

**Martha's Monthly**  
**January 2008**  
**Home Alone, watching the Fonz, while I wear my Brown & Orange polyester suit**

If you were **alive in the 70's** and you lived in Canada, then I know some things about you: you wore brown and orange polyester, watched Happy Days, thinking the Fonz was the coolest, argued with your girlfriends about which Bay City Roller was the cutest, and you heard of, but likely weren't one of, the latch-key kids. Latch-key kids were children who went home after school and did not have adult supervision until their parents came home from work. There were news stories of the dangers to children of being a latch-key kid but there were thousands and thousands of them because many families had no alternative.

Martha remembers wishing that *she* could be a latch-key kid. See, when Martha was growing up her family had a next-door neighbour named Mrs. Albert. Mrs. Albert was in her 50s, but looked older, and she occasionally babysat for Martha's family. Mrs. Albert was strict and did not particularly like Martha, or children in general, but she had no personal income other than the little bit she earned from babysitting the neighborhood kids.

In the 70s there were few after-school care programs – Martha's town had none. So kids came home to a parent (almost always a mother), came home to an empty house, or came home to some version of Mrs. Albert. As more and more women entered the work force in the following years there were fewer moms to come home to and fewer Mrs. Albert's too. Out-of-school programs sprang up as a way of offering care before and after school. (Nowadays these programs also offer supervision during lunch hours at schools because teachers no longer supervise lunchrooms.)

Statistics Canada tells us that as of 2003, 85% of two parent families have both parents working. (See [Middle Years report](#)) Very few families have a mother waiting at home when the children get off the bus. And neighbours like Mrs. Albert just don't exist anymore. Out-of-school programs have become essential to provide quality supervision of children. For many years **we have not heard about latch-key kids. But we will soon.**

In 2007 an out-of-school program in Calgary had to shut five sites down when they could no longer staff the programs. Parents were panicked. Many had to quit their jobs. Some had to make the tough decision to make their child a latch-key kid. What was the alternative? Other Out-of-school programs are full and cannot find enough staff to continue. **The problem is not just the lack of employees but the province's Five Point Plan for child care.** The Five Point Plan made some desperately needed improvements to the care provided to children under 6. Wage subsidies to staff, staff development money, and accreditation of programs have begun to improve things for child care staff. (There is still a long way to go but there has been a 5% reduction in staff turnover since these changes were introduced.) The problem is that out-of-school care

was not included in the Five Point Plan so children aged 7 and up are not provided with subsidies for care, their staff are not offered wage enhancements, and the result is that staff are fleeing out-of-school care for the daycares. Martha can't blame them.

**Out-of-school care in Alberta is in a crisis and it is about to get worse.** Under new guidelines introduced by Children's Services, out-of-school care programs will have to have more qualified staff and have a lower staff-child ratio. There is nothing wrong with these ideas but the result is that the programs will need money. The province has not offered any. Parents will foot the full cost.

There are 227 municipalities in Alberta. Five of them offer out-of-school care subsidies to parents and 37 provide some grants to the programs. In the other 185 municipalities parents are entirely on their own. (See [report on care in AB](#)) Even in municipalities that provide some assistance, the vast majority of those who need the care must pay large amounts. Currently, out-of-school care is about \$350/month per child in Calgary (one of the municipalities that offers 1100 subsidies to low-income families). With increased staffing costs these prices will have to rise. Last fall, when one program in Calgary raised their rates by \$50 a month, 12 families had to withdraw. Most of those kids became latch-key kids. ([CBC report "Home alone"](#))

The Alberta government **MUST** provide support to out-of-school care in the form of subsidies to parents of children aged 7-13. **Every other province in Canada does so.** Alberta is the only province that thinks it is okay for 7 year olds to have no alternative but to be a latch-key kid.

Until Feb 4, 2008 the Alberta government is holding an online consultation on the licensing changes that will affect the staff ratios for out-of-school care. Martha filled out the silly little questionnaire but at every opportunity she made comments like "the government must fund out-of-school care" and "provide subsidies to kids over 7, like every other province does". You can do the same at [Child Care Consultation](#). There are also public meetings being held in the next few weeks. Look at this schedule ([Schedule](#)) and find one you can attend and then ask questions about out-of-school care.

