

Nursery, but not as they knew it ... Norway adjusts to life after lockdown^[1]

As the country follows Denmark in easing Covid-19 restrictions, pre-school has become very different for its younger citizens

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EXCERPTS

It was school, but not quite as they knew it. Outside the Hullebergmyra nursery in Ullern, west of Oslo, William Bugge was dropping off his children Louise, three, and Jonas, five, after six weeks of quarantine.

Yellow smileys painted on the tarmac reminded everyone to keep 2 metres apart. Louise and Jonas were happy to be back, their father even more so: the family went into lockdown barely a day after the parents' wedding.

"It's been a case of adjusting, to say the least," said Bugge. "The challenge of working from home and looking after two small children has been immense. But we're still married." Several Covid-19 cases at his workplace forced them to isolate early.

Pupils at Norway's primary schools start returning from 27 April as the country, which has recorded nearly 7,500 cases and 194 deaths, reopens after a month of restrictions. Many shops have been allowed to stay open, but bars and most restaurants will remain closed and cultural and sporting events are banned until at least 15 June.

At the Hullebergmyra pre-school, Tor Garshol, a teacher, said he had stayed in touch with children and parents online during the lockdown. Online videos produced by the education ministry have taught children what to expect and how to react. "We've also provided parents with ideas for activities as well as communicating visually with the children," he said.

Lena Løvik, the headteacher, said that while the children would spend most of their time outdoors, the school's interior had been divided up into smaller areas and was subject to strict hygiene rules. "We're loaded up with disinfectants, soap and paper towels," she said.

Surfaces and toys are thoroughly cleaned twice a day, and children taught what to do in terms of personal hygiene and physical distancing. Most seem familiar with the requirements; there is even a corner to go and cough. "Our view remains: focus on the children, not the virus," Løvik said.

But as younger children in Norway this week followed some of those in neighbouring Denmark back to kindergarten, not all parents were relieved, despite the assurance of the education minister, Guri Melby, that "going to pre-school is safe".

As in Denmark, a Facebook group, "My child should not be a guinea pig for Covid-19", has been set up, and thousands have signed an online petition objecting to the reopening. A poll by the broadcaster NRK found 24% of parents did not want to send their children back to nursery and 13% were unsure.

Those who did return found much had changed: no more toys from home; specially installed handwashing facilities outside; staggered drop-off and pick-up times; no parents in the school building. Once past the gates, children must spend the day in the same small groups of three or six, depending on their age.

She said the school community had been through a process of "speed digitalisation", with online platforms allowing parents, teachers and children to stay connected and continue working. "The extraordinary circumstances have made us all more competent and actually brought us closer together in many ways," she said.

Denmark reopened schools and daycare centres last week after a month-long lockdown, but concerns that they might become breeding grounds for a second wave of cases have convinced many parents to keep their children at home.

"I won't be sending my children off no matter what," said Sandra Andersen, founder of the Danish "My kid is not going to be a Guinea Pig" Facebook group, which has more than 40,000 followers. "A lot of parents are thinking, 'Why should my little child go outside first'."

The prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, defended the reopening for younger children, undertaken on the health authority's recommendations, saying it would allow parents to return to work and "get the economy going again".

Christian Wejse, a scientist at the department of infectious diseases at Aarhus University, told Reuters he understood people's concerns

“because we’ve spent a month trying to avoid contact”. But any new infections would not cause problems in an age group “where few fall ill, and those who do won’t get very sick”, he said.

Looking at neighbouring Sweden – which has kept its primary and junior schools open – it appeared that children were not major transmitter of the virus, Wejse said.

In Denmark, as in Norway, strict rules apply in nurseries, where non-washable toys are banned and a small section assigned to each group of children. Authorities have recommended a floor area of 6sq metres per child for nurseries, 2 metres between tables, and expect staff to supervise regular handwashing and disinfect surfaces such as taps, toilet flushes, tables, and door handles twice a day.

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