

A daycare worker's difficult decision^[1]

When the pandemic hit, I doubled down for the kids. But how long could I hang in?

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Source: The Tyee

Format: Article

Publication Date: 29 Apr 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online^[2]

EXCERPTS

It's a hot day in August, in my first year as a daycare teacher. I decide to take the kids to the daycare's gym to play soccer, the emergency walkie-talkie strapped to my shorts. I dump out the plastic balls from the mesh bag, quickly counting all the kids.

Suddenly, Trevor darts towards an emergency exit, the one that leads to the parking lot. "Trevor!" I run after him. I reach out my arms, but he's too fast and has a head start. He reaches the door, flings it open and darts outside, a huge grin on his face.

The exit doesn't have a handle from the outside. I can't run after him without locking us out, away from the other children. I can't leave the rest of the kids unattended, but I can't put Trevor in danger either.

"Trevor, this is not OK! You can't run outside without a teacher. I need you to come back inside, buddy."

Trevor stops 10 feet away and looks at me. "No!"

"Trevor, it's not outside time." I reach for my walkie-talkie. "Guys, I need help now. Please. Hurry."

That's when I spot Alexa across the gym, reaching up to touch the red metal fire alarm. "Alexa! Don't do —" she doesn't hear me and I can't run to her, because if I move the door will close and lock out Trevor. "Don't —" she jumps higher, her heels lifting and her hand grasping at the red box.

The fire alarm rings.

Five years later, that difficult day still loomed large when I pondered whether the stresses of being a daycare teacher outweigh my calling to the field. In fact, I was trying to decide whether to quit and move on to something else when the pandemic arrived in March of 2020.

Suddenly, the world began to close. Some services were deemed essential, including grocery stores, hospitals, veterinarians, construction workers, post office workers, police officers — and child care.

By then I was in my tenth year working in child care, and my fourth as a preschool teacher. As B.C. decided what work was considered "essential," I tried to figure out how I'd function in the coming months. I was working at a centre that had two infant-toddler rooms and one preschool room (which I shared responsibility for). We had six teachers working in infant-toddler, two preschool teachers (myself and one other) and one "floater" teacher who helped between rooms. In all, nine staff members for 32 children. Could we shut down? Would we shut down?

Throughout the pandemic, that has been up to whoever runs the centre, private or non-profit. Centres that stayed open were given additional resources, while centres that closed also received funding to help make their eventual reopening possible.

Provincial health officer Dr. Bonnie Henry said B.C. was working on a strategy to protect daycares so that "we have this essential service available for essential workers." Parents were encouraged to care for their children at home if possible — but child care through daycare centres was to remain an option.

At my centre, each teacher was given the choice of whether to work or go on EI. Four teachers, including myself and my supervisor, decided to stay on.

By April, the height of lockdown, my job looked different. My centre had given each staff member a small "bubble" of children. Each bubble had two teachers, who worked with them for two-and-a-half days each.

Each day, I'd turn on the lights and glance around the lonely daycare centre, usually lit with life. I'd put away the dishes we used the day before and stow the sanitized toys left out to dry in their places, small simple jobs that I'd usually do while under the pressure of watching eight children. In B.C., the child-to-teacher ratio for preschool is eight to one — a proportion I'd sometimes found overwhelming, like the day Trevor got loose and I had to frantically call for backup just to keep everyone safe.

But the pandemic had changed a key variable, providing an experiment in job satisfaction for daycare workers like myself on the edge of

burnout.

One morning amidst the pandemic, the daycare was eerily quiet. Too quiet. I glanced at the clock ticking on the wall. 7:45. Maya was dropped off first, her blonde bob bouncing. “Want a snack?” I asked, welcoming her.

“Yes! Then can we colour?”

Mark and Cade arrived, and the centre picked up, but barely. The voices of the three children bounced off the walls, and when we went outside, into the sunshine, they spread out to separate corners. Mark built a sandcastle, and Cade wandered to the plastic slide. Maya played with a pile of Legos before pausing.

“I miss Kamri,” Kamri was Maya’s best preschool friend, and Kamri was currently staying home from daycare. Maya spun her way through the plastic toys to come sit by me. “When will this pandemic be over?” She said “pandemic” almost perfectly, and I had to remind myself her mother’s a doctor, so she probably hears that word a lot.

“I don’t know sweetie, hopefully soon.”

The next time I looked at the clock it was 10:40, which meant I’d have about six-and-a-half hours to go with three kids, no lunch break, no adult conversation, and not nearly enough coffee.

