

What will Ontario daycares look like when they reopen? ^[1]

Author: Armstrong, Laura

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EXCERPTS

There will be emotional as well as physical changes to manage when daycare centres are once again able to welcome children in stage 2 of Ontario's plan to restart the economy, and initial gaps could leave some Ontario households with no options for child care.

Education Minister Stephen Lecce announced last week that daycares will remain closed for the time being, except for emergency centres serving the children of front-line workers. But as the economy reopens — with phase 1 of Ontario's plan now underway — parents, especially those facing a return to work, are wondering what daycare will look like in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

How will physical distancing be enforced? Will temporary staff be able to enter the centres? What is the policy if a child or staff member tests positive for the coronavirus? Will a child lose their spot if their parents decide not to send them back right away? Those are just some of the questions parents posed to the Star about their children's care.

"Child care is going to look different when it reopens and it's going to take time to gradually return to full capacity, so we're just going to have to be flexible working with families and really flexible working with operators," said Shanley McNamee, general manager of children's services for the city of Toronto.

The framework for reopening 1,000 child-care centres in Toronto — with 80,000 spots among them — is expected to come down from the province. That will be translated by the local public health unit and regional funders into guidelines for each centre.

The city of Toronto is currently operating seven emergency child-care centres, mostly for children of front-line workers. The city has worked closely with the province and Toronto Public Health on developing enhanced infection protocols and policies for those centres, and will do the same for the centres reopening in future. Safety measures include screening children and staff, enhancing cleaning protocols, and reduced group sizes — in emergency care centres, groups have dropped from 16 children to five children.

Staff in emergency child-care centre were assigned to a single location. While that was easier to do with only seven locations and a large workforce, McNamee expects the practice to continue, at least initially, when other centres reopen. At city-run centres, staff wear personal protective equipment when they can't physically distance, for instance when doing screenings, escorting children to their rooms or feeding or changing younger children. All emergency child-care staff members have been tested for COVID-19. Premier Doug Ford last week discussed the possibility of testing teachers and daycare staff as part of the province's forthcoming testing plan.

New training for staff was also implemented and "regularly reinforced," said McNamee, in an environment where children may not always understand the parameters of physical distancing or want to wear face coverings.

"The rooms have been kind of reimagined to lay out areas with tape and even the tables that they sit at, so they're not sitting side by side," she said. "You can do that when you only have five kids in a room where you'd normally have 16.

"You can never completely socially distance when you're working with children," McNamee acknowledged, "but if you see what the rooms look like, they do look very different."

At the YMCA's emergency child-care centre, dress-up clothes and puppets have been put away, along with any materials that aren't easy to clean. There are now four chairs to a table where there used to be six. Each child gets their own craft kit or ingredients for snacks instead of sharing materials. But the 300 centres in the Greater Toronto Area — including more than 70 in the city of Toronto — won't look all that different when they reopen than they did before the pandemic, said Kerri Lewis, the general manager of child and family development for the YMCA of Greater Toronto. That's thanks to robust sanitary and health-care procedures required for licenced child-care centres in the province prior to the pandemic, Lewis said.

"It's a whole range of suppression standards for controlling infectious disease from spreading," she said. "It's not just masks, it's not just physical distancing ... it's adjusting programming, keeping in small groups, spreading out personal belongings, cleaning more frequently."

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