

## Caledon considered a 'childcare desert' for many local families

Written By JULIA LLOYD

If you are thinking about having a child, you might want to consider getting on a waitlist for childcare in the Town of Caledon ? even more than a year before you will give birth.

Katie Kelleher is a recent addition to the community, having taken up residence in Palgrave. She was excited to start her family here in town. She was recently married and gave birth to a beautiful little girl in early 2019.

When moving here, Katie was under the understanding that Caledon was a great community to raise children. It was in June 2018 that Palgrave Public School was approved for a daycare with 49 licensed spaces for children. It was going to be the new YMCA program that Katie would use for her daughter when she goes back to work in September.

In early May of this year, Katie found out the childcare centre for Palgrave Public School was put on hold because the Ontario Government cut approximately \$80 million worth of funding for licenced childcare across the province.

'When they cancelled the program, and calling around to other daycares, I found out the waitlist of some of them have 15 or 20 children ahead of my daughter. Some of them said when I asked them 'Oh how long to clear the waitlist,' and they're responding saying 'I am sure at some point in 2020,'" explained Katie.

The new centre within Palgrave Public School was to be a YMCA program with three rooms; an infant room for 10 children, a toddler room for 15 children and a preschool room for 24 children.

The approval of this new childcare centre was put on hold because of a new requirement set out by the provincial government. It asks for the Region of Peel and the Peel District School Board (PDSB) that, before the for the project to be approved, the spaces need to be confirmed with the current operation funding introduced back in late April 2019.

'Almost all of the province's 47 municipalities and district social service administration boards will see less money for child care from the province this year,' reports the Toronto Star in an article published on May 1, 2019.

Katie's daughter is currently 14 months old and, according to her, this is the age she is finding the most difficult to find available childcare for.

'So with daycare not available in Palgrave, and then every other daycare having enormous wait times, we don't know what to do. We tried to go the nanny route, but of course that is really expensive and not a lot of nannies want to work here,' said Katie.

As well, Katie's daughter is in a tough age bracket, where a lot of daycare centres, such as Magic Kingdom, don't accept kids until they are 18 months old.

Parents have mentioned the option of the Montessori Private School's childcare, however they do not accept children until they are three, and the program can be a financial burden on parents. Katie would like to enroll her daughter here when she turns three because she likes that the daycare is on school grounds and they are more flexible with parents and start times, according to Katie.

The PDSB and the Catholic board are in partnership with childcare providers PLASP and YMCA, however, not all of the local schools have childcare centres, so space in the program is limited. Only some public and catholic schools in Caledon offer before and after school daycare at the school through YMCA and PLASP.

One local mother, Amanda Diane, mentioned the issues she has surrounding these contracts with the school board having the same

start and end times for all the schools in Peel.

?They should contract the program that best suits the school's individual needs. For example St. John Paul II has PLASP. They have a 7:30 a.m. start with absolutely no option for earlier start times,? said Diane. ?When I called the PLASP program about the start times, they blamed it on the school board and when I called the school board about this, they blamed the decision of the start time on PLASP,? explained Diane.

Diane's daughter is five and a half and is currently enrolled in the before and after school program provided by her school, but there are still issues with the timing.

The childcare starts in Caledon at 7 a.m. or 7:30 a.m., for most before school programs, which isn't realistic for parents needing to be downtown for 7 in the morning.

Last year, Diane was planning to sell their home and move to a community with more accommodating childcare, but she was lucky enough to have her mother-in-law come and help. But this year, they may need to rely on their mother-in-law again because the start times are not manageable.

?I do believe many other parents have the same problem as I do with start times, and have enrolled their children in private or at-home daycares, whereby they are transported to and from school,? said Diane. ?However, for me, this is not an option as I am not comfortable with my child being cared for in someone's home and/or being transported to and from school daily.?

Katie and her husband both work downtown. In order for them both to continue working full-time and avoid demotion, one of the grandparents of the little girl had to move into Katie's basement in order to help take care of their daughter. She had to move from her home in Thunder Bay.

?For my family, I may not have the ability to go back to work full-time,? said Katie.

For new families looking into childcare in Caledon, they should consider putting their future child on a waitlist right now,? said Katie. ?Because almost all childcare options in Caledon have waitlists, or don't offer infant care.?

Family Tree Child Care Centre just opened in town in 2018 but has a waitlist for infants, which is the type of care Katie is currently looking for. Children's Castle offers infant care and summer camps, but is full and Katie would be put on a waitlist.

?There was a need for more childcare in the area,? explained the supervisor at the Family Tree Child Centre, Helen Wilks ? however, the hours at this facility fall into the same bracket as the other centres regarding start times. The Family Tree Child Care Centre starts a 7 a.m. and ends at 6 p.m.

The most recommended childcare centre in town is the Caledon East Children's Place, but this centre has wait times for toddlers until 2021 and pre-schoolers until 2020. It is also extremely expensive if you do not sign up for a program and choose to do drop-off childcare, which is \$40 for a full day and \$44 for a half day.

A recent post on social media drew a lot of attention from local parents. One issue that was mentioned a lot was the issue of the start time at these daycares for parents commuting downtown.

One mother, Laura Simmie discussed on Facebook the issues she has had with childcare in the community being inflexible. Simmie has been having trouble all summer trying to find childcare, or camps, in town that can work with her.

?In Caledon I was only able to find two camps and one was for 7 hours, which wasn't even a full work day for me,? said Simmie. ?Why are there so many options in Orangeville and Brampton but not here??

A recent report conducted by Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives looks at what it calls "childcare deserts" in Canada.

Ontario ranks eighth among the provinces and territories with a coverage rate of 36 percent, which is similar to rates in B.C., and Alberta. The report states, "Ontario has the highest proportion of children who live in big cities, where the coverage rate is 39 percent. Smaller Ontario towns with under 100,000 inhabitants have a coverage rate of 30 percent. Rural Ontario's coverage sits lower still at 24 percent."

The report also states 95 percent of children in Brampton live in a childcare desert, so imagine the percentage of children in Caledon living in a childcare desert?

However, the Ontario Government claims it is investing more in childcare than any other province in Canadian history, which is hard to imagine with the recent cuts to Peel Region childcare centres and the new regulations that have put some projects on hold.

"In 2019, the Region of Peel will receive up to \$173 million in funding from the Ministry of education, including up to \$28.4 million in expansion plan funding," stated Alexandra Adamo, secretary of provincial Education Minister Stephen Lecce.

Adamo also stated that the Ministry stands by the \$1 million in capital funding for a childcare centre in Palgrave.

The Citizen is going to continue discussions with the ministry, the Region of Peel and the PDSB and Catholic Boards to help parents in Caledon find affordable, flexible childcare and know all their options.