

Some daycare operators, parents worried about plan to reopen amid COVID-19 pandemic ^[1]

Allowing groups of up to 15 children without physical distancing raises fear of spread

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Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 13 May 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

No play dough. No puzzles. No dress-up clothes. No stuffed animals. Nothing that can't be sanitized after each individual use.

This is the new reality children will face when some New Brunswick daycares reopen their doors May 19 as part of Phase 2 of the province's COVID-19 recovery plan.

Jennifer Burns, the owner-operator of Jenny Bear Daycare in Moncton, says hers won't be among them.

She says when she agreed a few weeks ago to reopen, she had no idea what the government's plan would entail. And now that she knows the details announced last Friday, she contends they "don't make sense."

"I understand that in order to have some sort of peace of mind for parents ... there needs to be some restrictions put into place. However, the restrictions are contradictory at every turn," said Burns.

She notes, for example, that groups of up to 15 children will be allowed without any requirement that they keep at least six feet apart from one another.

"If those kids are in the same room together and somebody is COVID-positive or becomes positive in that environment, that is spreading through the group. No matter what you take away from the children, it will spread.

"So why are we restricting kids? Why are we putting the mental strain on our children [and] on our educators to take these measures?"

Burns plans to delay reopening until June 1, hoping the conditions will be more relaxed by then.

Screening, enhanced cleaning

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development spokesperson Danielle Elliott says the measures are as advised by Public Health.

"We know having access to safe childcare is crucial as parents begin going back to work and we are committed to working with operators to help them implement the required safety measures," she said in an emailed statement.

Although no physical distancing will be required among groups of up to 15 children, staff should encourage children not to touch other children and to practise good personal hygiene, the COVID-19 Recovery Phase: Guidance to Early Learning and Childcare Facilities and Day Camps states.

And while up to two groups will be allowed per room, a six-foot separation must be maintained between each group.

Everyone entering the daycares must be pre-screened by having their temperature taken. That includes staff, children, parents and visitors deemed essential. Non-essential visitors will not be allowed.

Enhanced cleaning will also be required. High-touch surfaces, such as toys, door knobs and handrails should be cleaned at least twice daily and when soiled.

Children must be monitored to ensure they're washing their hands correctly. They should have increased access to handwashing stations as well as hand sanitizer and signs should be posted, according to the document.

Activities and meal breaks may have to be staggered to meet the physical distancing requirement, it advises.

Children should nap head to toe, if possible. Mattresses and bedding must not be shared, and must be laundered at least weekly, or more often if soiled.

No field trips are allowed.

"Holiday events, festivals and other activities such as birthdays that bring together parents and groups are not permitted" either.

Brittany Levionnois, 33, a single mom in Shediac, says she read the government's 16-page daycare document online and is left with more questions than answers.

With physical contact in the province still limited to two-household bubbles, she finds the idea of sending her four-year-old son Theo back to a daycare with up to 14 other children "highly concerning.

"Those children ... what is their household size? Are their parents essential workers? Are their grandparents that they may be associating with, are they high risk? We don't know any of those little tiny variables that could really be a deal-breaker," said Levionnois, who suffers from rheumatoid arthritis.

If she gets sick, she worries about who will take care of Theo.

Are we going to sit back and use our children as potential test subjects on whether or not we should re-emerge into the economy right now?

- Brittany Levionnois, mother

And while she has been able to work from home, if Theo contracts COVID-19 and she has to stay home to care for him for two weeks or more, she will have to use her personal leave.

She said she understands the government wants children back in daycares to get people back to work to stimulate the economy, but she thinks it's too soon.

"Why can it not wait till July or August and we know for a fact that that community transmission isn't an issue? Because we really do not know."

"And the question that arises from this is, are we going to sit back and use our children as potential test subjects on whether or not we should re-emerge into the economy right now?"

Levionnois said it's frustrating to see the government "do so many things right, but to just jump into this due to stimulating the economy.

"I'm pretty sure that in our creative society where we've all said and been told that we can't do certain tasks from home and we've made that possible, that we can also figure out another solution to childcare than shoving 15 children in a room."

Already proven effective

But Shilo Boucher, the president and CEO of the YMCA of Greater Saint John, said daycares for essential workers have been successfully operating under similar circumstances for more than six weeks.

"There hasn't been cases identified in these child-care centres as far as we know and that's been reported to us because that was one of our concerns is — has it worked and are we certain that it will continue to work? And so I think that gives us a lot of hope and a lot of reassurance," she said.

The YMCA's daycare, which normally has about 360 children aged one to five, and about 60 staff, will reopen May 19, said Boucher. But she doesn't know how many children will be returning yet.

Staff are eager to welcome the children and families back, she said.

"I think you have to take one stand or the other — you're either going to be very nervous about it or you're going to have to embrace our new normal, which, this is the way we'll probably have to operate for the next 12 to 18 months," said Boucher.

"I feel like our our team is ready. I hope I'm not going to be proven wrong, but we do have to get back to some sort of new normal."

Operational plans required

Early learning and child-care facilities must each develop their own COVID-19 operational plan, outlining how they will implement group restrictions within their facility while still maintaining staff-child ratios and disease-prevention controls, such as personal hygiene, disinfection, and the management of illness.

The plans must be available for review during either an unannounced or a pre-scheduled visit by a Public Health inspector.

The guidelines call for strict exclusion of children or staff with two or more of the following symptoms: fever or signs of fever, new cough or worsening chronic cough, runny nose, headache, sore throat, new onset of fatigue, new onset of muscle pain, diarrhea or loss of taste or smell, or a child displaying purple fingers or toes, even as the only symptom.

Children or staff who have been identified as having seasonal allergies or who suffer from chronic runny nose/nasal congestion will not be excluded.

Those who are sick must stay home, contact 811, and cannot return until fully recovered. If tested, Public Health will inform the individual or parent (when a child is involved) when isolation may be lifted.

If a daycare has one confirmed case of COVID-19 or two or more suspected cases, Public Health is to be notified and an outbreak will be declared.

The facility cannot reopen until advised by Public Health.

Babysitting a 'viable option'

Adults in contact with children attending a child-care facility need to be "hypervigilant" about monitoring for symptoms and get tested if they develop two or more symptoms.

If children attending a child-care facility have a vulnerable adult at home, the parent will want to consider the risk of the child bringing COVID-19 home, the government advises.

For adults bringing their child to a child-care facility, those adults in the child's "bubble" should minimize their non-essential movement outside the home.

"This approach was based on that fact that to return to work, many families require child care," the COVID-19 Recovery Phase: Guidance to Early Learning and Childcare Facilities and Day Camps states. "By allowing these facilities to operate at their full capacity no family will be at a disadvantage."

The government encourages parents to consider babysitting as a viable option, where the babysitter would come to their home to look after their child or children. Ideally, the same babysitter would be used every time.

Region: New Brunswick ^[3]

Tags: health and safety ^[4]

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