

How daycares have operated during the pandemic – and what it can tell us about schools reopening ^[1]

Thousands of B.C. kids have been in the daycare setting throughout the pandemic

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EXCERPTS

While some parents and teachers have expressed concern over B.C. children heading back to school in September, thousands of others have been attending a different kind of educational environment – daycares – throughout the pandemic.

Cathy Poole, the vice president of children and youth services for the YMCA, has been overseeing 60 daycare centres serving hundreds of kids from babies to 12-year-olds in Greater Vancouver.

"We've learned a lot by keeping our programs open throughout the pandemic. I think as long as everyone is following the health and safety guidelines by our public health authorities ... the risks are really minimal," Poole told host Michelle Elliot on CBC's The Early Edition.

Poole says it's completely understandable for parents to be nervous about the school return, but her own experience of following public health's recommendations, as well as their own health and safety protocols, "has been working quite well for us."

Pandemic protocols

Some of the protocols the centres implemented include limiting the number of people coming in and out of the program and having parents complete a health declaration at sign-in everyday, asking questions about whether or not their child had travelled, been exposed to COVID-19 or had any of the symptoms related to the virus

Staff and children also increased handwashing, as well as sanitization and cleaning protocols.

One thing that was a challenge, especially with the toddlers, was physical distancing.

"Physical distancing in our earliest programs is really, really challenging. The guidance we received from public health is that wasn't expected. What we focused on is role-modelling good handwashing and sneeze etiquette for those children and trying to limit physical contact between the children themselves," Poole said, noting that some children are still so young they need their diapers changed.

School-aged children understood the concept of physical distancing better, but program staff still reduced the number of children within each site and restricted areas into zones to prevent physical touching.

What happened during an outbreak

There were COVID-19 cases at the centres, Poole said.

In those instances, public health was notified right away. Staff called families to pick up their children and closed the programs for a quarantine period. Staff also went into quarantine.

Poole said having a plan was key – as well as having committed staff.

"Staff need to be well trained. This has really been a unique time for us, and I think our child-care employees and staff have done a phenomenal job," she said.

Advice for schools

As for advice going into the school year, Poole said it was tough to compare schools and daycares directly, as schools have to deal with much larger populations with a greater age spread.

However, having a health declaration at drop-off and pick up and trying to limit the number of adults coming into the school would be helpful.

"I would encourage lots of outdoor activities and learning if possible. We've implemented that into all of our programs. It's going quite well," she said.

As per the latest announcement, B.C. students head back to school on Sept. 10.

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