

As daycares reopen, parents are facing impossible decisions to keep kids safe from COVID-19^[1]

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Source: The National Post

Format: Article

Publication Date: 13 Jun 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online^[2]

EXCERPTS

It's been three months of toddlers stumbling into video meetings, infants mashing the delete key on important documents, and pre-schoolers sitting with glazed eyes in front of episode after episode of Paw Patrol.

Parents are drained and the kids are either bursting with manic energy or collapsing in emotional heaps, or both simultaneously.

And now, with daycares reopening in many provinces, parents are asking themselves a question that seems almost absurd: Is all this adversity worse than shipping the kids off to daycare while the COVID-19 pandemic stalks the globe?

"My mind is all over the map. One minute I'm like, yes, I absolutely need this. I need the time to work and focus. I'm just way too drained. And then the next minute, all these emotions start flooding in and I think, oh my gosh, we haven't even opened our bubble up to grandparents," said Erica Willisroft, who works in human resources for a bank in Ottawa and has been doing her job from home with two boys under five-years-old under her feet.

Willisroft and her husband have been working split shifts, with one parent working from 7:30 a.m. until noon and the other working in the afternoon. Then, after the kids go to bed, they both work from 7:30 p.m. until "whenever the work gets done."

It's a familiar story for many parents and, although she's exhausted after three months of long days, Willisroft pointed out that her family has it better than many others. For one, both of their employers have been flexible and understanding about the situation. They also have two parents to share the load and a suburban backyard for the kids to run around in. But they know their situation is unsustainable and will likely be sending the kids back to daycare before long.

In Ontario, the announcement about childcare centres reopening hit like a bolt of lightning on Tuesday, leaving many parents and daycare workers with questions.

How safe will daycares be? How will they handle outbreaks? How will kids who already struggled with drop-offs react when a childcare worker in personal protective equipment is meeting them at the door rather than the friendly face they normally see?

And how nervous should parents be about sending their children into a bustling hive of toddlers who are used to climbing all over each other?

"There's so many questions. I think that's the biggest thing about daycares reopening so suddenly. It was a shock to hear daycares are opening Friday. Not a week, not two weeks, not July 1. There's no time to mentally prepare for that and you just have to make a decision," said Willisroft.

Some daycare providers are feeling similarly surprised.

"After they declared the last emergency last week, we figured it would be weeks, not days. I think they were absolutely blindsided," said Martha Friendly, who is the executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

Friendly said a survey conducted by the CRRU and other childcare organizations found that almost all daycare centres and childcare homes had concerns about reopening, with 88 per cent worried about health and safety issues during the pandemic and 85 per cent worried about lower enrolment.

With three days before childcare providers were allowed to reopen, the Association of Day Care Operators of Ontario had a series of alarmingly basic questions for the government, including "what needs to go into the pandemic plan the Ministry of Education says is required, who approves it and when?"

In Ontario, the new rules require a maximum of ten people to a room, which is about a 30 per cent reduction in the ratios that childcare centres base their business plans on. Alberta just expanded its limit to 30 people in a room and other provinces have promised incremental increases as the economy reopens.

With fewer kids in a room and fewer fees being paid, the daycare centres will be facing an immediate cash crunch.

"Parents are also worried about a shortage of available childcare spaces as many childcare programs are on the verge of financial devastation," reads an open letter from the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, which has attracted nearly 15,000 signatures, and calls for more funding to help daycare providers fill the shortfall.

"Without any new provincial funding to the child care sector, either child care centres won't be able to reopen or parents will be expected to pay higher fees. That's not fair," the letter reads.

While 64 per cent of daycare providers told the survey they would definitely reopen, that left 36 per cent that were less than certain. In many cities where daycare spots are tight, it could lead to a serious shortage. On top of lower enrolment, the providers could also be facing a staff shortage after many workers were laid off in March.

"There's less critical mass of parents to be paying the worker salaries. And the staff were mostly laid off and one of the reasons that they're not working in childcare is because they're making more money on CERB," said Friendly.

With the uneven reopening procedures across the country, some of the larger for-profit daycare providers could have an advantage. Kids & Company, which runs centres across North America, has had no service interruption in its centres in British Columbia and has been running daycare service for essential workers in other provinces.

The company has had no COVID-19 incidents so far at any of its centres, said Linda Starr, the vice president of sales and marketing at Kids & Company.

"There's a lot of families that are very nervous," said Starr, who said the centre directors have been devoting a lot of time to talking parents through the various procedures the company has put in place. In B.C., many parents pulled their kids out of daycare in the early stages of the shutdown and then Kids & Company started seeing the numbers rise again.

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"Some families did take their children out for a period of time because they were nervous and then they started seeing a lot of families returning. They saw the fact that their children were really missing their friends and their teachers," said Starr.

For the duration of the pandemic, though, the daycare experience will be very different.

Kids won't be eating "family meals" together and cots for naps will be spaced out according to physical distancing rules. The centres will undergo a rigorous cleaning every day and kids and employees will be constantly washing their hands. There is now zero tolerance for any kind of illness suffered by either children or staff.

With many toys removed over concerns about virus transmission, the company asked employees to brainstorm new games and activities that will keep the kids a safe distance apart. With kids under four years old, though, there's only so much that can be done to maintain physical distance.

That's done "to the best of our ability," said Starr.

It's a strange time for everyone involved and, whether it's parents, daycare workers, or government officials, they are contemplating moral dilemmas beyond what they ever imagined.

"What's the greater evil, keeping your child isolated, not interacting with their friends, and all of the positive things that go with that?" said Starr. "I don't know. I mean, it's a tough one."

For parents, it's a question of choosing between two unique kinds of strife and, with either one, accepting a lot of uncertainty.

"It's really hard to prepare yourself in terms of what the future is going to hold when it comes to kids going back into that environment, especially when you've been in such a closed bubble for so long," said Willisicroft.

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