

Fewer child-care spaces but more vacancies leave some Manitoba families scrambling ^[1]

Even with openings, supply hasn't outstripped demand, 1 Winnipeg parent says

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Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 2 Sep 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

It may be a scramble to find child-care spaces this fall, depending on where in Manitoba you're looking.

Some centres have no space for children they welcomed before the pandemic, while other facilities which used to regularly turn families away now have openings.

Jodie Kehl with the Manitoba Child Care Association said it's understandable some families are hesitant to head back to daycare.

"I think that families are just really apprehensive about coming back, and legitimately so," the executive director said.

They're fearful about whether they're ready to bring their children back into this type of environment."

In fact, a third of the child-care spaces operating before the pandemic aren't running now. The province says there are 23,800 spaces today, down from 37,000 before COVID-19 arrived, according to the Manitoba Child Care Association.

The province says that statistical comparison isn't fair, since more than 10,000 nursery and school-based programs don't operate in the summer anyway, according to a provincial spokesperson.

Daughter's space taken away

But looking beyond the numbers, there are still parents waiting for a child-care spot — a familiar experience for those used to years-long wait lists.

Anna Weier says their Winnipeg daycare no longer had room for her daughter when spaces were prioritized for the children of essential workers.

"Both me and my partner are working from home, and it's very difficult to get our work done while also taking care of our child," she said.

"At the same time, right now we are living with a family member who is at high risk for developing issues with COVID-19. I'm not sure that we would have been comfortable sending our child to child care, even if there was a space for us."

Of the 23,800 spaces operating, the province says there are 4,000 vacancies.

Weier said the numbers alone don't show that supply is outstripping demand.

"If you can find one spot, but it's a 50-minute drive from your house ... that's not super helpful."

Scott Forbes, an early childhood educator in Winnipeg, said he knows a number of friends who are desperate to enrol their children, especially in the hours before and after school.

Each vacancy is a child, or a parent, left behind, explains Susan Prentice, a child-care researcher and University of Manitoba professor.

"Every centre that's operating today with a vacancy, somewhere there's a family that couldn't go back, couldn't afford it, lost their job, or is trying to juggle work from home," she said. "We are on the edge of a disaster for working parents."

Prentice has long bemoaned the state of Manitoba's child-care sector, which has seen provincial funding frozen since 2016, low wages for workers and a wait list totalling 16,000 children as of 2018.

She doesn't think the government has responded appropriately during the pandemic, which began with all centres closing. The province has committed more money to home-based programs, including an \$18-million pool of money, over publicly-funded providers, she said.

Play area fenced off

One of Winnipeg's largest child-care centres, the Discovery Children's Centre, has spent close to \$20,000 adapting its indoor and outdoor

spaces. Executive director Ron Blatz says they've fenced off areas of their St. James centre, and are trying to keep staff with separate groups of kids.

"The province of Manitoba hasn't given us one dollar to help accommodate that," Blatz said.

"We felt it was worth the [financial] risk to accommodate more children because every time we separated a space, we could add another cohort group."

Slowly, the 300-space centre is adding more children, while ensuring the kids are divided into 30-person groups, as per provincial guidelines. Blatz expects to be at half-capacity in the coming weeks.

They've denied service to some families. Blatz said the day program is only accepting children from two neighbourhood schools, rather than nine.

"We couldn't have children from nine schools coming here and mixing together," Blatz said, noting the 10 affected families have been understanding.

In Portage la Prairie, Lori Carpenter said her nursery school has space for more kids. She's hasn't said that before.

"I've been at this job for 28 years now and every year we've had a wait list of at least 25 or 30 names," said the executive director of the Portage Ukrainian Nursery School.

She said some parents are rightfully nervous about the risk of COVID-19 exposure. She's heard from parents waiting a few months before entertaining their child's return to the nursery.

Even if it's slightly fewer children than she's used to, Carpenter says she'll be excited to see smiling faces when her nursery reopens next week.

"It'll be good for the soul and something well needed by children and staff alike."

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