

What will reopened childcare centres look like to staff and to children?^[1]

In Denmark, adapted childcare rules show Covid-19 risks continue to be taken seriously

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EXCERPTS

When Brendan Sweeney returned with his four-year-daughter Theresa to her daycare centre in Copenhagen in mid-April, after just one month of closure due to Covid-19, the “new normal” was apparent even before they went in.

Two corridors with markings indicating where to stand had been created, one going in and another through which to leave the large Studsgaarden Integrated Institution in Osterbro, northeast of the Danish capital’s city centre.

“Before you even go into the building, they have set up portable wash-hand basins with running water and soap and paper towels,” says Brendan, a long-time resident of the city, but originally from Ballyjamesduff in Co Cavan. “All the children and adults going in have to wash their hands – and there are also instructions on how to wash your hands.”

He must not go into his daughter’s room, “The Butterflies”, at drop-off or pick-up. However, although the children are assigned to rooms, they now spend most of their time outside.

Usually, the children keep rain wear and spare clothes at the centre, but now parents must bring them in and out daily, to ensure corridors are clutter-free and can be cleaned properly.

Another change was that they stopped providing breakfast and a hot lunch, so children had to bring in their own, but these meals were reinstated last week.

“It wasn’t because of the risk of contamination, so they said, it was to release people to do cleaning,” says Brendan. Their monthly fee of €330 for full-time daycare was temporarily reduced as a result.

She can now run about more and play with her best friends

When they returned after the closure, the playground had been cordoned off into little boxes, or “pods”, within which the children had to stay, playing with the same two other children all the time. But from May 18th those boxes were greatly enlarged and Theresa can play with all the children from her room. “She can now run about more and play with her best friends,” says Brendan, adding that there are 22 children and three full-time staff in her room.

The daycare centre can take up to 168 children but initially it reopened at only 25 per cent capacity. Brendan and his wife, Lisbeth, have to apply each week for Theresa to attend the following week.

Lisbeth is an essential worker, being a nurse manager at a care home, while Brendan is currently working from home as a lecturer at the Danish Institute for Studies Abroad. So far, the daycare centre has been able to accommodate their requests and, one month on, the centre is back to near full capacity, although the school-age children have left and the new intake of those aged six months to one year hasn’t started.

Theresa is going in five times a week, from about 8.30am to 3pm, compared with longer days of up to 7am to 4pm before. But Brendan knows one parent, with a boy the same age as his daughter, who had her son’s attendance at another centre reduced to two days a week.

In Ireland, we frequently look to Scandinavian countries for a lead in best practice for our childcare system. In planning for creches to re-open when Covid-19 hasn’t gone away, it’s no different.

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