

# Staffing a concern for daycares as progressive openings approach <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

The Quebec government has announced its plan for a progressive reopening of daycares. But when the children show up, will there be enough educators to look after them?

The progressive openings of daycares will begin in the regions on May 11 and – conditions permitting – will continue in the Greater Montreal territory on May 19.

According to Statistics Canada, Quebec has the highest childcare rate in Canada, with 58 per cent of parents using some form of childcare, be it home daycare, a daycare centre or private care.

The progressive opening will see the number of children limited to 30 per cent of capacity in the first week, then increase to 50 per cent on May 25. The plan, subject to change at any time, is to have daycares operating at their full capacity by June 22.

“There was a shortage of educators for five years before the pandemic,” said Samir Alahmad, who is president of the Association des garderies privées du Québec as well as a daycare director. “Now with the pandemic, educators who are pregnant or have underlying health conditions and those (age) 60-plus are staying home for valid reasons. And there is the fear. How many will stay home because they are scared? The (staffing) shortage is a nightmare for us.”

Even with enough educators to handle the slowly increasing ratios, there are other significant challenges to overcome, including disinfection protocols.

CPE Jardin d’Enfants N.D.G. is currently functioning as an emergency daycare for essential workers. On Monday, there were only two children and they weren’t being allowed to share toys or play together. Two employees had been hired to keep things clean.

The daycare’s director, Shabira Lalani, said one person keeps walls and floors clean. The other employee cleans a toy every time it has been touched and the bathroom and sink every time it is used. It’s doable when there are only two children, but what happens when even 30 per cent of the daycare’s 44 children come back to play on May 19?

Lalani said she was receiving plenty of information from the government via the Conseil québécois des services éducatifs à la petite enfance (CQSEPE) and the Association québécoise des CPE and was privy to regular briefings by Quebec’s Ministère de la famille.

“We are being well guided,” she said.

But are the guidelines feasible?

“I don’t know what it will be like when we start working with five children per educator,” Lalani said. “I’m not sure it’s possible. We will have to hire more people. But are there more people to hire?”

Alahmad said the progressive reopening plan is feasible.

“But if 100 per cent of the plan will work is another story,” he said. “We can reduce the ratios, keep children apart (during nap time) and clean the toys. But social distancing? It’s difficult to explain to 2 year olds that they have to walk down the right side of the hall or that they can’t play together.”

Alahmad pointed to other challenging government directives, including insisting the same parent pick up the child at the same time every day and to stay in the lobby until the child is brought out.

“A lot of daycares don’t have a lobby which means the parent will have to wait outside, which means an educator will have to bring each child outside,” Alahmad said. “(The plan) looks good on paper, but applying it isn’t that easy.”

A survey was sent to parents asking if they would be using daycare services when they reopened. Alahmad had not finished tallying all the replies, but said so far 50 per cent of the parents who responded would begin using daycare services on the announced dates.

Lalani was still working her way through the parent surveys so she didn't know how many children would be returning on May 19, but she is concerned about her staffing levels. Four of her nine educators are 60-plus and won't be returning for the progressive reopening.

"The rest of the educators are in their 50s," she said. "And, yes, there is fear."

Alahmad said it has yet to be confirmed whether young children are vectors of the virus but that the signs to date would indicate they aren't serious transmitters. However, it's not just preschoolers who frequent daycares.

"What are the chances of an educator infecting another educator?" Alahmad said. "Then they go back home to their families. The government promised us masks, visors and gloves. Let's hope that happens. We take a calculated risk leaving our homes in this time of COVID-19. We have to do our best to keep everybody as safe as we can."

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**Region:** Quebec <sup>[3]</sup>

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