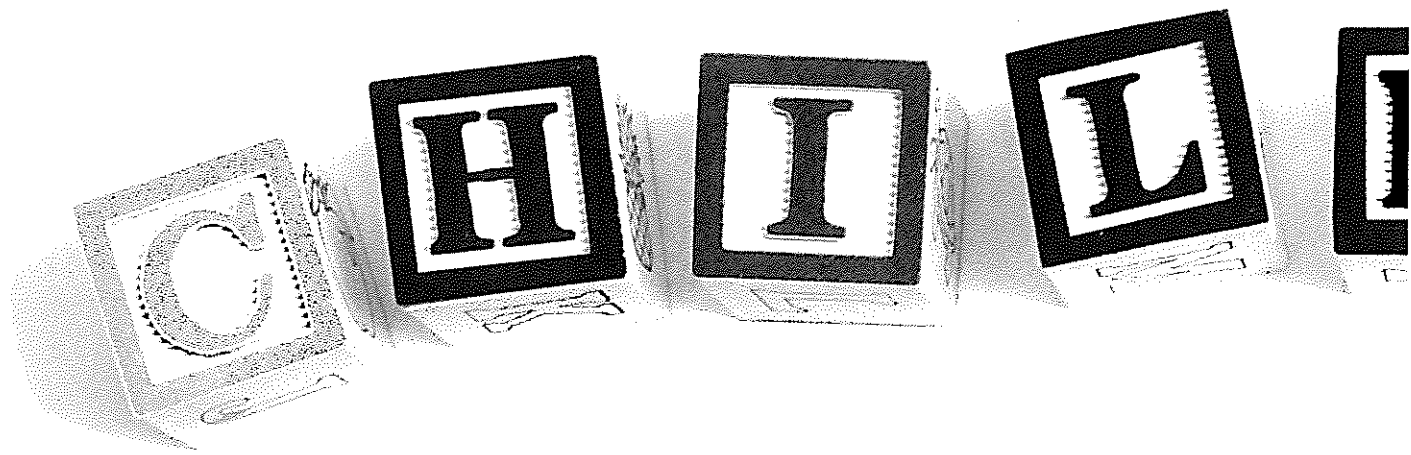


# The quest for quality



## Preschool co-ops are hard to organize, but successful ones nurture community

By Alexandra Samur

At 8 p.m. on a warm June night, Katharine Todd Millar convenes a meeting at an East Vancouver café. Joining her are seven mothers interested in becoming members of a babysitting exchange co-op. “I want community back in Vancouver. I was born and raised here,” Todd Millar says to the group. “I live in the townhouse that I grew up in, yet I don’t know my neighbours. That bothers me. So I could either shut up or do something about it – which is why I’m doing this.”

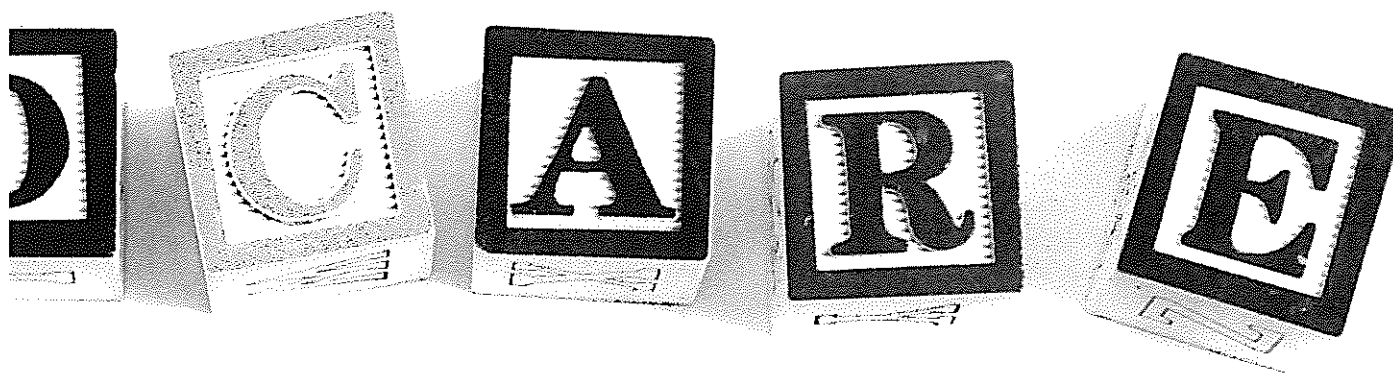
A babysitting co-op, Todd Millar emphasizes, not only alleviates the financial and emotional stress of finding good care (a huge motivator) but also provides community-building opportunities – the chance to spend time with local children and other mothers. As such, Todd Millar has seen how much the year-old co-op she organized has helped the parents within her network and she now has ambitions to expand it.

Todd Millar uses the co-op for regular care so she can get to her part-time job with a Vancouver digital agency, although most members use it for date nights, workouts or to tackle errands

“

**You've got people [who] are looking to join for financial reasons because it's a less expensive alternative”**

—*Roberta Stuart*



without the kids. The average cost of a babysitter in Vancouver is \$15 per hour, so the co-op helps offset this expense.

