

# Pack lunches and no toys from home: New rules for Norway's kindergartens <sup>[1]</sup>

Kindergartens in Norway have banned children from bringing toys from home, insisted on pack lunches, and built hand-washing facilities outside. When Norway's youngest children returned this morning, a lot had changed.

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## AVAILABILITY

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

*Please note: Child care in Norway is often referred to as kindergarten*

## EXCERPTS

Children returning to Oslo's Internasjonale Kultur Barnehage on Monday morning were greeted by bright balloons outside and a big welcome sign.

"The parents were happy and the kids are very excited," Therese Kofler, the kindergarten's manager, told The Local, two hours after the first children arrived. "All of the children were really happy to come back. There was no crying."

At Espira Grefsen Stasjon, a kindergarten in the city's north, some children were reluctant to let go of their parents' hands, but most were impatient to run and join their friends in the sandpit.

"He was so excited we had to leave the house early to come here and see the other kids," Silje Skifjell said of her eldest child Isaak, after she dropped him and his younger brother Kasper off. "I almost was crying, he was so happy to see his friends," she said.

Many kindergartens in Norway opened up this morning, five weeks after the facilities were shut down for all but the children of essential workers, with the majority of municipal kindergartens in Oslo set to open on Tuesday, and others opening throughout the week.

The reopening is the first step in the expected slow lifting of the restrictions imposed on Norway a month ago to slow the spread of coronavirus.

Along with Austria, Denmark and Germany, Norway is among the first countries to start easing restrictions, which were announced on March 12.

The Nordic country, with a population of around 5.4 million, has registered 7,068 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus and 154 deaths, and has reported a significant drop in new hospital admissions.

Authorities said they ordered the reopening because children have been less affected by COVID-19.

"Going to pre-school is safe," Education Minister Guri Melby has repeated leading up to the reopening.

However, some parents have objected to the decision. As in neighbouring Denmark, which started opening schools last week, a Facebook group called "My child should not be a guinea pig for COVID-19" has been created and an online petition objecting to the reopening has nearly 30,000 signatures.

At both kindergartens, staff were on site to receive the children at the gate, as entry to the buildings was banned to the public to limit the risk of contamination. But neither parents nor employees were wearing masks.

At International Kulturbarnhage, staff had placed water tanks outside so that the children could wash their hands as soon as they were delivered by their parents without needing to enter the premises. "After that, they wash their hands every hour almost," Kofler said.

Her staff are working hard to make the new strict hygiene routines fun for children to follow, as recommended under the guidelines issued by the Directorate of Education last Wednesday.

"They have made a song for washing their hands, which I think they found on the internet, so they are learning the song together with the children. For the small ones, I think, it's pretty fun to have the water outside."

The children have also been drawing the virus, to help them understand "how it sticks to children's fingers", as Kofler put it. They have also been made to watch educational videos, such as this one released last week by Norway's Directorate of Education.

At Espira Grefsen Stasjon, an employee wearing blue plastic gloves was wiping down the jungle gym as the children played.

"We've sanitised the kindergarten, so everything is very clean", said director Tone Mila, who was also there to answer parents' questions.

"Of course, now the biggest job to do is the hygiene," she told AFP.

According to Kofler at Internasjonal Kultur Barnehage, the new rule barring children from bringing toys from home had not caused any problems.

"Normally, they had only a special day when they could bring toys from home, or if they brought one, they had to put it on the shelf," she said. "So that wasn't a big thing."

For the smaller children, who need a small teddy bear to sleep, or for those who use pacifiers, staff had tried to keep it in the pram that they normally sleep in, she said.

"That's what we're trying to do, but some, of course, need it a little bit more than the others. Now we are trying to separate it so that someone else doesn't take it out of their mouth and put it in their own mouth,. I'm not saying that's not happening, but we're trying!"

The children are also having to get used to a much stricter regime around toy use.

"What we've been doing is that they are taking out what toy they want, and then when they're finished we are putting the toy in a box, and then it's only that group that has those toys, until we clean it," Kofler explained.

According to the recommendations, all children are supposed to bring their own pack lunches from home, which they are not allowed to share with other children.

The children at Internasjonal Kultur Barnehage are being split into groups of six for the older children, and groups of three for the very youngest. The groups will then play almost exclusively together, apart from when the staff take their breaks, when two groups of six will play together outside.

To make the reopening easier, the kindergarten has split it over two days, with half of the children coming on Monday, the other half on Tuesday, and the whole school attending on Wednesday.

"It's because of the small children," Kofler said. "They've been away for more than a month and we think they really need a lap to sit on. Even if it's only groups of three for the small children, if three children are afraid and start crying, they will need to have a lap.

Officially the argument for the reopening has been made on health grounds, but it also comes as a relief for parents who've had to juggle parenting with working from home.

"It has been a challenge," said Olav Kneppen after leaving his four-year-old son Oliver at the Espira Grefsen Stasjon "It was fun to spend more time with him than usual but it was a bit frustrating with work because I couldn't do everything I was supposed to do," he told AFP.

Asked about any apprehensions he might have about the children returning, he said he trusted in the authorities' judgement.

"At home, we choose to follow the recommendations from the health authorities. So when they recommend this, we trust that it will be relatively safe," he said.

"Of course, we are not 100 percent safe, but I agree that it's time to do it now."

**Related link:** Kindergarten reopening and COVID-19 [Video] [3]

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