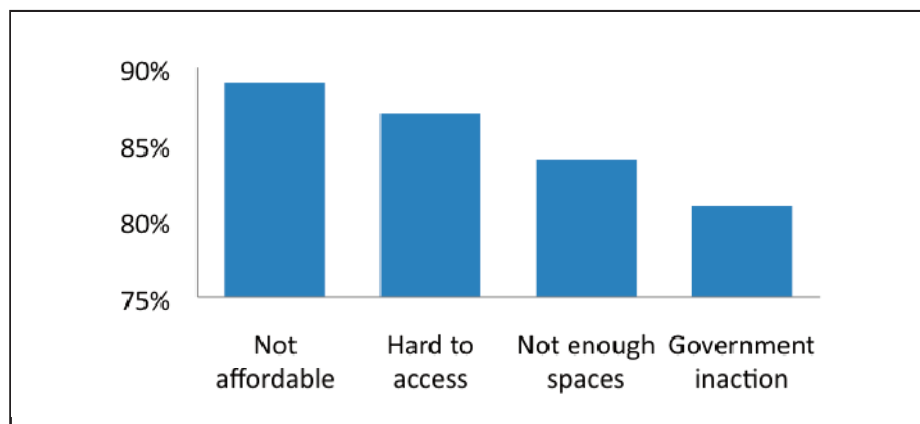
*“...very far from home so we get home quite late each evening...”*

*“We have to drive to our daycare because the 5 daycares around our area were full. After 3 years on the waiting list, we received 2 calls. By then, our child was settled.”*

### WHERE CHILD CARE IS FAILING: AFFORDABILITY, AVAILABILITY, GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

Respondents were asked to declare their agreement or disagreement with a number of statements that inquired about child care more generally. Asked whether the current cost of child care in Toronto is affordable, 88.6% of mothers disagreed, saying current child care costs are unaffordable. With regard to availability, the figure is slightly lower but still high - 83.8% said there is not enough child care for families who need it and over 88% said it is not easy to find the child care you need (Figure 6). In terms of solutions, mothers are clearly looking to government to step up their role - more than three quarters of respondents - 80.9% - felt that governments do not do enough to provide affordable and available child care options for working mothers.

Figure 6. Where mothers think child care fails



# WHAT MOTHERS WANT: RECOMMENDATIONS

- **A Modern Child Care System**

Mothers' qualitative comments also revealed their dissatisfaction with the way child care works in Toronto and pointed out concrete steps of action. Mothers called for a universal child care strategy, demonstrating their case by using examples of positive practices in place across Europe.

*"Are we in the 1950s? This is the year 2011 and it is hard to believe we are still contemplating the ideas of our grandmothers: mothers staying home, cooking and taking care of their children. Times have changed in most parts of the world but I guess not in Toronto..."*

*"We have to recognize that child care is something that we owe to children, not their parents."*

*"So the provision of affordable and quality child care is a must. I think universal child care would improve the situation for children, parents and society (e.g., see Norway for instance)..."*

- **Support from All Levels of Government for a Comprehensive System**

Mothers hoped that all levels of government will support the provision of a universal child care model. They proposed a funding increase from the federal government in order to assist Ontario in creating a child care model similar to the system in Quebec, which some of them had experienced.

*"Recognize it as an investment, and have all levels of government recognize that child care is not a luxury. Given the lack of support for job sharing etc for working women (and men), quality, reliable child care is essential for the future of our society..."*

*"We need to understand how Quebec manages to provide good quality child care at affordable rates and see if we can do something similar here."*

- **More Child Care Spaces**

Mothers wanted to see additional spaces in child care centres and more child care facilities, conveniently located near their work or home.

*"...For one, I'd like to see more child care centres. There are not enough."*

*"Open more daycare centres!!"*

- **More Affordable Child Care - Lower Fees**

Mothers were clear that affordability is a huge barrier to child care in Toronto. Many mothers called for a decrease in child care fees and an increase in the subsidy amounts and the number of subsidies available.

*"MORE AFFORDABLE (why does Toronto have such high costs?!)"*

*"...help lower the cost..."*

*"Increase subsidies for all families to reduce costs..."*

- **More Public and Non-Profit Child Care Centres**

With quality as their highest priority for child care, mothers proposed more publicly operated and non-profit child care centres, regarding them as the best available options for providing good quality care.

*"Increase the number of City-run and operated centres, stop closing centres!"*

- **Good Government Regulation to Ensure Quality**

Regulatory governmental practices were often mentioned as needed by the survey respondents. In fact, mothers don't envision a positive, educational child care program without application of government standards.

*"...policies and reviews to ensure quality care (programming, emotional and intellectual development, proper nutrition)..."*

*"Government should be responsible for providing good quality daycare centres."*

- **A Central Registration System**

Mothers suggested developing a centralized system responsible for administering waitlists and other information related to child care availability. The system would be intended to bring to an end the current practice of parents having to register on multiple waitlists and have the subsidy process as an additional and separate one.

*"We need a more central system so people only have to go to one place (website, whatever) to gather all the information they need, whether it's on availability or subsidies..."*

*"Have a system that compares all day care spots regardless of who administers them to help make selection easier. Or create a central system that allows a parent to register for a waitlist online and by doing this, you are on all wait lists in your area (or have a full list in your area pop up and you can select the ones you want to register for)..."*

- **Flexibility and Longer Hours – Extend Hours of Operation**

Parents want child centres with more flexibility, able to be open earlier, have extended closing times and accommodate parents with shift work and other working schedules.

*"...an increased number of flexible time spaces (many people in the city work shift work/ part-time to make family time/budgets work)..."*

- **Fair Compensation for Child Care Workers**

Respondents also felt that child care workers are repeatedly undervalued and proposed raising their wages and benefits.

*"...more oversight and regulation, more coordination of services, some way to make sure the ECEs et al are better paid."*

*"...while I find child care expensive, I would not want the people who work with the children to make less money, in fact, I think they deserve to make more, given that they have the extremely important job of caring for babies and children..."*

# CONCLUSION

## MOTHERS SPEAK WITH THE KNOWLEDGE OF EXPERIENCE

Clearly, Toronto mothers have a lot to say of value with regard to their struggles for child care services in Toronto. This rich and detailed discussion of the way child care is currently should inform future debates about what's needed. And the mothers are clear on what's needed as well:

- **More city-run and non-profit centres**
- **Lower fees**
- **Better and more subsidies**
- **More flexible arrangements**
- **Governments at all levels stepping up to ensure quality, affordable child care is available in a comprehensive system.**

In a short time, the Mothers' Task Force on Child Care was able to gather information because mothers were interested in being heard from and having their concerns taken into account by decision-makers. "I should have applied before I was pregnant" – the title alone speaks to the urgency of the situation. It is time to include mothers' voices and perspectives in policy discussions and solutions.



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