

# More N.L. children get the OK for daycare, but providers, parents ask: where was the preparation? <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

School-age children of essential workers can now spend full days in daycare as the provincial government has tweaked eligibility for regulated child-care services under Alert Level 5 following concerns raised by parents and providers.

Late Monday, the Department of Education closed a problematic gap that barred those school-age children, who normally attend after-school daycare, from being in care full time while their parents are at work outside the home. The loophole? Schools are considered open, meaning kids were to be in classrooms, however virtual, instead of at daycare.

The reversal comes as a relief to Shanda Slipp and her family in Corner Brook.

"I think a lot of parents were in that stress of not knowing what to do or where to go in these last few days," Slipp told CBC Radio's Newfoundland Morning on Tuesday.

Slipp and her husband are both physicians in Corner Brook, with two young daughters, ages five and seven. Now, their girls can spend full days at the child-care centre that normally takes them after school lets out, while she and her husband continue to work during the provincewide lockdown prompted by a spike of COVID-19 cases caused by an extremely contagious variant of the virus.

In a media release Tuesday, the Department of Education said the child-care expansion requires government approval centre by centre. Approved centres also aren't expected to make sure kids are keeping on top of their virtual learning.

"[Child-care] services may choose to do so if they believe they can accommodate it. In some cases this may not be practical, as services may have children from various grades and from different schools," the department stated.

It seems a bit of a panic, and a bit of a scattered response.- Meredith Loveys

Children may bring laptops or other devices into daycares, but the department advised that providers may not have the internet connectivity or technical troubleshooting for virtual learning to go ahead.

## Questioning preparations

While her girls may miss some class time, Slipp said, she's willing to try to balance the school curriculum with child care. But some questions remain about the entire process, and why information about taking care of school-age children has been slow to emerge.

"I certainly understand the situation, and our public health team is under immense pressure and decisions had to be made very, very quickly," she said.

"But at the same time, we've had 11 months to plan how this would look and how it would work around school closures specifically."

Slipp pointed to other jurisdictions — such as British Columbia — where some form of school has remained open during lockdowns to accommodate families of essential workers.

The head of the province's Association for Early Childhood Educators also wonders why scenarios for a return to online schooling, in the works since the summer, didn't involve child care for some of those kids.

"In preparation, I'm really surprised that people haven't thought that children who are younger than the age of 12 are going to need care, for the essential workers, so I'm not sure why it hasn't been addressed before this time," Meredith Loveys said.

"It seems a bit of a panic, and a bit of a scattered response."

The lockdown came swiftly and unexpectedly Friday night, and Loveys said the days since have been "overwhelming" for early childhood educators. In last March's lockdown, all child care was initially suspended, before starting back up again under a laundry list of rules, such as operating only at 50 per cent capacity. By June, daycares were allowed back to 100 per cent capacity.

This time around, Loveys said operators are struggling to figure out how to operate on little guidance beyond a go-ahead to open on Monday, sent out late Sunday night.

Loveys said big questions remain about how to continue offering child care as the B117 virus variant circulates. She said nobody knows how many children they're allowed to take care of, and has heard of some centres totally empty, while others are almost full.

"Right now, centres and home child-care providers are just doing their best to try to figure out what works in their best interest, but we're also very concerned about the variant spreading so quickly," she said.

Tuesday's tweak to allow schoolchildren into child care didn't address Lovey's concerns. On Monday, the Department of Education told CBC News in a statement, "There are no plans to develop new operational guidelines for child-care services at this time. Services should continue to follow current protocols."

The provincial government and public health have both urged as many children to be kept out of child care as possible under Alert Level 5.

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

**Tags:** COVID-19 <sup>[4]</sup>

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