

Child-care centres, parents trying to navigate unknown future as COVID-19 restrictions ease ^[1]

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Author:

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EXCERPTS

All licensed and unlicensed child-care centres on P.E.I. are set to open on May 22 as part of the second phase of the provincial government's COVID-19 ease-back plan.

Questions still remain for operators and parents about who will be able to secure a spot at a centre and what the new normal will look like.

Rainbow Beginnings Early Learning Centre in St. Teresa, P.E.I., is one of a limited number of child-care centres currently open in the province for children of essential workers.

Co-owner Jamie-Lynn Mosher said since the announcement was made on Tuesday, parents have been reaching out to find out how to get their children a spot.

"I did get a few phone calls, people saying 'How will this work? How do we get in? If I get called back to work, can I just come on the 22nd? How does that look for you?'" Mosher said.

In the end, she found it easier to host a live video chat with the families to answer what questions she could. But, she said there are still lots of questions she couldn't answer.

"It's not going to be business as usual. I don't know how we're going to decide who comes and who doesn't come."

Enhanced cleaning, distancing protocols

Mosher said staff at her child-care centre are following strict public health protocols at the moment.

Currently, there can be no more than 20 people in a centre at a time and no more than five per room — that includes both staff and children.

Everyone is also expected to stay six feet apart.

There are staggered times for drop-offs, parents are not allowed inside and children must complete a health screening, including temperature checks, at the door before entering the building.

"It's not a big 'Hey! You're here!' Big hug and we're so happy you're back," Mosher said. "It's 'Let me take your temperature. Do you show any of these signs or symptoms?' And then we can start our day."

Details to come

P.E.I.'s Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Heather Morrison said similar rules will remain in place as more child-care centres reopen.

She also said there will be limits on capacity in each centre.

During Wednesday's health briefing, Premier Dennis King said the province is exploring all options, even the possibility of using empty school spaces to help alleviate capacity issues at centres.

Another question operators are waiting to have answered is who will decide which children are accepted to the limited spaces.

"Are we still talking about essential workers only? And what does that look like? Is that definition changing as businesses are opening up?" said Sonya Hooper, executive director of the Early Childhood Development Association of P.E.I.

"Most employers are going to think their employees are pretty essential as their businesses are reopening."

Island child-care centres were originally closed on March 17 as public health restrictions were being put in place for the province.

Hooper said another pressing question on the minds of centre operators is funding.

"The lower numbers of children makes it really difficult for centres to be operational without those additional dollars coming in," Hooper said.

Hooper said there will also be the issue of what to do with school-aged kids with working parents.

King confirmed during the briefing that children won't be returning to schools before September.

Provincial officials said they are still working on the details and expect more announcements soon.

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