

Women scramble to find childcare in lockdown—again ^[1]

Whether it means work from home or paying out-of-pocket, caregivers are stressed.

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EXCERPTS

Last week, schools around HRM began shutting down for cleaning after COVID-19 exposures. “We didn’t have to get tested, we were not told that there was a case in the school, but it was a case in the community,” says Ronit Milo, whose eight-year-old son’s Dartmouth school shut down Thursday.

As the days went on, the active case count rose, including an unprecedented number of infections in schools. Between April 19 and 26 the province reported 30 cases connected to schools, most of them in HRM.

“I did go for an asymptomatic test anyway last Monday just to be a good citizen,” says Milo. “And I was fine so I wasn’t too concerned about possible exposure for us.”

On the weekend, Canada reported its youngest COVID death to date, a 13-year-old girl in Ontario whose parents are essential workers. Then on Monday, the province announced the closure of schools in and around HRM.

On Tuesday schools closed in the rest of the province. “We are in a race between the variant and the vaccine,” said Nova Scotia chief medical officer of health Robert Strang when he made the closure announcement.

According to the province’s COVID-19 dashboard, there are 299 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in youth under the age of 19 across the province as of April 28.

Milo, who works in administration, says she feels lucky to work from home most of the time. “I will have to go in about one day a week for a short time, but I’m able to work from home and my husband always works from home, so we’re very fortunate.”

But parents across Nova Scotia are in myriad situations, no one identical to the next. For Hannah Humphries, it meant bringing her children home early when she felt they were unsafe.

“Last Tuesday was the last day they went,” she says. “With the cases starting to go up, I felt that if they didn’t have to be out then they shouldn’t be. I was trying to reduce the amount of population in the schools and daycare.”

Humphries, who lives in Dartmouth, has two daughters, aged seven and three, and works part-time as a CCA—a continuing care assistant. But with her children home from their school and daycare, Humphries is only working a few evenings a week when her partner can care for the kids, meaning she’s worried about her clients.

“I’m trying to help reduce the strain on the other staff,” she tells The Coast in a phone call. “There’s 100 clients in the Spryfield area that we see, and I think there’s less than 30 staff that cover 200 to 300 visits a day.”

For Martha Paynter, a PhD candidate at Dalhousie’s school of nursing and chair of Women’s Wellness Within, this isn’t surprising. “If nurses can make the arrangements to stay home, that means that they’re not working as nurses,” she says. “This is a pretty clear problem.”

Paynter says women—who comprise most of the healthcare industry—will be taking time off to care for their children, causing even more stress on the threadbare system. “This is a field that’s predominantly women, and women—or people with a uterus—are predominantly the primary caregivers in families. So we have layers of gendered labour happening here.”

Because of the wage gap and because women are often the designated primary caregiver, they are the first to take time off when schools close. “When you’re talking about the opportunity cost of not working, there’s less of an opportunity cost when women don’t work because women don’t make as much money,” says Paynter. “So women’s paid labour is sacrificed in this zero-sum game of making it through a day.”

This is putting women behind in their careers as they miss out on everything from weekly meetings to promotions and raises down the road. “We know already that COVID has destroyed women’s careers,” says Paynter, “and has taken women back decades in terms of labour force participation.”

All the women who talked with The Coast say they are lucky to be privileged enough to have childcare options available, or employers who are flexible. “I am very fortunate to have a very flexible employer. If I have to re-arrange my schedule so that I can support her to do her schoolwork, I’m supported to do that, thankfully,” says Sarah White, a mother of two who lives in Lantz.

Although they live outside HRM, her six-year-old’s school, Maple Ridge Elementary, was shut down with other HRM schools earlier this week. But White wasn’t too worried.

“I feel like we’re a little bit isolated just because I normally only work in the city one day a week,” she says in a phone call on Tuesday afternoon.

But for others, the loss of time and income can be devastating.

“Supporting elementary school children—and even beyond, but certainly elementary school children—in completing online work, is a job. You cannot have another job while you are doing that job,” says Paynter.

Even for those who do have flexible employers, the juggling can be difficult. “Last year when both kids were home with me and I was still working, I just felt like I wasn’t doing a good job at anything,” says White. “I felt like I wasn’t really doing a good job at parenting, at my work job or helping my oldest with her schoolwork.”

And those in the healthcare industry face difficult challenges between their children and their jobs, which are considered essential.

“It definitely is taking a toll on me ‘cause I’m really struggling with balancing protecting my family, but also I feel like as a CCA I have a duty to be out in the community doing my job and taking care of people,” says Humpfhries. “Because if so many of us don’t show up for work, you know there’s some people that aren’t going to get seen that day. So I almost feel guilty when I’m not at work.”

On Tuesday, premier Iain Rankin promised a new childcare support program for essential workers—where parents can email ECDSERVICES@Novascotia.ca ^[3] or call 1-877-223-9555 for support. A few more details were released Thursday, saying parents will not be forced to pay if they pull their child out, and will not lose their spot. The government says subsidies will be available on a sliding scale for families with an income less than \$70,000.

