

Ontario's Covid-19 response has been shockingly anti-child^[1]

Time and again, kids have been treated as an afterthought in this pandemic.

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Source: Huffington Post

Format: Article

Publication Date: 23 Oct 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online^[2]

EXCERPTS

My daughter's birthday was at the end of June. Being just at the start of Ontario's "Stage 2" re-opening, the "party" we held was essentially a handful of kids in the park eating individual pizzas, which I dutifully doled out with freshly sanitized hands, while wearing a mask.

We all stared wistfully at the playground equipment wrapped in caution tape. Even though we could meet in the park, the children couldn't actually do anything in the park—a frustrating restriction, given we now know transmission of COVID-19 happens through airborne respiratory droplets, not sitting on a swing or going down a slide.

Surprisingly, the ban on park play continued for several weeks after my daughter's party, only lifting when we entered Stage 3 in July. Indoor dining areas of restaurants, bars and gyms all re-opened at that point too. Like many parents, I felt it was all happening too soon and too fast, especially since a clear plan on how to keep schools safe had not yet been formulated. The hashtag #schoolsbeforebars started trending on Twitter.

I was one of many parents who begged the provincial government to make serious investments to reduce class sizes to no more than 15 and ensure proper air quality in classrooms. It all felt too late when we began our advocacy and the province only released money to school boards in August. It was not enough to significantly reduce class sizes and there was just not enough time to retrofit schools.

By September, pictures and reports of overstuffed classrooms with poor ventilation and teachers who did not feel safe at work flooded the Internet. Parents and educators wrote letters, made phone calls and demanded that the Ford government invest in smaller class sizes and outdoor learning spaces. It all felt like a desperate, unwinnable race. And sure enough, within days of schools reopening, we saw 8-hour-long lines wrapping round hospital buildings to test kids with stuffy noses for COVID-19.

And now here we are, a couple weeks since October 9, where the province rolled back major hotspots, including Ottawa, Toronto, Peel and later York Region to a "modified Stage 2," temporarily closing gyms, indoor dining and bars again in an effort to curb an alarming spike in daily COVID cases. Meanwhile, we continue to send our kids to schools where children eat lunch, unmasked, in poorly ventilated classrooms.

Nearly 500 Ontario schools have had a case of COVID enter the classroom, amounting to nearly 10% of the schools across the province. And daily COVID infection rates in Ontario are higher than at the height of our spring lockdown.

Now, we wait with bated breath to see if today will be the day that the virus enters my daughter's school. After so many months of isolation, she is finally thriving again. I fear that all of this could be taken away in a heartbeat, once again. In the dark days of March and April, I became concerned for my child, who was just not acting like herself anymore. It was hard to convince her to go outside for a walk, she became moody and mercurial. And in a heartbreaking move, sent me a message that said, "Mama, I am sad and I don't know why."

And now, the icing on the cake: a directive from public health officials not to let kids trick or treat on Halloween in "hot-spot" areas.

Kids lost three months of school and two months of summer camp. Recreation activities were either cancelled or converted to an often frustrating virtual format. We have no idea when kids will be able to go to gymnastics or play hockey or hang out with Girl Guides in person again. For months now, they've seen vital connections with friends and extended family weakened. And for all we know, this could go on for years.

While I would not consider Halloween as important as safe schools, this week's fun-killing public health directive is yet another example of how children have been an afterthought when it comes to surviving this pandemic.

Indoor establishments were allowed to open before schools, contributing to the exponential spread of COVID and inevitable outbreaks in schools all over Ontario that we're seeing now.

Beloved caregivers are losing their jobs and childcare centres are closing. In school boards, the decreasing confidence in the ability for schools to keep kids safe has meant that hundreds of families are switching to online learning, particularly in Toronto. This is leading to

even bigger class sizes in physical schools as teachers are re-assigned to online, because the provincial government has failed to fund smaller class sizes.

And now, the government has failed to offer helpful harm-reduction tips to make outdoor, masked trick or treating safer. Instead they just shut it down, like so many of the things that kids look forward to. This seems incredibly hypocritical, given that indoor dance studios were just given a special dispensation to re-open and that handing out candy using tongs and wearing a mask is no less safe than picking up takeout.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: children's rights ^[4]

Source URL (modified on 27 Oct 2020): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/10/ontario%E2%80%99s-covid-19-response-has-been-shockingly-anti-child>

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