

# Coronavirus forces child-care centres to reduce capacity, leaving parents scrambling <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Child-care centres across the country are slowly starting to reopen but operating at reduced capacity because of the coronavirus pandemic, meaning some parents may be out of luck for a spot.

Antonette Williams from Toronto said she's waiting to see if her two-year-old son will be heading back to daycare, which has been closed since March, in the upcoming weeks.

"We don't know at this point," she said. "If we don't have our spot back, we may have to look for full-time help, which is difficult."

Williams is a full-time student, and her husband recently returned to work. Before the pandemic hit, her son was in daycare at the local YMCA.

At the beginning of the month, Ontario Premier Doug Ford announced all daycares were given the green light to open on June 12 as long as they abided by a 20-page guideline with new health and safety rules.

These rules include increased cleaning, screening all staff and children for symptoms prior to entry, barring visitors from the centre, using blankets while holding infants and toddlers and removing toys made of materials that can't be cleaned and disinfected.

The number of kids and staff in a room is now limited to groups of 10 or fewer.

Williams said her child-care centre used to allow 15 children, including staff. But with the reduced number, she said she has been put on a "prioritized" wait-list.

"I don't know who gets priority," she said.

The guidance from Ontario's Ministry of Education is to prioritize kids that had been served through the emergency child-care centres for essential workers, parents who have to return to work outside the home and children with special needs.

Ontario has been hit harder with COVID-19 than most provinces. While other provinces are rolling into Stage 3 of reopening, a majority of Ontario is still in Stage 2, which includes opening restaurant patios and hair salons.

Manitoba is in Phase 3, which includes allowing public gatherings of 50 people indoors and opening of bars and restaurants. Child-care centres now have the option to return to full licensed capacity. However, the centres still need to adhere to public health guidelines, such as social distancing.

"There remains some uncertainty about maximum group sizes," Jodie Kehl, executive director of the Manitoba Child Care Association, said. "Programs do need to follow the regulations on group sizes but with space between groups, which becomes the challenge for the program depending on their physical space."

She said there are still more than 2,500 vacant daycare spaces, according to numbers from the province. But she expects the need for child care in Manitoba to go up as more parents head back to work.

British Columbia is in Phase 2 of reopening, but on Wednesday, Premier John Horgan said the province is moving into the Phase 3 stage. This means residents can travel within the province as hotels, spas and camping sites reopen.

The province did not close down any child-care centres or restrict capacity over the last few months.

"Many child-care centres have continued to operate safely as an essential service during the pandemic by following public health guidance," said Kirsten Lauvaas, communications manager for B.C.'s Children and Family Development Communications Office. "However, some centres have temporarily closed during the pandemic."

But the province is encouraging daycares that have temporarily close to reopening, as long as they adhere to new public health guidelines,

such as removing toys that cannot be easily cleaned, staggering pickup and drop-off times to avoid close gatherings and disinfecting cots and cribs after each use.

"If parents are returning to work in July or August and their regular centre does not have an available space because it is being prioritized for the child of an essential service worker, our referral system can also help them find a spot nearby," Lauvaas said.

### **Ontario feeling shortage of child-care spaces**

Toronto city Coun. Joe Cressy said that over the last few days, he's been on the phone with many parents who are worried about the lack of child-care spots, as some centres in the city have shut down due to the financial strain of the pandemic.

Some parents have even had to quit their jobs, he said.

"It was hard to find child care before COVID. And now in the midst of COVID, it's exposed the glaring child-care crisis and it's made it worse, and the province has no plans to make it any better," Cressy added.

Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce said the government is banking on some parents not wanting to send their children back to daycare.

"The reality is not all parents will be putting their children back," Lecce said at a media conference on June 9.

"So, we believe with this plan, co-hosting of up to 10, no more than 10, including the staff and the children in a defined space, should allow operators, should they want to, to optimize their full licensing capacity, and some will not be based on space. But we think we will be able to get workers and parents back into the workforce as soon as possible, and there should be sufficient space for them."

Kelly Baker, who lives in downtown Toronto, said she goes back to work in the fall but is worried her one-year-old daughter will be without child care.

A few years ago, she said she put her name on a number of daycare waiting lists in the area, knowing that spots are hard to find in the city. She was told she was high on the waiting list, but when the pandemic hit, her number on the wait-list fell.

She contacted the centres a few times to see if she still had a spot but was told to keep checking back as there wasn't any information on spots available.

"It's unnecessarily stressful. I planned to go back to work in October but have had to talk with my work about my situation. I had lots of options before but now places aren't taking new children. All I've been told is to keep checking back. Basically, the onus is on me to keep following up," Baker said.

She said she believes the government needs to step up funding child-care access more adequately.

Carolyn Ferns, public policy co-ordinator for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, said it's a very confusing time for parents, and the government should have seen it coming.

She said she proposed a plan for the Ontario government to address the inevitable shortage of child-care spaces.

"We proposed using schools that are currently sitting empty as child-care spaces or even using recreational facilities. But the government did not take up our recommendations. I understand it's a difficult situation, but it could have been mitigated to some extent," she said.

Ferns said she hopes to see more federal leadership on the child-care crisis.

"Child-care advocates across the country are trying to tell the government this is a huge issue across the country, we need a handle on this if we're serious on an economic and social recovery," she said.

A spokesperson for Ahmed Hussen, Canada's minister of families, children and social development, told Global News that the federal government has been working with provinces to address child-care needs, including those created by the pandemic.

"There is \$7.5 billion in federal support that has already been committed to the provinces, which will be distributed over the decade. We are moving forward to create up to 250,000 more before- and after-school spaces and are taking action to cut fees for before- and after-school programs by 10 per cent," the ministry spokesperson said.

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