

Childcare, second wave of pandemic key concerns among moms returning to work after maternity leave ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Whether returning to a workplace transformed by the novel coronavirus pandemic, working from home for the first time or being unable to resume work at all, it's a tumultuous time for mothers coming off of maternity leave.

Ontario began relaxing some restrictions on businesses last week, allowing retailers, some sports centres, vehicle dealerships and other businesses to resume operations providing they comply with public health guidelines like physical distancing.

Global News heard from several mothers in the London, Ont., region who all echoed similar concerns: the struggle to find childcare options and the fear of a second wave of the virus.

Returning to the workplace

Lisa Burke is still on her maternity leave, but it's set to end on June 21. The mother of two boys — Marshall, who will turn five at the end of the month, and Hutton, who celebrates his first birthday in July — works in a long-term care facility in London and her husband is also an essential worker. Burke says her daycare provider is expected to resume operations next month.

"My daycare provider has been following all ministry and public health recommendations and has a very strict protocol in place for when (it) does open, which gives me peace of mind in that aspect. Had my provider not been able to open, I then would have had to apply for the CERB and stay off work until they were allowed to open up," she told Global News.

"My workplace has been very understanding with everything going on and understood if I had to take more time off."

Burke says she's especially concerned about returning to work in long-term care, a sector that has been particularly hard-hit by the virus, because both of her children have asthma.

"My oldest has viral asthma, which means if he gets any upper respiratory virus it goes straight to his lungs and triggers his asthma and makes it harder for him to fight off and sometimes lands us in hospital stays," she explained.

"I am worried about an outbreak occurring and I then would have to leave my job — unpaid — because we don't have much sick time and to qualify for the CERB you have to be off for a minimum of 14 days to protect my family as my boys are both compromised. I am worried about not having enough (personal protective equipment, or PPE) to protect myself, my co-workers and my residents."

Still, she says her employer had put protocols in place even "before it was mandatory to do so" but she's worried that "more and more people are starting to think it's OK" to flout physical distancing guidelines which are in place to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus in an effort to lessen the strain on the health-care system.

"It's already heartbreaking watching my oldest not understand why he can't go to school or see his new friends (it was his first year of school) and why he can't have a birthday party. My baby likely won't get a first birthday party either. I know it's the least of our worries but it still pulls at your heart," she said.

"Then, seeing people not seeming to care because the weather is nicer — it's all very scary. The unknown and the potential of what could happen is all very scary. I have learned to take one day at a time, but some days are a lot harder than others."

Working from home

Michele Vanderspank works at Western University in the department of family medicine. Her maternity leave ended April 6 and she has been working from home since then. Her baby, MicKinley, was started in home daycare on Mon., May 25.

"She was supposed to start on April 13, but our home daycare provider was closed until last week. I am very lucky that I have been able to work from home and take care of McKinley. However, it was just getting too hard to try and do both and I felt comfortable sending her to our daycare provider now. I am expected to work full time and it is a challenge doing that while taking care of a one-year-old," Vanderspank explained.

"I think I have been quite lucky. My boss was very understanding that I had a small child at home and I was able to work when I could and flex my hours around her schedule. We have been expected to complete a weekly log of our tasks and obviously, ensure our job is being completed."

Now that McKinley is in daycare, Vanderspank has been able to focus on her job during the day.

"My job is still very busy. It has been different working from home, but I don't mind it," she said.

"My job is to schedule medical students to do Family Medicine placements. All placements were put on hold until July, so I have been busy with rescheduling those placements. I do worry that finding placements will be more challenging in the face of COVID-19."

While Vanderspank says her employer has been taking steps to keep staff safe, her main concern is about the possibility of a second wave of the virus.

"I'm concerned about a second wave, and what that will mean for my job, my daughter's daycare, etc.," she said.

Unable to work due to lack of childcare

While some businesses have reopened their doors for customers, some staff are struggling to find childcare providers to allow them to return to the office. Among them is Amanda Boyer, who works in the food service industry. She applied for CERB after her maternity leave ended April 20.

"Work has been accommodating and understanding why I can't return and has offered to make a schedule accordingly to our family needs when daycare is open," she said.

"It's difficult — I want to go to work to make sure my son can get what he needs (the usual toys or clothes, diapers and wipes) but at the same time I'm afraid I will get the virus and possibly have no symptoms and bring it to my family and my son. It's a question you have to ask: are you willing to risk you and your family's health to go to work?"

Boyer says she's concerned about whether or not her daycare will be open before her CERB runs out.

"As CERB is only for 16 weeks, if I decide to stay home and my daycare isn't open past the 16 weeks, how can I support my family after that?" she asked.

"Also what if we get a second or third wave in the fall, how can I keep my family safe if I'm back to work and my son is back in daycare? Would I have the option to be off work and would I be compensated for it?"

Unable to return to work due to closures

Dentist offices are open in Ontario but only for emergency, and as of May 22, essential care. The Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario (RCDSO) said Friday that the profession is currently in Stage 2 of its three-phase reopening plan. Dentists had previously only been allowed to practice emergency or urgent care on patients in-person, but can now offer other essential services with enhanced precautions.

Bethany Weedmark's maternity leave ended April 20, but as a registered dental hygienist, she has yet to return to work. She lives with her husband James and daughter Adeline in Thorndale.

"My biggest concern about my return to work is as the highest risk for proximity and aerosol-generating procedures, I know that my day-to-day schedule is going to be vastly different, there has been some guidelines released by the RCDSO and (College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario) regarding PPE and it appears as though I'll be wearing an N95 the majority of the time if I wish to continue working as I did before, with ultrasonic scalers and polishing," she explained.

She added that her employer "is taking all necessary precautions according to scientifically-backed research, and is doing an excellent job keeping those of us not in office in the loop."

"Given that my place of work cannot simply open because the government has given a green light, but that our governing colleges also have to provide us with standards of practice, we are held to a different standard than perhaps a typical office," she said.

"My main concern, like many others, (is) that the inevitable second wave will come, and I will still not be able to return to work, and my CERB eligibility will run out. My husband has since returned to work so I have some concerns about his transmission of the virus, but his employer is also taking appropriate precautions."

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