

With caution and creativity, day cares prepare to reopen ^[1]

Isolation rooms, crib dividers and designated school shoes are just a few examples of the health measures that child care centers are taking.

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EXCERPTS

When I dropped my 3-year-old daughter off at school in mid-May for the first time in more than two months, we embarked on a new routine. She climbed out of the car with a mask over her mouth, refusing to pull it over her nose, and stood in line waiting to be checked in. When it was our turn, a teacher clad in gloves and a mask asked if my daughter had experienced a fever, cough, loss of smell or other coronavirus symptoms, and then took her temperature. After I gave her a hug, she was given a healthy pump of hand sanitizer and then escorted into the building. I waved goodbye from the sidewalk as the wooden gate shut behind her.

I had been daydreaming about this moment for weeks, when the days of never-ending worksheets, puzzles and experiments with baking soda and vinegar left me drained. But as I stood on the sidewalk, staring at the school that I had walked through so many times but now wasn't permitted to enter, I couldn't help but feel a pit of anxiety rise in my stomach. Was it safe to send her back?

It's a question that many parents of young children ranging in age from months to 5 years are asking themselves, as day cares and preschools outside the public school system begin to reopen. With shelter-in-place orders beginning to lift, early childhood centers are having to figure out new and creative ways to protect children and teachers, while also working to ease parental concerns, all with little guidance.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a list of recommendations for areas such as meal time, toy use and sanitization standards. But child care specialists say those guidelines, which at times seem to contradict others set by the C.D.C., are difficult to implement because they don't take into consideration the ways in which young children best play and learn. And not all state regulators have offered guidelines on carrying out the specifics.

"It's like creating a whole new school," said Angelika Getmanchouk, the head of school at WorldSpeak School in Los Angeles. "We had to change the whole structure of the day, the activities, almost everything we do."

Those changes start before kids set foot inside. Check-in procedures include: health screens for coronavirus symptoms, temperature checks and curbside drop-offs to limit the number of adults inside, per C.D.C. recommendations.

In Nashville, Tenn., teachers at Glen Leven Presbyterian Church Day School disinfect lunchboxes on the front porch during drop-off and require children to switch into a designated pair of shoes that stay at the school, said Debbie Ferguson, the director of the school.

In St. Louis, at Webster Child Care Center, which reopened after Memorial Day, the temperature of the mail carrier is checked before being permitted to make a delivery. "That's something I never would've imagined before," the executive director, Lisa Jones, said.

To keep the same children with the same teachers in groups of 10 or less, a recommendation by many states, some day cares are limiting the number of kids in attendance and shortening their hours. In some cases, administrative staff has stepped in to cover teacher breaks. "The concept of a floater has been eliminated," said Stephen Kramer, the chief executive officer of Bright Horizons, the Boston-based child care company that has kept 150 of its centers across the country open throughout the pandemic.

Teachers are also setting up classrooms differently, removing soft toys and dress-up clothes that would need laundering and divvying up supplies for children so they can have individual boxes of crayons, markers, tape, scissors and Play-Doh. At some centers and schools, isolation rooms have been set aside for a child to stay in and await pickup if he or she gets sick.

Lunch and snacks that were served family style before are now individually portioned out into foam containers or plastic cups. Some schools have even eliminated lunchboxes, finding it too difficult to disinfect the nooks and crannies, and asked parents to send food in brown paper bags.

"It seems ridiculous it's come down to what kind of lunchbox you can bring to school," said Carla Moody, the director of St. Mark Lutheran Preschool in Charlottesville, Va., who is allowing children to bring food in a self-contained bento box or disposable bag once she reopens June 8. "But that's what it takes right now."

In Sioux Falls, S.D. at Baan Dek Montessori, which is 10 miles from the Smithfield pork factory that was a national coronavirus hotspot in

mid-April, the school's well-known practice of using glass drinking cups has been paused because of contamination concerns and replaced with disposable paper cups, said the head of school, Charlotte Snyder.