In Cochrane, Alberta, Anne Hayter echoes the importance of community for the parents of the Cochrane Babysitting Co-op. The stay-at-home mother of four has been using the co-op on a weekly basis for three years. “If you're in a neighbourhood, you get to know your neighbours and you get to know the people who go to your [children's] schools, but the co-op's been great because we know people all over Cochrane now. We probably would have never met them otherwise,” she reflects.

The Cochrane group started in 1985 and is Canada's oldest babysitting co-op. Thirty years on, its members still use red and

blue plastic bingo chips instead of cash to exchange babysitting hours. Prospective co-op members must submit to an RCMP criminal records check. As well, two co-op members conduct a safety check of candidates' homes before they are accepted into the fold. A 10-page bylaw document covers monthly meetings, explains how to track hours and organize schedules and outlines member roles, among other rules and responsibilities. The co-op secretary coordinates weekly babysitting arrangements, matching families with sitters via email.

### **Laying the groundwork**

Informal babysitting meetups and other groups like the ones in Vancouver and Cochrane exist across the country. They illustrate how industrious parents have been finding suitable care for

their little ones. Indeed, such groups have traditionally set the groundwork for formalizing childcare co-ops.

## The average cost of a babysitter in Vancouver is \$15 per hour, so the co-op helps offset this expense

The Canadian Cooperative Association estimated that in 2007, when it produced its last report on the subject, 34,000 families were members of childcare co-ops. Eighty per cent were preschools – the focus of this article – with the largest concentration of co-ops located in Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan. According to the report, British Columbia was found to have “a considerable number of co-op-like organizations” as well.

Childcare co-ops grew out of need. They originated in the U.S. in the early 1900s in small or rural communities where public childcare facilities simply would not have existed otherwise. In Canada, B.C. families first began organizing preschool cooperatives in the 1940s, with organizations such as the Association of Cooperative Play Groups of Greater Vancouver and Vancouver Island’s Cooperative Preschools leading the way. Shortly after, Ontario and Quebec parent groups also began holding informal meetings. Today, they do more than merely provide a much-needed resource. Participatory models of cooperative childcare can foster social inclusion among traditionally marginalized groups.

### Nurturing communities

The Council of Parent Participation Preschools in British Columbia (CPPPBC) and the Parent Cooperative Preschool Corporation (PCPC) in Ontario are the only two provincial councils of their kind in Canada. They work to support active networks of preschool co-ops locally and occasionally counsel groups nationally and internationally.

“You’ve got people [who] are looking to join for financial reasons because it’s a less expensive alternative,” says Roberta Stuart, Executive Director of CPPPBC, which currently has 23 member preschools, “and you’ve got people who want a more inclusive, transparent educational environment and connection with their children. [They want to participate] and be involved in their children’s lives in a way that isn’t segmented. To stay connected actually takes effort. It’s much easier to become disconnected. As a society I think people are feeling that loneliness. People want to stay connected.”

### Reduced fees just one benefit

Since parent volunteers help run all aspects of non-profit co-op preschools, including managing budgets, hiring staff and teachers,

fundraising and enrollment, the cost for each participating child is generally less than for other programs. Co-op preschool parents also play a part in the classroom alongside early childhood educators (ECEs), where they inevitably get a crash course in teaching techniques to apply to their toddlers. “The [Early Childhood Educator’s] goal is not only to be interacting with the children,” explains Nancy Bradley, Executive Director of PCPC. “Parents are really learning every time they are there. They’re not just sitting there cutting circles out of paper.”

As a child, Emily Mather, attended Time to Play Co-op Preschool in downtown Toronto. When the facility opened in 1980, there was so much demand that another co-op preschool immediately opened next door. Her own experiences and hearing about the friendships her mother developed while her three children were at preschool motivated Mather to register her three-year-old son Kye at a co-op preschool as well. Mather appreciates the community aspect of the co-op model: “My favourite part is meeting with the other mothers in my neighbourhood whose kids attend the preschool,” she says.

