

From Surviving to Thriving: The Impact of the Universal Child Care Prototype Project

In 2018, 53 child care centres across the province were chosen to be universal prototype sites. The prototype sites are part of the Government of BC's 10-year ChildCare BC plan and model what high-quality, affordable, universal child care may look like for BC families. Child care providers at the prototype sites received government funding to cover their operational and administration costs. In return,

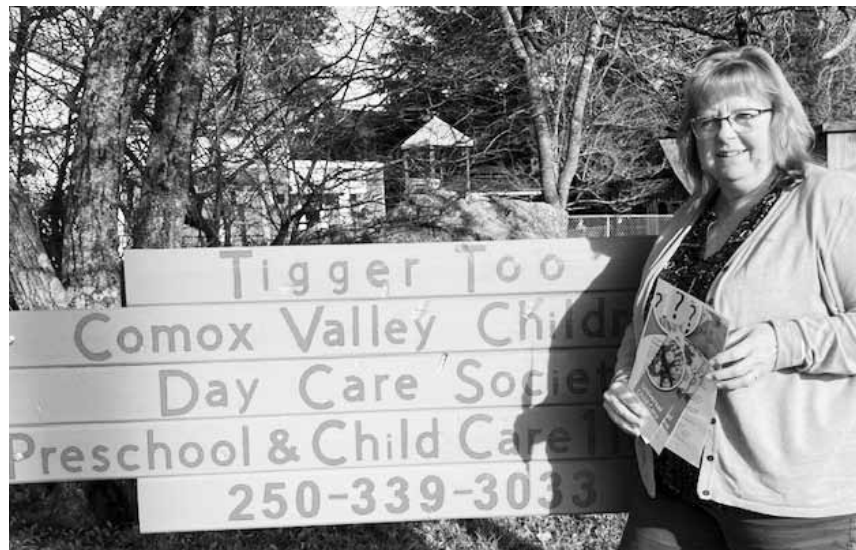
they reduced parent fees to a maximum of \$200 per month for full-time enrolment during regular hours. The child care providers have been sharing their feedback with the government to help inform the future implementation of universal care. We asked two participants to share the impact the Universal Child Care Prototype Project has had on them and the families at their centres.

Tiger Too Learning Centre, Comox Valley Children's Day Care Society, Comox

Charlene Gray

What an enormous privilege and responsibility it has been to be one of 53 programs chosen as a prototype site for \$10aDay Child Care. It is a privilege because, although I am very proud of the application our centre submitted, I'm sure there were hundreds of deserving applicants. It's a responsibility because it will be the data, lessons, and stories collected by the Ministry that will inform the future of \$10aDay child care in BC. The huge amount of work that we have put into being a prototype is so worth it if it means expanding the project across BC. It feels much like being under a microscope and rightfully so. With increased public money comes increased public accountability.

Our non-profit society operates both Tiger Too Early Learning Centre, which is an infant/toddler, a three-to-five child care program, and a preschool program at one site, and



Charlene Gray, senior manager of Comox Valley Children's Day Care Society.

Lighthouse Early Learning Centre, a three-to-five child care program, at another site.

What that meant for us is that one site was chosen as a prototype and one was not. That in itself posed an ethical problem for us. Our society is celebrating 50 years of service, always working together for the benefit of our community. Now one set of families were going to experience, as one parent put it "winning the lottery," while another set of families was not. To reconcile this, we pledged to do everything we could

at our prototype site so that it would be clear to all that this is the road everyone needs to be on in BC.

For the families of Tiger Too Early Learning Centre, the prototype project is nothing less than life changing. Imagine being the parent of a toddler being told that your full time fees would now be \$200 per month instead of over \$1000! For many that represents a good portion of rent or mortgage. It means food on the table, gas in the car, activities for families. For some it even means working fewer hours because their

income is not being drained by the cost of child care. Our families are grateful beyond belief. They have willingly taken part in parent surveys, focus groups, and phone calls and have expressed their gratitude in many ways. In fact, what we have seen is a change in parent's disposition toward child care. Without the burden of high fees, late notices, and uncomfortable conversations about money, parents have a more positive outlook about the services we offer. We have found that they are much more willing to volunteer and participate in fundraising activities (yes we still have to do that!). Maybe what we are seeing is the result of less stress for families. That's always a good thing.

