

Child-care centres say they're ready to accept larger groups ^[1]

Starting today, daycares in Ontario can welcome groups of 15 children

Author: Porter, Kate

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EXCERPTS

Child-care centres in Ottawa can increase the size of their groups today to as many as 15 children, as part of Ontario's Stage 3 reopening plan — and many daycare operators say they're ready.

The change comes after weeks spent with smaller cohorts of 10, including staff, so everyone could settle into the changes COVID-19 requires.

"Having that smaller number [at the] start has been helpful, because it's just given us that time to practise a little bit and really think it through," said Kim Hiscott, executive director of Andrew Fleck Child Services, which runs 13 centres.

There was a lot to plan and train staff for: the Ontario government and Ottawa Public Health had provided a long list of requirements for the widespread reopenings in June.

Only children and staff, not parents, would be allowed to enter a child-care centre. Each child would go through a daily screening and have their temperature checked.

The play structure would be used by one group at a time and disinfected between cohorts. Children would be encouraged to do more individual activities, not play with plush toys, and take naps on mats spaced farther apart.

From 'laid-back' summer to busy fall

"At the beginning it was a little bit nerve-racking," said Jackie Ruano, director of the Beacon Learning Centre on Ogilvie Road.

Beyond the cleaning and screening, Ruano was worried how comfortable her staff and children would feel.

"The children hadn't been with other children, or with anybody other than their parents, for months. And we were expecting a lot of tears. But in fact there weren't."

Some families started daycare right away so their parents could work, while others aren't even sure they'll take spots for September, she said.

With a much smaller number of kids, Ruano said, the summer has actually been "laid back."

But things will now get both busier and riskier at the Beacon Learning Centre, she added, with the new rules that come into effect today — even if most daycares won't likely see more children until after the August long weekend.

Local cases

Both Ruano and Hiscott said they'd heard of the COVID-19 cases recorded last week at two Ottawa child-care centres.

A child and an adult from Head Start Child Care inside Dr. F. J. McDonald Catholic School tested positive, according to the Pinecrest-Queensway Community Centre, which operates the centre.

So did a staff member at the Michel-Dupuis location of le Centre éducatif La Clémentine in Manotick.

A third outbreak was also declared at the Renée Tassé Daycare at La Cité college on Friday because of a confirmed staff case.

Hiscott expects positive cases are inevitable for Andrew Fleck's centres as well.

"It's not if, it's when," said Hiscott. "All we can do is make sure we're supporting our centre, our staff, our families to be as safe as possible."

Ruano is most worried about the cold season, as operators have to be vigilant to not allow any children with symptoms that resemble COVID-19.

She says in child-care centres, that season can last from September to April, with many a runny nose among little ones.

"Gone are the days when you can walk in and say, 'Well, we'll see how it goes,'" she said. "We can't do that."

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