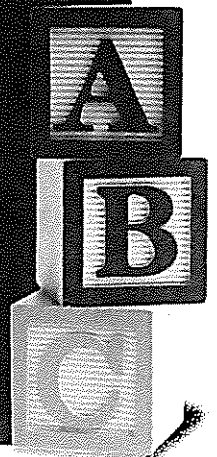
### Challenges for the future

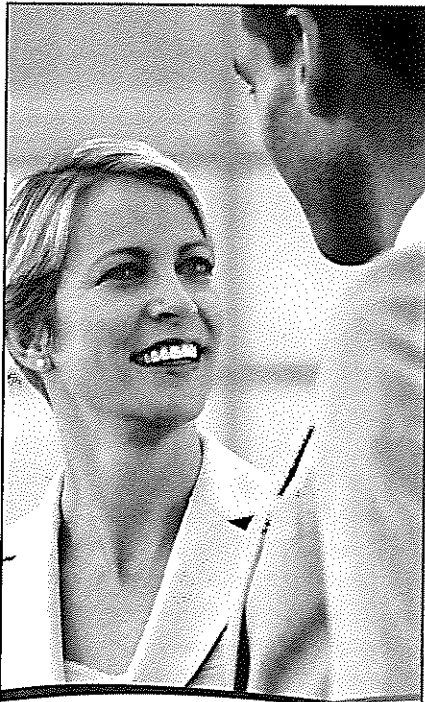
The increase in dual-income families with less free time, competition from a blossoming for-profit childcare industry as well as a lack of funding and spaces for childcare centres have taken their toll on co-ops over the years. “Participation is a huge challenge right now – getting parents to feel that they can commit some limited amount of time,” says CPPPBC’s executive director Stuart. “The most important [deterrent] is ‘time pinch.’ That’s what’s coming back to us from members. In the last 10 years that that’s been the main issue – it’s two-income working families and [fewer] grandparents [who] are available.”

As a result, co-ops have had to adapt their mandates. “Our policy book has been through a huge modification in the last couple of years,” says Stuart. She adds that she’s been working hard to

“The organizational challenge of having a child in preschool for only two hours, two or three times a week, is simply not solvable for many working families”

— Roberta Stuart





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# Childcare by the

**N**

**40** Percentage of growth in women's employment rate between 1976 and 2011

**U**

**74** Percentage of mothers with children under age six working outside the home

**M**

**22.5** Percentage of children under age six who have access to licensed childcare

**B**

**0.7** Percentage of growth of regulated childcare centre spaces for young children between 2010 and 2012

**E**

**\$12,000** Average parent fees for childcare per year in Ontario

**R**

**\$1,824** Average parent fees for childcare per year in Quebec

**S**

**\$1,676** Average monthly cost of licensed daycare for a child under age two in Toronto – the most expensive Canadian city for childcare

Sources: *The state of early childhood education and care in Canada 2012* by Carolyn Ferns and Martha Friendly, June 2014; *Early childhood education and care in Canada 2012* by Martha Friendly, Shani Hallon, Jane Beach and Barry Forer; *Growing Pains: Childcare in Canada* by Sunil Johal & Thomas Granofsky, June 2015

make the participatory aspect as flexible as possible so parents can fulfill their co-op obligations without taking time off from work or having to spend hours in the classroom. As well, many preschool co-op programs offer limited hours. The organizational challenge of having a child in preschool for only two hours, two or three times a week, is simply not solvable for many working families. Instead they opt for full-time, five-day-a-week daycare. The result: preschools across the country have been closing. The Ontario childcare co-op movement flourished in the 1960s and 70s; by 1980 there were about 225 centres with a family membership. For the past five years, PCPC has operated with 60 to 65 member schools – down from 84 in previous years. Anywhere between 16 and 240 families participate in these schools.

“[A preschool is] either in the community, or there’s just no one around to support it because people won’t drive two hours to get to it, Bradley explains. “You’re going to go maybe 10 to 15 minutes in a car max to go to a cooperative. The bulk of people using a preschool are on their second or third child and they’re home on mat leave and want their two-and-a-half-year-old to go into a preschool setting.”

### Why childcare co-ops are hard to establish

Lack of available locations and red tape are also deterrents for parents interested in organizing childcare co-ops. “It’s probably a two-year – at minimum – adventure for a group of families to pull it together,” says Bradley. “The paperwork, the hoops – and location, location, location.” Not only is finding an affordable site challenging but often landlords don’t want children or can’t have them in a formal way on the premises – as is the case with some churches and housing co-ops.

And parents interested in starting up a co-op preschool or daycare must fulfill licensing and health authority requirements, among other municipal regulations. Ontario’s *Day Nurseries Act*, for example, covers everything from broad building codes and fire safety standards to details pertaining to play space: Ontario operators must ensure there is “play activity space of at least 2.8 square metres of unobstructed floor space for each child” and levels “in each play activity room ... of at least 55 dekalux” – a measure of illumination.

Additionally, parents must ensure safety requirements are met related to food equipment, change tables, cribs and cots, bedding and outdoor playground structures. As well, they must comply with human resource laws regarding staff qualifications. These are all desirable and important safeguards; however, gearing up to meet the sheer number of obligations can discourage busy families from trying to launch a childcare co-op.

Still, Bradley remains optimistic about the future of childcare co-ops. Many that she works with are 40 to 70 years old and are longstanding institutions in their communities. “I’ve seen the pendulum swing. I’ve seen some schools on the cusp of just closing down and then the next year they have enrollment of 40 or 80 families,” she says.

Activists are pushing for improvement in childcare facilities. Organizers behind B.C.’s \$10aDay Childcare campaign have been holding stroller rallies, encouraging parents and their supporters to sign pledges and petitions to back their cause. Sharon Gregson, spokesperson for the organization, points to credit unions like **Vancity** (509,000 members and \$18.6 billion in assets), which joined a growing list of organizations endorsing the \$10aDay Childcare plan.

In the meantime, local working families must still grapple with few, expensive and irregular childcare choices. ■

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