Our entire team of ECEs have participated in the prototype project. Educators and management have been asked to take part in focus groups and surveys. We have had teams from Malatest, the research

company involved in the project, visit our centre and talk to the staff and observe our programs. As a result of the quality improvement grant that came along with the prototype funding, our staff teams have had rich, purposeful discussions about quality—what it looks like and what it feels like. It was extremely helpful to be able to make improvements and purchases that supported our quality goals. We have been able to access the wage enhancement as a prototype, which is very important. All of our educators identified well paid, certified staff as a necessity to support quality. We feel that this point cannot be stressed enough and hope that higher wages becomes a part of any conversation moving forward with \$10aDay child care.

Being a prototype centre has brought a lot of attention to our programs. Our waitlists have grown substantially, much more than our

non-prototype program. Of course, the drastically lower fees have been a huge incentive for parents to want to attend our centre. It has been very difficult to tell families that there will not be a space for their child for close to two years.

Overall we have had a very positive experience as a prototype centre. We have found that the prototype team has been very supportive and engaged with us from the beginning. We have been able to connect with other prototype centres formally and informally, which has been very helpful. We gratefully acknowledge the enormous commitment from government and only hope that this initiative will be expanded throughout the province. Can you just imagine the impact that will have for families in BC?

Charlene Gray is the senior manager of Comox Valley Children's Day Care Society.

Ruby's Place, Quesnel

Ruby Derksen

It has been my immense pleasure to be a part of the Government of BC's prototype project since it began in 2018. I have been running Ruby's Place, a licensed family day care, in my home for 19 years. I was caring for a couple of children 20 years ago when I decided to work toward becoming licensed because at the time, the BC government was proposing implementing \$7 a day child care in licensed facilities.

I am licensed to have seven children per day. Over the years, it has often been difficult to keep my program full because only four children can

be under the age of four. It felt like all of the home daycare providers were competing to find three- and four-year-olds every year.

Thanks to the prototype project, it is no longer difficult to keep my daycare full. It is normal life now for my parents to be able to afford their daycare. It's normal life for them to know they will be able to afford it next month. It is normal life now for me to get a full paycheck. It's normal life for me to know I will get a full paycheck next month.

It has been an incredible change for parents too. To pay \$10 a day for their child in daycare takes a lot of weight off of their shoulders. The cost to have a child in daycare is a

huge burden on families. I feel like they have relaxed, and I have relaxed with them. I believe I charge a fair amount

for child care, but I know it's a lot of money for the parents to pay, and I feel it every time I charge them.

Money is no longer a conversation I have with my daycare parents. I don't wonder if I should be giving them a deal when hardship knocks on their door. Parents aren't asking for shorter days at a cheaper rate, and they aren't relying on grandparents or friends to watch their children to save money.





On left, inside Ruby's Place. On right, a play house that's on the half-acre of outdoor space.

Children are no longer confused by all the places they have to go in a week. Children aren't asking their parents, "Where am I going today?"

I have a family that is booked for next September with two children. The mother is a student support worker. They fortunately had the \$10aDay with their first child. If the prototype project continues, everything is fine. If not, her wage isn't enough to make working worthwhile once they pay daycare for two children. However, they need her wage. It's an impossible situation that occurs over and over. The prototype project makes the impossible, possible.

For me it changed my daycare in many ways. Incredibly, I was given money to make quality improvements. I purchased some much-needed fencing upgrades and had all of my trees inspected and many taken down in a precautionary measure. I was able to purchase many new educational toys. My daycare had well-used toys that I had ac-

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—Ruby Derksen

quired at garage sales. It was amazing to search for quality educational toys to buy. I purchased four sturdy sets of tables and chairs for eating, crafts, and the play area. Previously I had adult size tables and benches.

I bought a new lock for my front door that the parents all have codes to operate. It keeps the daycare safer and more accessible. The process of evaluation caused me to look at my daycare in detail with new eyes. But not just eyes of wishing, but eyes of knowing I could make the changes.

Having a stable income is amazing. Can you imagine having a job that you never know how much you're going to get paid? I remember one fall when two of the five children gave two weeks' notice. It took me until January to fill the spots. It was very difficult. For these past two years I haven't had to worry about what will happen if someone moves. I will be financially supported, and I have many people wanting the daycare spot.

I have had a daycare in my home for 20 years. I never imagined I would get the opportunity that the prototype project has given me. My daycare families and I have gone from surviving to thriving.

Ruby Derksen lives in Quesnel and loves being out in nature, and she has a half-acre of space for the children to play. She has spent her days with preschoolers since her first daughter was born in 1990. She received her ECE Assistant designation last year with funding from the prototype project.