

Experts say child care needs consideration in reopening plans ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

REGINA -- Kelly Knowles has many questions about returning to work, including where her son would go.

The Regina hairstylist contacted his daycare after the Saskatchewan government announced last week that some businesses such as salons, shut down because of COVID-19, could reopen in mid-May.

She was told there is space for her 2-1/2-year old, but the centre is only caring for kids of essential workers. And with her partner still working, there isn't anyone else at home to help, she said.

"If I did go back to work, we do need that extra care," Knowles told The Canadian Press.

"I can't open up my schedule and start accepting my guests to come in if I don't have a daycare for my son."

Questions about child care and schools are being raised as various provinces outline their plans to relax public health restrictions so that some services and businesses can reopen and residents can go back to work.

"For families with kids, they can't participate in that if they don't have child care," says Jennifer Robson, associate professor in political management at Carleton University in Ottawa.

Each province is dealing with the issue differently. In Saskatchewan, there is no timeline for expanding the current capacity in child-care facilities. Premier Scott Moe has said students are unlikely to return to classes this school year.

Manitoba plans to keep schools closed, but intends to allow day camps with a maximum of 16 kids per site.

Schools and daycares in Quebec are to reopen May 11 outside greater Montreal, but high schools are to stay closed until September. In Ontario, publicly funded schools are to stay closed until at least the end of May.

The inability to provide hard timelines is understandable, Robson says, since those decisions are driven by medical evidence.

She says households with parents who can resume work will be figuring out what makes economic sense. And without child care or schools, someone has to stay home with the kids.

"Gender roles being what they are and gender-related pay gaps being what they are, odds are good that most families are going to elect to have Mom end up staying home with the kids."

Lindsay Tedds, professor of economics at the University of Calgary, says women have already borne the brunt of the pandemic and, without child-care options, that could be exacerbated.

Citing a Statistics Canada labour force survey from March, Tedds says women were the hardest hit by job losses and a lot of the impact was felt in female-dominated sectors such as hospitality and tourism.

"Women had to leave their jobs even before the big shutdown started simply because the schools shut down."

In a statement, the president and CEO of the Business Council of Canada, acknowledges that restarting the economy will be tough for working parents if schools and daycares stay closed during the initial phases. Goldy Hyder encourages employers to be flexible.

Dan Kelly, head of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, says some employers may not be able to find workers who can pull away from their families. But he feels it's better to move ahead with an imperfect plan than to keep the economy frozen.

While some parents can work from home, those who work in bars, restaurants and sectors such as the airline industry cannot, Tedds notes.

She and Robson say household incomes will continue to take a hit if both parents can't get back to work. Gains made over the last few decades have been in large part thanks to women entering the labour force.

They also say time away from work may mean not getting promotions or building up work hours associated with career advancement. As

well, staying home means not paying into a pension plan or employment insurance, including maternity and paternity leave.

"If we're ... expected to go back to work and nobody has thought about what we do with the kids, we have a huge problem," said Tedds.

The CEO of the Canadian Women's Foundation says it's time governments examine how child-care centres are funded. Right now, without receiving fees from parents, they could close.

Paulette Senior says Ottawa has a critical role to play.

"This government is committed to gender equality and gender equality is an essential rung to the economy."

Maryam Monsef, federal minister for women and gender equality, says in a statement that the pandemic has shown long-term solutions are needed in child care -- and provinces need to collaborate.

"It is clear that the steps that all orders of government take in the next days and weeks as we contemplate slowly reopening our economy will require a vision for child care.

"We can't resume without it."

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