

Parents scramble to fill day-camp gap

As strike shuts down affordable city-operated camps, people ponder pricier alternatives

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Jennifer St. Denis' summer is a carefully orchestrated series of interlocking weeks, a balanced juggling of her two young daughters' five separate day camps and her husband's vacation time.

"My whole summer was mapped out," she said. "Week by week."

Enter the city workers strike.

Exit affordable city-run day camps across Toronto – used by St. Denis and thousands of other parents as an alternative to expensive private day camps.

"I'm going to be scrambling to find activities because you can't keep your kids inside," St. Denis said.

"It's probably going to cost more money and we'll probably have to go further out of the city. Pretty much all of my friends are in a similar situation."

She knows dozens of private day camps across the city – both non-profit and for-profit, offering everything from tennis to theatre – are offering their services.

But for now, St. Denis, a stay-at-home mom in south Etobicoke, waits anxiously as trash piles up in her local parks, rendering them unsafe for her and her two daughters, ages 2 and 4.

Charles Small, executive director of the non-profit Great Big Theatre Company, said their one-week camps are a great option for Toronto's strike-afflicted parents. At \$215 per week, their programs are a far cry from the city's – at rates as low as \$54 per week – but Small said interest is starting to pick up as the strike lengthens.

Another option for distraught parents is overnight camps outside the city. Although more expensive than day camps, the recession has left many overnight camps struggling to fill cabins, laying off camp counsellors and cutting fees.

"Camps are suffering," said William Grove, board chair of the Sparrow Lake Camp, in Alliston. "If you are generally doing day camps, for whatever reasons, overnight camps may not necessarily be on your radar."

Toronto's YMCA is another organization receiving frantic strike-related calls from parents; its home page yesterday – ymcatoronto.org – blared: "YMCA Not Affected by City Strike."

Lisa Bendall now has her 10-year-old daughter registered in two programs: a city-run swim camp and at the YMCA's Toronto Island camp. She said the YMCA also provided a refund policy, in case the city's cheaper day camps became available in the middle of her daughter's program.

"I really do rely on day camps for daycare throughout the summer," Bendall said.

Lisa MacDonald, mother of Emilia, 5, and Georgia, 3, said she was frustrated by the city's lack of communication during the strike – with parents unsure of whether the city would offer refunds. Though there is still time for the strike to end before most day camps start, the city's chief spokesperson, Kevin Sack, said the usual refund policies will apply.

For MacDonald, however, it might be too late.

"Is it going to ruin my whole summer? No," she said. "But it might make me think twice about city programs."