

Parents scramble to register in private day camps

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Susan Kelly is the kind of mother who clocks long days at work, shuttles her son to soccer practice in the evening, and lives life by her BlackBerry. She plans everything in advance. So the mother of two was blindsided when municipal workers decided to strike, potentially derailing plans she made in March to send her kids to a two-week-long city musical theatre camp beginning July 6.

"I'm trying to block it out of my mind because I don't want to consider how much of a hassle this is going to be if I have to find something else," said Ms. Kelly, a mother of two who lives in Bloor West Village.

With the school year ending this week and the strike threatening to drag on, parents across Toronto are scrambling to find alternatives to the city-run camps. The YMCA of Greater Toronto, which runs 13 day camps, has been flooded with calls, while upscale options like Lytton Park Tennis Camps are slashing their fees to attract new clients seeking last-minute options.

The shuttered camps pose a particular problem because, for many families, day camps are more than a pleasant summer diversion for the kids: They're affordable alternatives to traditional child care. At \$54 to \$143 per week, city-run camps cost less than most private options.

Ms. Kelly's son, Alexander, 7, and her daughter, Emma, 5, are set to spend most of the summer in a Montessori school, but she wanted to give them a change of pace for the first half of July. She could send the children to Montessori for the whole summer, but she can only secure the extra two weeks if she pays in full ahead of time.

She's hesitant to do that since she's still not sure if the city will refund the \$448 she paid for her kids to attend the two-week camp and to stay before and after the regular camp day. She also knows she will have to move quickly to find a Plan B.

"The burden on the existing camps is higher, so that might make us even more screwed," she said.

Mathew Visentin, a father who lives near St. Clair Avenue West and Dufferin Street, is frustrated that he spent half an hour on the phone in March to secure spots for his son, Thomas, 5, in daycare until mid-July and summer camp until the end of August. Mr. Visentin's parents in Barrie have offered to babysit if the strike continues, but he or his wife will still have to take days off to look after their son.

"On Thursday morning, one of us will have to take care of him, on Friday someone will have to take care of him all day," he said. "It's not too bad, fortunately, but it's still a pain."

For all the pain the strike is causing parents, private day camp owners are reaping some benefits.

"I know it's bad to say, but this strike has been very good to me, actually," said Shawn Reynolds, owner of Lytton Park Tennis Camps. He said he received more than 75 calls over the weekend from frantic parents who wanted to register their kids in one of his three camps because they weren't sure city-run camps would operate this summer.

Mr. Reynolds has reduced his fees by 10 to 15 per cent to attract new families.

The YMCA has also been fielding plenty of calls. But Kerri Lewis, the general manager of the YMCA's summer camps, said only a few of the calls have translated into camp registration.

"I think people are reluctant to book something else if they don't know if they'll get their money back [from the city]. And of course we are more expensive because we're not subsidized by the tax dollar," she said. The city did not return calls asking if camp fees would be refunded if the strike continues.

Some parents who can't afford private care are turning to each other.

Tricia Flood registered her two kids in a city-run day camp. Many of her friends did the same. She already has an informal play date co-op with other moms in Davisville Village. She said they're considering making it formal.

"We do it a lot with the moms at school - probably six to eight of us," she said. "I could see it becoming a solution if we're all stuck for a long time."

SEEKING LAST-MINUTE DAYCARE?

Spaces are still available at privately run summer day camps across the city.

Lytton Park Tennis Camp

Locations: Avenue and Lawrence, Yonge and Sheppard, Bloor West Village

Cost: \$150 to \$365 per week

Register online at:

lyttonparktennis.com

YMCA of Greater Toronto

Location: Several outdoor and indoor locations throughout the GTA

Cost: \$128 to \$380 per week

Register online at:

ymcatoronto.org

Arts Express Activity Camps

Location: Royal York and Bloor, Yonge and Lawrence

Cost: Starting at \$120 per week

Register online at:

artsexpress.ca

French Day Camp

Location: 1067 Davenport

Cost: \$337.50 per week

Register by phone at:

416-516-9990

Mad Science Camp

Location: Beaches and Etobicoke

Cost: \$170 to \$205 per week

Register online at:

madscience.org