

Montreal daycares are open again, but educators are worried about how the kids will respond ^[1]

With physical distancing hard to enforce, daycares look at other ways of curbing the spread of COVID-19

Author: Mignacca, Franca

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EXCERPTS

As daycares in the Greater Montreal area get ready to reopen Monday, educators are concerned that children will have difficulty adapting to their new surroundings.

Before the pandemic, Garderie les Petits Anges de Wesley, a non-profit daycare in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, had space for 69 children. When it reopens on Monday, however, there will only be 10 returning.

Under provincial public health guidelines, daycares are allowed to accept up to 50 per cent of their original capacity.

But many parents in Montreal don't yet feel ready to send their children back, according to Liane Tusa, executive director of the Garderie les Petits Anges.

"We're all nervous and scared," Tusa said in an interview Sunday morning. "We're doing everything in our power to open up slowly, safely, gradually and with the help of our parents."

At Tusa's daycare, and others around the city, all daycare staff will be decked out in full personal protective equipment (PPE).

The daycares have been divided into separate play areas for children. Signs indicate where they are allowed to sit on the floor. Parents will no longer be allowed past the foyer.

Because fewer children are returning, Garderie les Petits Anges will have one educator for every child in the daycare: one educator to take care of day-to-day functions while the other ensures everything is sanitized at all times.

No more sharing, and other new rules

Tusa acknowledged that enforcing physical distancing regulations will be next to impossible with children, some of whom are as young as 18 months old.

But it isn't just the potential threat of catching the virus that has Tusa and her staff concerned. It's also the fact that the children have been at home with their parents for more than two months and may have issues readapting to a daycare setting.

"I'm expecting them to be quite attached to their parents. We'll be going back to square one with that," Tusa said.

Many of the behaviours that children were previously taught — sharing, for instance — will now be forbidden.

"Essentially, everything we taught them in the past has to be undone, restructured, re-framed," Tusa said.

"We've talked about it a lot but we still have to put it all into practice. There's some apprehension about that."

Tusa and her staff are also concerned about the challenges educators might face communicating with the children while they have their masks and protective equipment on.

The daycare has suggested that educators film themselves, without PPE, reading stories and putting on puppet shows, so the videos can be used in the classroom. Still, Tusa knows nothing is foolproof.

"My staff is nervous, they're prepared but they're nervous, and I am too. I don't think we can lie about that," she said.

Province could see major staff shortage

Daycares outside the Montreal area have been open at 50 per cent capacity since May 11. Their procedures provided a template for their counterparts in Montreal, said Marie-Claude Lemieux, director of public and government affairs at the Association Québécoise des Centres de la Petite Enfance (AQCPÉ).

"We're trying to learn from that experience to replicate what has been going on in the cold zones for reopening tomorrow in Greater Montreal," she said Sunday.

According to Lemieux, there have been no COVID-19 outbreaks at daycares affiliated with the AQCPE since the May 11 reopening. The association represents 75 per cent of the province's daycares.

There were a handful of cases reported at the emergency daycares that continued operating for frontline workers, but these occurred before PPE became mandatory for staff, Lemieux said.

"We hope that we'll keep the numbers of infections at a minimum," she added.

Quebec's Education Ministry said among the daycares that reopened earlier this month, there have been three cases detected at three different daycares.

The daycare association's bigger concern, Lemieux said, involves the return to full capacity. Outside Montreal, daycares will be able to resume normal operations beginning June 22.

They will be able to do so starting July 13 in the Montreal and Joliette regions.

"It worked well in the past weeks and we avoided outbreaks because we had a very low ratio," she said.

But with an increase in children, Lemieux fears the situation will become harder to control.

She is also concerned the daycares won't have enough staff to implement the new public health guidelines.

The AQCPE has estimated it could be missing anywhere between 1,300 and 3,000 staff members when daycares resume full capacity.

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