In Reno, Nev., the family day care A Place of Our Own has kept dollhouse figures in the facility but eliminated their clothing, letting children dress them in tissue and paper towels instead. This month, Dunwoody Prep, a child-care center in a northern suburb of Atlanta, put up privacy dividers around cribs and cots that are alternated head-to-toe because there wasn't enough space to place them six feet apart, the director, Edye Disner, said.

On my daughter's first day back, instead of finding little plastic chairs encircling the communal table where students gathered each morning, she was introduced to her own space, a little white desk with specific toys and puzzles only available to her. Her schedule was switched so she could play and learn in a socially distant circle outside for two hours each morning, instead of one, to limit the amount of time indoors.

Because being outdoors is considered lower risk for contracting coronavirus, the logistics of outdoor play have become high priorities. The Virginia Department of Social Services recommended that only one group use the playground at a time, so St. Mark Lutheran Preschool in Charlottesville divided its playground into sections, with temporary fencing to allow different classes to play at the same time.

"If today you play on the swings, tomorrow you get the sand," Moody said.

The C.D.C. recommends that "playground structures" routinely be cleaned and disinfected. But the agency later advises, in other guidelines, that "playgrounds in schools and parks generally require normal routine cleaning, but do not require disinfection."

Moody decided to take extra precaution: she purchased a portable sprayer to wash slides and swings with sanitizing agents.

For Tim Kaminski, the co-owner and director at Gingerbread Kids Academy in Fort Bend County, Texas, about 45 minutes from Houston, procuring supplies has been one of his biggest challenges. "Sam's Club and Walmart have nothing in stock, and when I reached out to the county they told me all materials are being directed to hospitals," Kaminski said. He's had to beg and borrow, he added.

As a provider of employer-sponsored child care, Bright Horizons was able to procure 400 touchless thermometers for its centers from CVS Health, one of its clients. Some day cares in Wisconsin are sourcing hand sanitizer from State Line Distillery in Madison, which is now making cleanser instead of spirits. In Nashville, Glen Leven is sending a staffer to the grocery store nearly every day for milk because "you can't just show up and get 14 gallons of milk in one day now," said Ferguson, the school's director.

Of all the new procedures and precautions, the decision for children to wear masks has been one of the most debated.

Susan Acker, the director of MindBloom Preschool in D.C., requires them for adults but not kids. "To get a 3-year-old to keep a mask on all day? It's like trying to get them to not yank out a barrette from their hair," she said, adding that kids would probably touch their faces more with a mask because of constant adjusting. Other providers said that if the C.D.C. recommends it, they will require it. The C.D.C. is recommending cloth face coverings for children over age 2.

Centers are also finding creative workarounds to make up for facial expressions that are now hidden with masks. Some have teachers in infant classrooms, where babies rely on seeing facial expressions for cues, wearing masks that have a clear plastic window over the mouth. Others have moved story time outdoors so that teachers' frowns, smiles and surprised looks can still be seen while teachers without face coverings read books.

Part of what has made implementing new routines so difficult is that such changes fly in the face of best practices for early childhood learning. The founder of my daughter's preschool told us the children seemed very "Zen" in the new format; there wasn't the usual fighting over a crayon or toy. But is this really a positive?

"In many instances what's good from a public health perspective is contradictory to what's good for the social and emotional development of children," said Rhian Allvin, chief executive officer of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. "When you think about a typical early childhood classroom, kids in a dress-up center or in a kitchen center are playing together and problem-solving. That's extraordinarily difficult if not impossible to do while adhering to social distancing."

In some ways, the new preschool routines have brought about unexpected, but welcome changes. Each afternoon, as my daughter naps, her teachers hop on a Zoom call to give us updates on what she did that morning. I used to hear bits of this in person when I'd pick her up each day, but I was often harried to get home and didn't pay close attention.

I have begun to feel more comfortable about the decision to send my daughter back to school. Recently, I saw a video of her blonde curls bouncing up and down as she danced outside to a Spanish version of "Baby Shark." And I knew it was a good choice for us when my husband asked her one of our favorite pre-coronavirus dinnertime questions, "Who got in trouble at school today?", and she giggled.

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