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'Air-conditioned babies' keep cool despite the cost

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Pat Spadafora says she is "dreading my next hydro bill."

Like many people in the city, Ms. Spadafora has been running her central air conditioning constantly during the current heat wave, and she knows there will be a price to pay.

She just doesn't know how big a price: The bad news will be on her next hydro bill.

When her family of seven is not using electricity for heating or cooling their house in southern Etobicoke near Lake Ontario, the bill runs about \$73.

Her last bill, which does not cover the recent heat wave, was for \$232, she says.

"So when we run the air conditioner among other things, we do notice a jump," said Ms. Spadafora, a stay-at-home mother whose husband is a roofing contractor.

Just how high the jump will be depends on a number of variables, particularly the temperature setting, but Toronto Hydro estimates that a 2.5-ton central air-conditioning unit, a common size for homes, running for 24 hours a day for 30 days uses \$240 worth of electricity.

Hydro also estimates that a 23,500 BTU window air conditioner, which can cool 1,400 square feet, running 24 hours a day for 30 days costs about \$200 in electricity.

This time of the year, central air conditioning can account for up to 50 per cent of a household's electricity bill, the utility says.

Like many, Ms. Spadafora did not grow up with air conditioning at her family home near Bloor Street and Lansdowne Avenue, although the family got air conditioning before her youngest sister was born.

"When it was really hot, what did you do? You went to bed later at night, slept with your window open, hoped to God nobody came through it. But you become accustomed to [air conditioning], and then, when you don't have it, you find the air stifling."

She got air conditioning before her youngest child was born.

"My youngest sister and my youngest [child], we call them the air-conditioned babies because they have had it in their lives since Day 1. When they don't have it or [are] not exposed to it, they are very cranky."

Ms. Spadafora, who has three daughters and two sons, ranging in age from 17 to 24, all of whom still live at home, does look for ways to keep the hydro bill down.

The air conditioning is never set lower than 24 degrees (77 Fahrenheit); heat production in the house is minimized by making salads or using the oven in the cooler part of the day; and she puts washing on the line to dry, instead of using the dryer, she said.

Hydro also suggests that air-conditioning costs can be minimized by keeping units at about 25.5 degrees, turning it off when you leave home, opening windows to draw in cool air when practical, closing curtains and blinds in southern and western exposures, using a microwave to cook, and taking showers instead of baths.

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