

# Italians prepare to return to work, if they can find child-care <sup>[1]</sup>

With businesses opening but schools and day care still closed, parents are wrestling with how or whether to return to their jobs

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## EXCERPTS

ROME—More than four million Italians are getting ready to go back to work in May after eight weeks of lockdown to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. But with schools and day-care centers remaining closed until the fall, many parents are facing a dilemma: Who will look after the children?

Morena Quarta, a saleswoman at a car dealership in the northern city of Brescia, is one of them. She is supposed to start working on Monday, while her husband, a mechanic, resumed work two weeks ago.

"It's going to be very difficult," said Ms. Quarta, wondering who would look after her 8-year-old child. For now, her husband's parents will do it, but she worries this could make them vulnerable to contracting the virus and it is only a temporary arrangement.

"Whatever solution I can think of, there are lots of problems," she said.

Beginning May 4, manufacturing and building businesses will reopen if they follow social-distancing guidelines. They will be followed by shops, museums and other public venues on May 18, and then restaurants, bars, hairdressers and other services that involve closer personal interaction on June 1.

Although children in most cases don't develop Covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, experts say they can still pass on the infection, though it isn't clear to what extent. This is why Italian authorities and many others around the world have decided to keep schools shut while they restart their economies.

Parents unable to work from home have few good options. Grandparents -- a pillar of child-care in Italy -- are supposed to stay away as they are considered vulnerable if they contract the disease. Parents could hire babysitters, but many worry about the cost and the possibility that whoever they hire might pass on the virus.

The Italian government is providing financial aid to families to pay for babysitting and more days of parental leave, but many complain isn't enough.

The problem is likely to be repeated across Europe and in the U.S., where some schools won't reopen before September but businesses are slowly opening their doors again.

In Italy, it is causing deep frustration -- so much so it is testing how far it is possible to emerge from lockdown.

"We are very worried. Parents find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place. They are already exhausted. It will be very difficult and stressful," said Antonio Affinita, general director of Moige, an aid group for the protection of parents and children.

Caterina Burgisano, a Bologna-based lawyer, said she may end up quitting her job to look after her 10-year-old and 8-year-old sons. "I fear if I go back to work, I will make just enough to pay for a nanny," she said, adding that she hasn't had any income for the past two months because of the lockdown.

Ms. Burgisano's partner is a self-employed telecom engineer who mostly works away from home and is unable to look after their children during the day.

Mr. Burgisano said she and her partner decided not to ask for their parents' help, worrying they could somehow expose them to the risk of contagion.

She is also concerned about hiring a nanny.

"That would take a big leap of faith in these conditions. How can I know she will remain healthy, what she does and who she sees when she is not here," she said.

Marie-Eve Ciparisse, a Rome-based consultant, said she and her husband decided they will look for a nanny for their 14-month-old son, even if they will be able to work from home for the near future.

"Looking after a baby requires a lot of time and energy. Working at the same time is hard, a baby throws himself on you, grabs the phone or the PC," said Ms. Ciparisse.

She is trying to hire one nanny who would look after her son and the twins of a friend of hers, who are the same age as her son. This would allow both families to save some money until nurseries reopen, but the search hasn't been easy.

"Nannies are the most sought-after commodity these days," Ms. Ciparisse said. There is a shortage of those who are suitably qualified and experienced. At the same time, many families prefer to avoid hiring nannies above a certain age, fearing they are more vulnerable to the virus, narrowing the number of potential candidates.

Psychologists and parents said that the first phase in which families were suddenly locked down at home was perceived by children as a sort of a holiday. Children and parents were largely happy to spend more time with each other.

But after that initial period, many parents struggled to homeschool and play with their children while also working from home.

"Having all these roles has been very difficult for many parents," said psychotherapist Rossella de Bello. "For some who will now go back to work regularly, it will be on the one hand a relief, but on the other a source of anxiety as they have to solve the problem of who will look after their children."

Paola Bragagnolo, a consultant living in the northeastern city of Padua, said her 5-year-old daughter initially didn't understand why her parents were at home but unable to play with her all the time.

Ms. Bragagnolo, who is married to a university teacher who, like her, has been working from home, says it is unclear when she will be able to get back to work at her office. For now, both she and her husband will go on working from home, juggling conference calls, online teaching classes and attending to the needs of their daughter.

"We have jumped through hoops to get organized every day to work from home and look after her," Ms. Bragagnolo said.

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