

Surge of COVID-19 outbreaks at daycares put parents in tough spot ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

With the number of COVID-19 outbreaks growing in child-care centres across the country, parents are being forced to make hard choices about pulling their children from care as they try to balance the risk of exposure with the demands of work.

"I have never seen such a stressed-out, worried and concerned group of people," Tanya Szarko, owner of Bow Valley Child Care, said of the parents whose children attend the Calgary centre. It had its first COVID-19 case on Monday, when a staff member tested positive. A second staff member tested positive on Tuesday. A child at the centre tested positive Tuesday evening.

Ms. Szarko decided to close the centre until Monday as a stopgap measure, but many parents had already pulled their children in recent weeks.

There are currently 42 reported active outbreaks in child-care facilities in Alberta, an alarming spike in cases that is also being seen in child-care centres across the country. After widespread closings during the first wave of the pandemic, daycares have generally remained open, even in provinces where schools have moved online. Only a few provinces have opened up vaccinations to daycare workers despite their increased risk of exposure.

If parents can take their kids out of daycare and have them cared for by someone with less exposure, that is a safer option, said Dr. Susy Hota, medical director of infection prevention and control at the University Health Network in Toronto.

Looking at case numbers in daycares isn't a very helpful way of deciding the risk factors for parents and children, she said.

As of Wednesday, there have been 1,137 confirmed COVID-19 cases in Ontario child-care centres in the past 14 days. That is more than one-fifth of the total number of cases reported in child-care centres since June, 2020.

But those numbers aren't very informative for parents, Dr. Hota said.

"It's more about understanding what's happening with community transmission in your neighbourhood or where you are sending your child to daycare and where you live, and then understanding the policies of that centre. That's really what determines the risk," she said.

Child-care workers in Alberta are not on the province's priority list for vaccines. They've been similarly left off the priority lists in Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Nova Scotia. Ontario announced on Tuesday that workers at licensed child-care centres will be eligible for vaccines as of Thursday. Other provinces made that move earlier. In B.C., for example, child-care staff were included among the front-line workers eligible for the vaccine from the beginning of April.

Sandra Roppa and her husband decided that their five-year-old daughter would not return to daycare in Brampton, Ont., following the April break. Cases of COVID-19 in the city north of Toronto were on the rise, and a child in the daycare had tested positive with a variant the week before the break.

Ms. Roppa, an engineer who is currently working from home, is able to look after her daughter.

"We thought, we have the opportunity; we can pull back for a few weeks and just monitor the situation," she said.

She continues to pay child-care fees while her daughter is out of care, as most parents who decide to temporarily pull their kids are required to do.

Asha Marra, whose five-year-old son attends the same Brampton daycare, is keeping him in care. She and her husband both work in construction and don't have the option to look after their son at home.

"Naturally, we're always a little bit worried. We know a lot of people who have been affected by COVID and so there's always that little bit of fear," she said.

Her son is in a small class of about nine children, and Ms. Marra is comforted to see the staff taking the utmost precautions.

The uncertainty of what lies ahead is keeping child-care workers on edge, said Kim Yeaman, the owner and director of a child-care company in Innisfil, Ont. She had to close one room at her centre three weeks ago because a child who was asymptomatic tested positive.

"We think, 'Yeah, we've only had two cases.' But have we?" Ms. Yeaman said. "The staff are terrified."

Many parents of children in care at the centre are essential workers, which adds to the stress daycare employees are under, she said.

"We're taking care of the people's children who are completely exposed to this every day and we're taking care of their children who are not wearing masks."

The stress everyone is feeling has begun to sometimes cause conflict between parents and staff at Building Blocks Nursery School, said Joanne Freer, co-owner of the Brampton company.

Every day, each child is screened for a list of symptoms, including cough and runny nose. Sometimes, parents who need to get to work and can't take a day off will plead that it's not COVID-19, it's just the sniffles, Ms. Freer said.

But, for the most part, parents have been understanding of the school's screening protocols and requirements, she said.

Linda Delany, acting director of the East Toronto Village Children's Centre, has begun checking in with staff members each week to assess their stress and mental health.

"We have a lot of staff here who, especially with the new variants, they're starting to get scared," she said.

Ms. Delany welcomed news that child-care workers in Ontario will be eligible to be vaccinated as of Thursday. But, she added that they should have been prioritized from the start of the rollout and now must be vaccinated as soon as possible for everyone's benefit.

"We are definitely essential," she said. "It should be a high priority."

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