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National Post: Where the child-care debate ends

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The forlorn teddy bears were sitting in a row in a glass case, out on the street on a cold winter's night. Emblazoned on the glass: "Only 1 in 5 children in Canada has access to a licensed daycare. Is that fair?"

Maybe you've seen this ad at a bus shelter near you. In case it's not abundantly clear, we're supposed to say, No, it's not. But given licensed daycare is but one form of care among many, it may actually be fair enough. And where that ad implies tremendous shortages, the reality is in Canada's largest city, data published by the City of Toronto going back to 2009 shows daycare vacancies.

Those vacancies fluctuated from a low of 3.6 per cent to a high of 6.6 per cent between 2009 and 2014. By way of contrast, the rental apartment vacancy rate in Toronto in October 2014 was 1.6 per cent.

That there are daycare vacancies anywhere is a well-kept secret.

This could be for a couple of reasons. Claiming spaces are in high demand and near impossible to get is an important tool in getting more funding, and is aimed at creating need for a nationalized, government-run system, similar to the system that currently exists in Quebec.

Some parents do experience a shortage — they can't get the care they want while sitting on long waiting lists. Waiting lists are used as a proxy for demand, but they are highly inaccurate. Parents are told to get on wait lists when their child is still in the womb and they don't necessarily get off the waiting lists when they do find a space. Waiting this long can create insecurity, fear and the feeling that care of that particular kind will never come.

Where parents are truly in a crunch, they will not be comforted to know that this is in spite of high funding levels. In 2011/12, Ontario spent nearly \$3,000 per space. This is money that goes primarily to supporting daycare centres. If you are a parent who chooses a different form of care, this is money that you never see.

The research further shows that child-care funding goes to a minority of families who need it least. Those who do not rely on institutional daycare spaces are more likely to have a comparatively lower income. A 2014 Statistics Canada study reports that about 65 per cent of parent with incomes of at least \$100,000 used non-parental child care. "This was nearly double the rate recorded for households with an income below \$40,000," the report concludes.

Helen Ward is herself a single mother of two. The president of Kids First Parents Association of Canada and author of the report *Is there really a daycare shortage?* is tired of being told she is one of the wealthy few simply because she has juggled her life to prioritize caring for her kids herself. “The daycare lobby would have us believe that all parents — and especially all low income single mothers — want and need nothing more than a space in a daycare centre for their child, but that’s not true,” she says.

Charlie and Engilla Loo are another “wealthy” family, living about 40 minutes outside of Vancouver in Port Moody. Before their first child was born they were on a daycare waiting list — but Engilla and her husband together decided one of them would take a career break to provide care themselves. “We never eat out, we don’t go on vacations, and we saved up for two and a half years to buy a new TV,” says Charlie.

Another new reality complicating the statistics, is that many who are categorized as being in the paid labour force by official definitions may in fact be working from home, or doing their job outside regular business hours. The good news here is that the mommy wars may soon be a thing of the past, as parents, specifically mothers, work in new and creative ways.

As for the bears asking “is that fair?”, they might ask “is that accurate?” Fairness today means recognizing that people like Helen Ward and the Loos do child care, too. “I don’t know the best way of taking care of kids,” says Charlie. “I know the best way of taking care of my kids.”

For many parents, that’s where the child care debate starts and ends.

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Andrea Mrozek is the executive director of the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. The data cited here can be found in, *Is there really a daycare shortage?* published April 28.

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