The Alberta Liberals have said they would offer a subsidy to parents for school-aged children to attend out-of-school care. (See [Alberta Liberals Policy](#)). Liberal MLA Weslyn Mather is the Shadow Minister (critic) for Children's Services and here are the opening lines of a statement she made in March, 2007: "Alberta is the only province, I'm ashamed to say, that does not offer parents subsidies for child care up to the age of 12. . . Family support networks have changed in our society. Parents don't have extended family that they can rely on or friends or neighbours to provide child care for their elementary school-aged children. The circumstances that create the need for child care in the early years generally continue through the elementary years, and quality care is still essential during these years." Mather is right. Martha is also ashamed that Alberta does not offer subsidies to families of school-aged children. We can do much better.

Unless we want to have a drastic increase in the number of latch-key kids, we need to offer families some real alternatives. In order to run out-of-school programs well, they need to be able to offer competitive wages and staff development opportunities. The costs have to be kept affordable. In order to do this, the government must be involved. (After all, the point of a government is to intervene when market forces cannot provide affordable public services like utilities, roadways, and child care. It is only in Alberta that we privatize all these jobs of government and think governments are supposed to be cheerleaders for business interests!)

Some children under 13 are old enough and mature enough to be Home Alone. Most are not. And as much as Martha did not like old Mrs. Albert she is darn glad for the fact that she had a neighbour to provide care at a time when she needed it.

Out-of-school care is a requirement in our world. We no longer think the Fonz is cool and we now realize that none of The Bay City Rollers were cute. We don't wear brown and orange polyester and we should not make a new generation of latch-key kids. The Alberta government needs to subsidize parents who use out-of-school care and they need to provide wage subsidies to staff who work in these programs.

Please [write a letter](#) (this link will open your email program with the addresses already inserted) to the Premier and CC it to the Shadow Ministers of Children's Services, Weslyn Mather (Liberal) and Raj Pannu (NDP). If you want to use the following letter as a start, then please do. Simply copy and paste it into your message after you click "write a letter" above. Offer your own experiences of out-of-school care, especially if you are a parent who will have to face quitting your job to care for your school aged children. Also, before the end of January make sure to provide your feedback to the online consultation or at public meetings. ([Details are above](#)).

**If the "write a letter" link does not work on your computer, you can copy and paste the following addresses into your email program.**

TO: premier@gov.ab.ca, banff.cochrane@assembly.ab.ca  
marthasmonthly@yahoo.ca, edmonton.millwoods@assembly.ab.ca,  
edmonton.strathcona@assembly.ab.ca

January 16, 2008

Dear Premier Stelmach:

Your government is currently seeking feedback on changes to the licensing of child care facilities. I have provided some feedback through the online form but wanted to emphasize to you the growing crisis in out-of-school care.

The provincial government in every province except Alberta subsidizes out-of-school care. Only in 5 municipalities of Alberta can a few parents receive subsidies for their children's care. All across Alberta out-of-school programs are desperate for staff and unable to meet the demand of parents with children who need care. When one program

in Calgary could not find staff they were forced to close five sites and many parents were forced to quit their jobs or have their children become latch-key kids.

Alberta needs every worker we can get. This is no time to have skilled people quit jobs because their school-aged children cannot get into an out-of-school program. This is not the time to make out-of-school programs compete with daycares for the same staff when daycare workers can get a wage supplement from your government. It is essential that the wage supplement offered to care givers of children under 6 be extended to providers of care for those over 6. It is also essential that subsidies for low-income families to receive out-of-school care be extended across the province, not just to those municipalities that can afford to offer a few subsidies.

Please move quickly to offer assistance to the children of working families in Alberta. We cannot afford to have a new generation of latch-key kids and we cannot afford to have their parents quit work because they can't find care.

Sincerely,

Your name and full mailing address.