



CHILDCARE RESOURCES FOR NEWCOMERS TO SARNIA-LAMBTON AN ASSET AND GAP ANALYSIS

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Prepared By

Mary Baxter, Emily Nielsen, and Victoria Esses



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and Social Trends (NEST)

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Overview

Sarnia-Lambton's network of regulated childcare services is extensive and well established. The system's core features a central clearinghouse, called the OneList, which parents and guardians access through the County of Lambton's website (https://onehsn.com/lambton/ux_2_0). Parents and guardians use OneList to register their children for daycare. The system subsequently distributes applications to the selected daycare facilities.

The county website also provides information about other childcare supports such as access to daycare and recreational subsidies and to Pathways Health Centre for Children (<https://www.pathwayscentre.org/>), which maintains the region's Smart Start Hub, an assessment referral service for child and youth development supports, and the No Wrong Door Program, which helps to equip the many agencies and organizations to assist families and children with obtaining the services and supports they need. EarlyON Child and Family Centres (<https://earlyonlambton.ca/>) throughout the region round out access to institutional childcare services. EarlyON can also help parents connect with public health programs, SmartStart and SoundStart (a preschool speech and language service also coordinated by Pathways).

As with many other community services in Lambton, the network is designed to accommodate a wide variety of needs. Newcomers can receive assistance from settlement agencies to negotiate the system, and small additions in the system's design make solid contributions toward accommodating the specialized needs of newcomers. Provincial requirements mandated in 2023 require that local childcare strategies target underserved and vulnerable populations and "meet or exceed the proportion of French language spaces for ages 0 to 5, proportional to the population of Francophone people in Ontario." (Ontario 2023, p. 10) Locally, this mandate has resulted in the addition of a 32-space French daycare in Sarnia, the inclusion of tools to translate the OneList and SmartStart web pages into many different languages, and English and French versions of the EarlyON Child and Family Centres website (Kula 2024).

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Under its No Wrong Door program (<https://www.pathwayscentre.org/no-wrong-door/>), Pathways offers a reference guide to help childcare professionals determine when to seek advice or treatment for a child. Along with tackling topics such as signs of bullying and dental and hearing issues, the guide includes some information about topics of inclusivity, such as how to talk to parents about sensitive issues, equity, diversity, and inclusion. This section of the guide defines terms such as equity, diversity, and inclusion and lists their legally protected characteristics. The guide's settlement services section lists challenges children might face as they adjust to new environments. These include items such as cultural shock, language barriers, lack of familiarity with certain foods, adolescent identity issues, discrimination, and change in economic status for the family. The guide also lists settlement supports, although this list needs to be updated to include French-language services.

The Space Crunch and Other Issues

Few other supports exist to assist newcomers facing challenges with the system that are also experienced by the community at large. A lack of childcare spaces because of a lack of early care educators to fill positions is of central concern. When La Garderie Beaux Sourires, Sarnia's French-speaking daycare, opened in 2024, for instance, a lack of staff meant only 13 children were enrolled even though the facility had been funded for 32, and the previous bilingual service in the city closed in 2022 after it lost its staff (Kula 2024; Morden 2022). This gap is especially concerning considering that the County has identified 231 children in the region who speak French as their official language (County of Lambton 2024).

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The space crunch has contributed to extended wait lists. Garderie had a wait list of 180 names at the time of opening. In September 2024, more than 3,000 children were on the OneList waiting for a spot in daycare. Childcare is labour intensive, especially with regard to younger children: infants require one educator per three children, toddlers one per five, and preschoolers one per eight. The County has sponsored a year-long fast-track program for early childhood educators at Lambton College to address the staffing issue. The program, taken after typical working hours, allows daycare workers a chance to meet qualification requirements while working. It was anticipated that 20 people would take the program in 2025. To qualify for the county-funded spots, students must agree to work in the County for two years after completing the course (Roushorne 2024).

Another documented gap is a lack of readily available information to clarify how the service works. Local journalist Melissa Roushorne (2024) has reported on the confusion arising from differences in acceptance criteria between daycares and services and how services are accessed. She notes that some services establish a certain number of spaces each year to introduce some predictability but charge an upfront fee to guarantee the space. OneList cannot provide its users with standard wait times because wait lists vary from service to service and depending on the child's needs. Parents may not enroll their children early enough, resulting in long waits, or delay application because they think they can access it through the school system since many daycare facilities are attached to schools. Another bottleneck arises from most parents taking a 12-month rather than an 18-month parental leave, straining the space allocated for infants (Roushorne 2024). The website also fails to explain that due to long wait times, once a space has been assigned, it is difficult to switch to a different provider because the match is based on the child's needs at a particular stage of development, which may change by the time another space becomes available.

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A recent survey of area employers has indicated that a lack of access to childcare is a significant issue in retaining employees (SWLDB 2025, p. 12). The County has been working on easing wait list times and improving local access to childcare by developing 573 new childcare spaces in high-need areas by December 2026, responding to forecasts that the population of children in the County will grow by up to 15% between 2023 and 2051 (Ontario 2025). The number of new spaces reflects the number needed to ensure the County meets the province's goal of establishing an access rate of 37% by the end of 2026 or the equivalent of one affordable childcare space for every 2.7 children aged 0 to 5. As of May 8, 2025, the County's access rate was 26.6% (Morden 2025).

Mitigation Strategies

The County has adopted different strategies to generate the spaces. It has offered start-up grants to service providers that target neighbourhoods that need more spaces and administers the provincial wage subsidy for early childhood educators. In Petrolia, whose current population of over 6,000 has been underserved, the County is leading the development of a new facility to add 73 licensed spaces in a new daycare facility by 2026. The addition addresses past undersupply and responds to estimates of 20% population growth in the community over the next decade and the County's current largest concentrated population of children under four years old, "pointing to the fact that many young families are choosing to live there." (Wright 2024; Morden 2025). Late last year, 300 children in the town were waiting for childcare, and the town would need 120 new spaces to meet the provincial targets for childcare access (Wright 2024). Many other rural communities where the population of children up to age 12 is expected to increase significantly have also been targeted for an expansion of services: Lambton Shores, Plympton-Wyoming, and St. Clair Township are slated to receive more childcare spaces, with the cluster of Sarnia, Brights Grove, and Point Edward anticipated to receive 113 new spaces in total (County of Lambton 2024, p.20).

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Currently, OneList contains 79 childcare providers. Three of these provide home-based service, more than half provide service in centres located throughout the region, five are nursery-based, roughly a third are school-based, and seven are recreation-based. Of these services, 20 accept infants, 32 accept toddlers, 45 accept preschoolers, four offer an extended day, and 74 provide for special needs. Of the services registered, 54 provide full-day service and only one provides evening service, but the service, Ska:na, specializes in supporting Indigenous communities on reserve and in urban areas. Only one of these services does not accept the Ontario childcare subsidy.

Childcare subsidies have not yet met the provincial target of \$10 a day by 2026. In September 2024, the provincial average for daily licensed childcare was \$20 (Roushorne 2024).

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