

Parents and advocates concerned over COVID-19 guidelines for childcare ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Back-to-school also means back to daycare for some children, but there are concerns that provincial restrictions don't go far enough to protect families from the spread of COVID-19.

"Where we have concerns are around the cohort and group sizes," says Carolyn Ferns, a policy advisor with the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. "The province said they can go back to full capacity, which for pre-school means 24 children, and for school-age means 30."

Those numbers are exactly what prompted Bobby Umar to pull his children from their usual after-school programs this year.

The dad of two says he spent weeks trying to find an alternative he would be comfortable with.

"I feel stuck between a rock and a hard place — I want my kids to be safe, but at the same time my business was devastated by this situation and I need to find time to recoup," he says.

The motivational speaker has had to pivot his business during COVID-19 and says having his kids at home the last six months has been a challenge.

"It's been very difficult. We haven't gotten any work done, and it's extremely overwhelming to just manage the kids who need constant attention," says Umar.

After much research, Umar settled on two separate after school programs for his 9 and 12 year-olds, namely because they had reduced the number of children who usually participate. But while some centres have opted to reduce capacity below the provincial maximums, and coordinate with schools to avoid mixing cohorts, the fact that it isn't an Ontario-wide mandate has advocates concerned that certain families will be at more risk than others.

"The question is, if that's not happening across the board, then where isn't it happening, and where are we seeing inequities?" says Ferns. "There are some childcare programs at 10-15 per cent enrolment, but other ones that are full, so to me if we have any afterschool care program that has 30 children in an ill-ventilated basement, that's not acceptable."

In a statement, the Ministry of Health said "school boards have been encouraged to consider strategies to limit the interactions between groups as much as possible; for example, grouping children for the school day who require before and after school care to the greatest extent possible."

They wouldn't answer why they haven't reduced the cap on group sizes, only saying guidelines are based on advice from the provinces' chief medical officer of health.

The gap in guidelines appears to have played a part in low enrollment, with many parents choosing to opt-out of after-school care. The YMCA of Greater Toronto said, for the most part, it's the before and after-school programs that are not full.

"We continue to do outreach to families that have not yet made up their minds," says Kathy Wallace, general manager of child and family development. "Certainly for September, we've seen families change their mind more than once," she says.

Umar says among his parent friends, most who are sending their children to school have opted not to add after-school care into the mix.

"At this point, they're like 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. or 3 p.m. is pretty good, just let them come home and we won't work as hard the next two-to-three hours before quitting time."

But Ferns worries what impact low enrolment could have on the future childcare. She says across the province, more than 500 childcare centres have yet to reopen, and it's unclear how many of those could close permanently.

"We know ordinarily childcare centers have waiting lists, there is high demand and that's going to be the situation again, whether its six

months down the line or next year,” she says. “If a number have closed in the interim, we’re going to be in a very difficult position.”

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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