

# Daycares doing their best to support economic recovery, but not without limits <sup>[1]</sup>

After a summer of re-openings, most daycares in London still aren't running at full capacity as they pivot to meet COVID-19 safety rules, a tough balancing act that means some families could be left in the lurch.

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## EXCERPTS

Daily temperature checks. Extra staff. Growing waiting lists.

After a summer of re-openings, most daycares in London still aren't running at full capacity as they pivot to meet COVID-19 safety rules, a tough balancing act that means some families could be left in the lurch.

At stake is getting parents, especially women, sidelined by the pandemic back to work.

Leaders of the Licensed Child Care Network (LCCN), which represents about three-quarters of early learning and licensed childcare organizations in London and Middlesex, say while the re-opening has gone well overall – no COVID-19 outbreaks so far – there are challenges to navigate.

"We've shifted from running at about 50 per cent to about 75 per cent capacity. I feel like it's going to remain that way indefinitely, because we don't know how long this pandemic will last. I don't know that a lot of us feel safe for 100 per cent capacity," said Barbara Jackson, executive director of Parkwood Children's centre and co-chair of the LCCN.

Running a childcare centre in a pandemic means screening families, kids and staff every single morning.

Early childhood educators – already hard to attract and retain because of the pay – must now wear a mask and shield for eight-hour days, and come up with creative programming that doesn't involve close contact.

It takes more staff, because workers can't move among different groups of children like they used to before and after school and during lunch breaks.

It's creating a financial crunch, with many centres running deficits.

Above all else, it means smaller groups to keep everyone safe.

"One of our biggest challenges is the Ministry of Education and the Ontario government wants us to get to full capacity but also physically distance," said Kara Pihlak, who runs Oak Park Co-operative Children's Centre and leads advocacy efforts for the LCCN.

"If a room can technically hold 16 children, but we can't socially distance, then we have to have less children in the room. Safety is the No. 1 priority over spaces."

Luckily, her centre hasn't had to turn any families away because of its small size, Pihlak said.

But larger childcare agencies with multiple locations have pared down because of high staff needs, Jackson said.

With so few centres running at full capacity as older kids prepare to head back to school, some families already are conscripting grandparents or looking for other options. The LCCN expects waiting lists to grow even longer in London and Middlesex.

And it all comes at a cost beyond the parental angst, uncertainty and confusion.

"Childcare plays a big role in parents combining family and work. So, now that most of our families are dual-earner couples, childcare is an essential. It's an essential foundation for our workforce in Canada to be able to go to work and be productive," said Alison Konrad, a professor at Western's Ivey School of Business.

Her research has found childcare leads to greater success for women down the road. Reducing work hours, however, does not.

"Having an arrangement where the child is cared for in a way that (families) – particularly for mothers – feel is a good arrangement and the child is doing well and thriving, that is a positive predictor of women being satisfied in the workplace, and advancing."

A July study from RBC Economics showed that women's participation in the Canadian labour force reached its lowest level since the 1980s.

As COVID-19 pushed most companies into a work-from-home arrangement, parents have juggled nearly six months as full-time employees, teachers and childcare professionals.

"Having a lack of childcare spaces directly affects the London economy and the ability for parents to go back to work, especially women. It's definitely a direct ripple effect," Pihlak said.

Konrad knows of many mothers who are quitting jobs or plan to take care of their kids because they don't feel there's a safe place to send them, especially those with an immunocompromised family member.

"That's going to hurt careers and it's going to hurt women's careers more," she said.

"We have people dropping out of the labour force."

Konrad warned that falling unemployment rates — as the latest figures from Statistics Canada show in London and area — may not tell the whole story, as parents who drop out of the labour force and aren't looking for work aren't counted. Only those who are out of work but looking for a job are included in unemployment figures.

It causes more than just a financial toll, too, Pihlak said.

"The majority of a child's brain development does occur from age zero to five. It's not just for the economy, childcare spaces, it's for the future and good of our country, having enough quality childcare spaces to educate our children."

And thanks to diligent safety precautions and dedicated staff, daycares that are open have had good experiences thus far, said Diane Gordon, director of the Whitehills Childcare Association and a co-chair of the LCCN.

"All our educators and operators . . . have moved boldly forward, but carefully forward. It has gone well. Our educators have done a fantastic job through the summer of opening our programs successfully, because that was a bold step forward for all of us," she said, noting rooms look different and some materials were removed.

The sector as a whole was given just three days' notice that childcare centres could re-open in June. Most in London began welcoming kids back a few weeks later, and many have used the summer as a time to figure out how to run while dealing with COVID-19.

But Jackson said the progress – and resiliency – of the childcare sector has gone largely unnoticed.

"We keep hearing so much about schools and the challenging of reopening, and we're thinking 'Yes! Check. We've done that.' We've been through all of it, but no one was listening or watching to see how we've done."

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** economic recovery <sup>[4]</sup>

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