

P.E.I. child-care centres confident upon reopening^[1]

'Change isn't as scary for them as it is for us sometimes'

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EXCERPTS

The operators of two Island daycares say they're confident with the protocols put in place as more children return to their centres after more than two months.

Island child-care centres shut down on March 17 due to COVID-19. As part of Phase 2 of the province's ease-back plan, all unlicensed and licensed child-care centres could reopen May 22.

"We kind of had butterflies. We're all pretty excited to be back," said Sandra Mills, owner and operator of First Friends in Charlottetown.

"We were in last week and we got everything all cleaned up and prepared, and we have some rooms even barricaded off and toys that are barricaded off and some of the play units as well. So we felt very prepared."

The condition upon reopening is that centres have to operate under the guidelines set by the Chief Public Health Office, which include sanitization measures, physical distancing for the staff and children and no more than 20 children per centre.

"We were only letting in one family at a time. We had to go through a questionnaire with each family. The parents didn't leave the front porch, they just dropped the children off to us," Mills said.

"We have a couple of staff that are runners basically and they take the children to wash their hands immediately, all their belongings all go into the same room that they're going to be spending their day in."

Reduced spots

First Friends typically has 50 children. Monday it had 14.

"We're hoping that will increase within the next few weeks, but every day is a different story," she said.

When they got the green light to reopen, Mills emailed all the families and did a questionnaire online to choose the children she felt needed child care most. For her, that meant children with parents who are essential workers and need to leave their home to physically do their jobs.

"Not being able to take on the families, like the ones that really wanted in, or it might not have been a working issue, it might have been, you know, things are really hard at home or a single parent or whatever ... those things were difficult for me to say they needed to wait," she said.

For Mills, the remaining question is still when things will return to a normal state.

"It might never be really normal, but there's a lot of people out there that want child care or that need child care," she said. "We've just got to figure out a way to be able to accommodate that."

133 new centres open

With the reopening of all licensed facilities, P.E.I.'s open centres jump to 155 from the 22 that were open for emergency child care throughout the pandemic.

Children are built to play with each other and to learn with each other.— Jamie-Lynn Mosher, Rainbow Beginnings

Jamie-Lynn Mosher, director of Rainbow Beginnings Early Learning Centre in St. Teresa, P.E.I., was one of those 22 centres. She said Phase 2 didn't change their operations too much since they were already open.

"The only difference is we had some children enrolled that didn't normally attend here and they went back to their pre-COVID plan

because their centres opened so then we had two more available spaces for children."

For Mosher, the greatest challenge has been explaining physical distancing to the kids themselves.

"It's kind of heartbreaking to see them just kind of individually playing, not being able to go join their friend in an activity," she said.

"Children are built to play with each other and to learn with each other."

Both Mills and Mosher said they're impressed with how the children have adjusted.

Change isn't as scary for them as it is for us sometimes— Jamie-Lynn Mosher, Rainbow Beginnings

"We do have to get close to these children, they are going to fall. They are going to need a hug. We need to do diaper changing. We need to help them get cleaned up after an art activity. So you know, we do have to do those things — it's no different than being a nurse," said Mills.

"Listening to the way they're talking to us and the way that you could tell that they want to hug, and they want to sit on your knee, but they're kind of working their way around it ... kids are amazing."

"That's the joy of small children as most of them can adapt," said Mosher.

"Change isn't as scary for them as it is for us sometimes."

Under Phase 3, which is scheduled to begin June 1, 15 people can gather indoors. The province has not made it clear whether that means daycares can offer up more spots.

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