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Thursday, September 08, 2011
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NEWS

Markham daycare shut down after toddlers escape

September 3, 2011 00:09:00
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Social Justice Reporter

An award-winning daycare in Markham has had its licence suspended after three toddlers walked out of the playground undetected, crossed a busy parking lot and entered a neighbouring drugstore.

A subsequent investigation by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services found that the children were being underfed and that the centre's supervisor was not qualified.

The Markham Village Childcare Centre, located in a strip mall on Highway 7 near Ninth Line, was closed by ministry officials Wednesday.

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Three staff were supervising 11 children on the morning of Aug. 16 when the incident occurred.

After the toddlers — ranging in age from 18 to 24 months and still in diapers — wandered out of sight, five other children also escaped from the playground through an open gate. But the five were rounded up before they got very far, say parents and a daycare staff member interviewed by the *Star*.

Store staff who found the little boy and two girls at the neighbouring Shoppers Drug Mart were horrified. "We all have small children and we couldn't believe this was happening," said cosmetics area manager Shireen Moniz.

She was alerted to the drama when the boy got his fingers caught in the store's automatic door and began crying. Moniz and another staff member freed him.

"One of the little girls was already inside and when we looked outside we saw another little girl standing in the driveway," she said.

"There was a UPS truck coming and we ran out screaming 'Stop!' " she said.

Damian Alfonso credits the Shoppers staff with saving the life of his 18-month-old daughter, Lucia.

"She was standing in the parking lot. She could have been killed by that truck," he said.

It was obvious to staff that the children didn't belong to anyone in the store, so they sent someone to the daycare, about 100 metres away.

At first, the daycare didn't seem to realize there was anyone missing, said store manager Gary McKoy. Once they realized their mistake, workers came to collect the children.

"I wasn't going to release the children to just anyone," said McKoy, who called police. The police took a report and released the children back to the daycare.

Sarah Tan, whose son, Kairon, had his fingers caught in the door, learned of her son's escape from York Regional Police.

Tan later asked police to retrieve the daycare's playground surveillance video. They did so this week, and passed it on to the ministry.

Tan, who saw one of two videos recorded, said footage showed one of the playground staff on a cellphone and the other two staff talking to each other.

The ministry has told Sharifah Amanda Ally, the daycare's owner, to hire a new supervisor.

"(Ally) has not hired a qualified supervisor to plan and direct the program of the day nursery, be in charge of the children and oversee the staff," says an order from the ministry, posted on the daycare's door.

Ally did not return numerous phone calls Friday.

However, a letter from the daycare to parents the day after the three toddlers escaped said the incident occurred "when staff were distracted while tending to other children."

The daycare letter said the tots were missing for about 12 minutes before staff were sent to the drugstore to retrieve them.

"The Centre is taking the following measures to ensure that an event like this never occurs again," the letter says. The measures listed include: installation of child-proof latches on playground gates, rearrangement of toys "to allow for an unobstructed view of the entire playground" and reprimands for staff involved.

The daycare opened on June 10, 2009, and has won the *Markham Economist and Sun*'s reader choice award for best child care two years running.

A ministry inspection in June gave the daycare failing grades on 12 points. Those issues, which were quickly resolved, ranged from incomplete playground checklists to improper record-keeping on medicine administered to children.

Most recently, a ministry inspection found there was not enough food in the centre to feed the number of children enrolled.

There were 28 children enrolled, "but catered food was ordered for only 13," according to the ministry.

The daycare will remain closed until a qualified supervisor is hired and the centre's operator provides evidence of sufficient food, as well as a detailed plan on how the children will be looked after at all times.

"This daycare will not open until all our requirements are met," said Ken Dove, a government spokesman.

Meanwhile, little Lucia's family — who sent Shoppers Drug Mart staff flowers to thank them — has found another daycare centre.

"I can't imagine my little granddaughter, wandering alone like this," said Lucia's grandfather, Edgar Timor.

"It just makes me feel terrible. She is everything to us."

With files from Liam Casey

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