

# Yukon early childhood educators concerned about working during pandemic <sup>[1]</sup>

Early childhood educator has circulated letter expressing concerns about care centres remaining open

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

Early childhood educators have written a letter outlining their concerns about remaining open and the operational guidelines they have to follow during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rea Knight, one such educator, spearheaded the letter to the Department of Health and Social Services. The letter has been signed by 45 people from all over the territory. It started circulating on March 22 and started off as a survey but eventually morphed into a letter used to voice concerns. It is being shared on social media.

Knight is currently not working because she is at home caring for her six-year-old child who is off school. She does not have a care option for the child.

She said there were several concerns and workers wanted to collectively put their voices together.

She explained that at the time of the letter was written, there were no enhanced health and safety measures in place or financial support to keep early childhood education centres open. She added there were no guidelines on keeping families and educators safe, either.

She said kids are now to be screened before being let in. This includes taking temperatures and getting the parents to go through a check-list.

She said she was instructed by the territorial government to promote social-distancing measures. The educators were told to teach social distancing to young children, ages five and under. She said these practices are unrealistic for the field.

"What they (the government) is doing is asking us to teach social distancing to very young children, which is exactly the opposite of building healthy attachment and social and emotional skills," Knight said.

She gave some examples of what this would look like. Kids are to be told not to share toys. If a toy is to be shared it must be thoroughly cleaned by going into bleach.

A child that is crying and wanting a hug for comfort cannot be touched. She explained that denying kids this comfort can be harmful to their development.

She said if this last five months that will be a long time when dealing with a young child's development.

She said she feels that teaching kids this young about social distancing is unethical. She indicated that young children will have difficulty understanding what is going on in the world today and that some kids may feel like they have done something wrong.

"They feel like they are being punished when they're being asked not to sit beside their friend," Knight said.

She said kids need nurturing care that is being denied under these guidelines.

She added that she is unsure of what early childhood educators are supposed to do with a crying child that needs to be comforted.

She asked why early learning centres are being asked to remain open as an essential service and their workers are considered essential workers when many have school-age children themselves. These workers won't have care for their kids.

"It really kind of highlights why the market-based system in early learning centres is problematic," Knight said.

She added there is uncertainty on who is an essential worker and what that means for early learning centre staff, and thinks the details of who can bring their kids to these centres needs to be made clear.

She also asked why the territory's schools are not being asked to do the same thing.

Although she herself is not working, she said she has learned through talking with colleagues of what it is like in early learning centres right

now. She said she found it shocking how many children are still being brought to the centres and feels this shows why the government needs to clearly outline who should be allowed to use these services.

She said some parents may still be bringing their kids to daycare out of fear of losing their spot. She added that if parents are paying for a space, they will continue to use it, even if they are off work themselves.

Ultimately, she said she would like to see the government look at other measures. She said other jurisdictions have closed down some early learning centres and only kept a few open to essential workers. She said she wants the term “essential worker” clearly defined.

She raised an alternative — that ECE workers could fill a nanny-type role where kids can be watched in their own homes.

The News reached out to the Department of Health and Social Services for comment on this matter but did not hear back before deadline on March 27.

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