

# Province issues pandemic guidelines for early-years educators <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Public health protocols may seem at odds with the culture of kindergarten classrooms, where students learn by sharing toys, singing songs and doing messy crafts — but new provincial guidelines suggest otherwise.

Manitoba Education has released a resource for early-years educators that outlines ways to safely promote play-based learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It remains unclear if kindergarten, which isn't compulsory in Manitoba, or any grade level will resume in physical classrooms in September. The province is expected to announce a decision half-way through the summer, with the options being continued remote learning, mixed learning or a standard return.

In any case, the province is asking kindergarten teachers to consider ways to implement individualized play and outfit classrooms with visual prompts and without plush toys, dress-up clothes, and other items difficult to sanitize.

"Banning play due to the challenges of social distancing is not in children's best interests," states the document, *Learning and Joy in the Pandemic*, which backs the province's existing stance in support of play and in opposition to the use of worksheets in kindergarten.

"Play is a powerful antidote to stress and can be very therapeutic for children who may have experienced trauma related to the impacts of COVID-19 on their family."

The document acknowledges maintaining a strict two-metre distance between four- and five-year-olds isn't always practical; instead, it suggests teachers minimize physical contact. Among the suggestions on how to do so: teaching outside; dividing items such as modelling clay into personalized bags; and encouraging pretend play or story acting with figurines rather than physical touch.

"Play is a powerful antidote to stress and can be very therapeutic for children who may have experienced trauma related to the impacts of COVID-19 on their family." — *Learning and Joy in the Pandemic*

Jennifer Iverach-Brereton said she's hopeful the emphasis on play-based learning will extend beyond Manitoba's youngest students, as she has both a soon-to-be-kindergarten and third grader. A mother and classroom teacher, Iverach-Brereton said she recognizes no scenario is 100 per cent risk-free, but still wants her children to be able to return to "something resembling the old normal" in the Winnipeg School Division in September.

According to *Learning and Joy in the Pandemic*, "young learners continue to need lots of emotional guidance and support in order to feel safe enough to learn" — so much so, it suggests teachers consider whether foregoing a hug as a safety precaution is worth the social-emotional risk of not providing physical connection to a child.

"To introduce children to the school environment is important, but it needs to be done cautiously, and in a way that's safe so kids are comfortable going to school and they can do so without being fearful," said Jennifer Protudjer, a local epidemiologist and scientist at the Children's Hospital Research Institute of Manitoba.

Protudjer declined to comment on whether she thinks schools should reopen for in-person instruction in the fall, however, she noted existing research indicates COVID-19 infection rates are lower for children than adults. Approximately two per cent of Manitoba's total positive cases have involved children aged nine and under.

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In the Louis Riel School Division, teachers are testing ways to facilitate educational play during a pandemic with the children enrolled in its summer programs, using pool noodles and designated seating arrangements. The assistant superintendent of student services said the division plans to emphasize recess as a time for play-based learning and give students individual kits for hands-on activities in September.

"While we know children learn primarily through play, we know that play also builds resilience and supports the overall well-being of a child," said Marlene Murray. Student well-being, she said, is top of mind as the division plans for September.

Meantime, Winnipeg mother Lindsay Toset remains undecided about whether her children will go back to school in the fall.

The mother of six said she wants to know how school staff will thoroughly sanitize classrooms throughout the school day, as children — her five-year-old included — tend to touch everything they see.

"Is there going to be a teacher behind (students) wiping everything down?" Toset said, adding she has to be especially cautious because one of her children is immunocompromised.

Toset added she could be swayed, but only if class sizes are halved, teachers implement strict handwashing procedures, and COVID-19 cases in Manitoba remain low.

**Related link:** Learning and joy in the pandemic: Manitoba kindergarten practice resource [3]

**Region:** Manitoba [4]

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**Source URL (modified on 17 Sep 2020):** <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/07/province-issues-pandemic-guidelines-early-years-educators>

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