But while daycares for children are permitted to remain open, some parents are feeling unsafe sending their children to those.

“With the rise in cases I felt it more safe to keep him home. Also if I am home, why send him?” says a mother of one from Sackville, whose five-year-old son goes to a Halifax daycare. Although he’s been home since last week because she is too, she’s still paying upwards of \$43 each day to hold her spot.

“The government needs to step up and figure out how to support daycares. If a parent is forced to stop working because of a closure, we are keeping our kids home safe, and to stop unnecessary travel, then the government needs to help pay for the daycare fees,” she says. “I’m paying \$43 a day to send my kid somewhere that they technically aren’t supposed to be going because we’ve been asked to stay home. It doesn’t make sense.”

Other parents feel the same way. “My not-yet-two-year-old child attends a daycare, and I’m very concerned that the province is not publicising daycare cases, or forcing them to close when a positive case happens. I am a complete mess of emotion about sending my baby to a potentially unsafe centre,” says one parent who prefers to remain anonymous because they work in the healthcare system.

Although the official industry rules for the childcare sector haven’t been updated since February, newly leaked information online says parents are now able to voluntarily withdraw their children without facing penalties. The Coast is awaiting confirmation of this detail from the province.

But White, whose youngest child attends a smaller dayhome full-time, is not as worried, because only three families attend and there are rigorous cleaning processes. Still, “the kids, they play very closely together.”

And White says her older child will now be going there even more, meaning higher fees. “It’s manageable for us,” she says, “but it’s certainly not expected.”

The parents who spoke with The Coast say they are all glad to have their kids home and safe. But with at-home learning set to begin Thursday, April 29, many are still trying to figure out a plan.

Humphries is unsure how much help her daughter will need with online learning. “She knows how to log into it and everything, but that’s kind of as far as we’ve gotten with it,” she says.

White says her eldest will most likely need full-time supervision during the hour she’s expected to be online each day.

“She’s only six, so she can’t necessarily read the assignments. She knows her username and password, but she can’t navigate to the website,” she says. “A lot of their assignments and stuff so far that the teacher has sent have been like apps and websites and stuff where they will like play games or do exercises—and she just needs somebody to sit with her to do that.”

And children are dealing with the effects of the pandemic too, whether it’s fear of the virus, missing their classmates and friends, or confusion and worry about the rules.

“On Friday when she first had to wear the mask at school all day, she was kind of really anxious about it, ‘cause normally Grade 1 doesn’t have to wear it all day, she just normally wears it on the bus and then takes it off once she gets to school,” says White. “We had picked up some extra masks and stuff and her anxiety about wearing a mask all day was definitely building, and she was hoping that school would end

up being closed.”

For Milo, lessons were learned from last year’s first lockdown about how to keep her son occupied throughout the day. “It’s still a lot to organize, to look after an eight-year-old and make sure he’s stimulated, and that we can get our work done. So we have to kind of change our schedule around a little bit to manage that,” she says.

With COVID still spreading, parents are unsure about asking anyone for help.

“It’s really hard because everybody’s older, grandparents and stuff, and they can’t take that risk, a lot of them have health problems,” says Humphries. “It’s really just down to my boyfriend and I because we don’t want to increase risk for people we love.”

Milo says she’s thought about asking other parents in the neighbourhood to exchange childcare, but restrictions don’t even permit that right now. “We don’t have family here so we can’t rely on grandparents or anything. I considered trying to get a babysitter or try to exchange childcare with another family but I feel like right now that’s not advisable,” she says.

The long-term solution, Paynter says, is pretty obvious. “I think that we absolutely have to have emergency funded childcare available for people who have to go to work,” she says.

But the Nova Scotia government set out without a solid plan. “If you’re not building policy to reduce inequality, then your policy is discriminatory, that’s just the way it is,” says Paynter. “And so what Rankin’s government has done in closing schools without making accommodations, it’s simply discriminatory against women.”

For now, parents are coping as best they can. “I feel both at the same time that it’s better for kids to be in school, but we also have to get this under control to protect the general population,” says Milo. “And keep the healthcare system from getting overwhelmed and from having problems like we see in other provinces.”

And while most parents have found a short-term solution, it won’t be long until it takes a toll on them emotionally, financially or career-wise.

“When we’re in periods of extreme stress, we’re just trying to get by,” says Paynter. “And people are able to make accommodations. But on whose backs?”

It’s clear that in the long run, caregivers, and primarily women, will be making major sacrifices for the sake of their children. “I was talking to one of my mom’s friends and she said ‘honestly, I’d rather lose my job than my son,’” says Humphries. “I kind of feel like we’re all stuck between a rock and a hard place.”

Region: Nova Scotia ^[4]

Tags: mother's labour force participation ^[5]

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