

Physicians demand Legault ease restriction rules for children ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTED

More than 1,000 Quebec physicians have signed a petition demanding Quebec Premier François Legault relax some of the more “preposterous” rules for COVID-19 prevention for children at schools, daycares and day camps, as they may do more harm than good.

Thirteen physicians from across the province specializing in children’s health posted an open letter to the premier online on Saturday, and within 24 hours it garnered support from about 1,000 other physicians and 1,500 other professionals in healthcare, as well as teachers, daycare educators, and others who work with children and teens.

The letter notes that many recent studies have demonstrated that children are unlikely to catch the virus or to suffer serious health effects if they do, and transmission of the virus from children to adults is rare. The physicians argue these findings demand an urgent reassessment of the extreme precautions that have been put in place for children at schools outside Montreal and as day camps and daycares are set to reopen in this region.

“The healthy development of children involves fostering relationships, playing with other children, bonding with educators, etc. We are very concerned these measures will have a negative impact on the physical and mental health of children and adolescents,” Dr. Suzanne Vaillancourt, associate director of pediatric emergency medicine at the Montreal Children’s Hospital, and one of the lead authors of the open letter, told the Montreal Gazette on Sunday.

The physicians acknowledge it was necessary to close schools and daycares and shut down sports activities at the beginning of the pandemic, but given more recent scientific findings, they say some of the more extreme measures should now be reassessed.

“The preventive measures that the Ministère de la Famille and the Ministère de l’Éducation are requiring to be implemented seem preposterous to many experts, as well as parents, childcare providers, teachers and administrators,” the letter says.

While the letter acknowledges there have been cases of COVID-19 among children in a daycare setting and in some schools outside Montreal since they reopened, they argue these outbreaks have been minor and manageable.

Among the measures the doctors consider unnecessary and harmful:

- Schools drawing squares on asphalt in the school yards, where young children are expected to remain, alone, during recess
- Daycare providers spending time policing a two-metre separation between toddlers, while cloaked in a mask and visor
- Day camp counsellors being instructed not to help children apply sunscreen or fill their water bottles, even during heatwaves
- Daycares banning books, puzzles, crayons, dolls and balls over concerns these items cannot be easily disinfected

The physicians are demanding that:

- the two-metre distancing rule not apply to children under 12 years old,
- children under 12 not be required to wear face coverings,
- adults caring for or teaching children wear transparent masks and protective eyewear, rather than visors, so that children can see them smile and see their lips when they talk,
- all individual and group sports activities for children and adolescents resume as soon as possible, and
- the use and sharing of educational materials and toys be permitted without the need for disinfection between each use.

Vaillancourt said she has seen an increase in the number of children and adolescents with depression and anxiety coming into her emergency ward since the isolation measures began, and that colleagues in psychiatry are confirming these issues. Many children do not have access to computers, so they have been completely cut off from their peers, she said. Sports activities are central to the mental and physical health of many children, and so day camps that promise kids will be kept two metres away from other children are simply not feasible or desirable, she said.

“We need to remember that the risk will never be zero,” Vaillancourt said. “Our goal should be to ensure that the benefits of these

prevention measures outweigh the harms.”

She said it is easy for public health authorities to show graphs of COVID cases, but it is much harder to graph the short- and long-term negative effects on the physical, mental and emotional development of children of some of these prevention measures.

Region: Quebec ^[4]

Tags: health and safety ^[5]

policy ^[6]

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