Eventually, we went inside for lunch, and I warmed up their lunches and put Kade to bed for a nap. Maya and Mark coloured, we made coffee filter butterflies and I taught them the alphabet, while working to scrub every area of the room clean.

“Look at this!” Maya said, bouncing her butterfly up and down. “I drew hearts all over it. It’s for Kamri.”

“Mine is for Daddy,” said Mark, holding out his blue and green butterfly treasure.

When Cade woke up, we went outside again to snack. The kids watched curiously as I gathered a small mountain of toys, two empty plastic tubs and a spray bottle.

“What are you doing?” asked Mark, inspecting my plastic gloves. “Well,” I explained as I start spraying the toys. “I’m making sure the toys get all clean and that there are no germs on them.”

“Why?”

“Because there are germs on our hands, and we need to make sure everything is clean. Especially because lots of people are getting sick right now.”

“Because of the pandemic?”

“Yes, exactly.”

When I asked my supervisor Sofia what her work experience was like during the height of the pandemic, she said she found it “almost calming.”

“Because I only had three kids, and I only had to work two-and-a-half days... it felt freer,” she explained.

It’s hard to accept that one of the calmest stretches of work came in the midst of global chaos. Working with three children was not nearly as overwhelming as working with eight.

That’s not to say the pandemic lacked stresses: from needing to rely on public transit, to the constant risk of exposure, to the extra cleaning precautions and policy changes. But the smaller ratio allowed for a chance to breathe.

“Fundamentally, it’s the low wages and lack of respect that goes along with the position,” says Sharon Gregson of the \$10aDay child-care campaign, on why people quit the job. The expectations of child-care workers have also risen as we’ve learned more about the importance of the early learning years for children and brain development, she added.

“We expect educators to run brilliant programs that are nurturing and inspiring, but they’re not able to build in program planning time into their workday,” Gregson gave as an example. “It is a physically demanding job, and emotionally demanding job, in not only meeting the needs of the children but being support for the families as well.”

We’ve known for a long time that well-funded child-care systems are key to reducing inequality. But as long as the industry continues to take in enthusiastic, compassionate people and then spit them out after a few years, we’ll never have an adequate child-care system.

Change may be on the horizon. The federal Liberal budget released April 19 earmarked \$30 billion over the next five years for a national child-care system. With goals like lowering daycare fees to an affordable \$10 a day, raising educator’s salaries, creating more daycare spaces and more opportunities for Indigenous-based child-care programs and education, and making child care more accessible, it could be a start of much-needed, long-overdue change.

Gregson has fought for such changes since 1987. The Royal Commission on the Status of Women has called for more child-care supports since 1970. In fact, the federal Liberals promised a national child-care investment in 1993.

B.C.’s current child-care system is not a model for worker support. Licensing regulations specify rules that a centre must follow in order to be a licensed daycare provider. The regulations outline safety standards and expectations regarding daycare spaces, cleaning protocols, ratio guidelines, education requirements, care plans, certification of staff and child protection, among others. But these guidelines only

ensure the safety of a centre and don't protect the staff within, or create consistency within the work environment, causing difficulty and tension.

"Because we're so disconnected by not having a real system in place, there are huge ramifications," says Emily Gawlik of the Early Childhood Educators of BC.

The education of B.C.'s youngest citizens is an opportunity that requires "high-quality educators" who are shown respect through compensation and working conditions, she said.

Yet many educators do not even make a living wage. WorkBC reports the highest average wage for early childhood educators and early childhood educator assistants is \$24 an hour, while the lowest is \$14.60.

I was cleaning up the lunchroom after snack time when Sammi, a three-year-old girl with soft yellow curls approached. "I want alone time," she said. I glanced behind her at the group of children playing rowdily by the bookshelf.

"That's OK," I said with a smile. "There are lots of things you can do alone!"

Sammi found herself a puzzle and a corner, near where I'm cleaning, and played by herself for a few minutes. When I was done cleaning, I walked over to her. "How are you doing, Sammi?"

"I'm good. I want alone time!"

"OK, sounds good. I'll be right over here if you need anything." I walked a few feet away and sat down on the floor, positioned to see all the children.

Sammi looked up from her puzzle and waddled over to where I'm sitting.

"I want alone time teacher!"

"I know, Miss Sammi! Aren't you having alone time?"

"No, I want alone time with you."

Sammi's puzzle was long forgotten as she crawled into my lap, wrapping her little arms around my wrist, as we watched the children play in front of us.

My mom always says that she's impressed that I really love children.

"You love children though," I always say.

"No, I love my children. I don't love children. There's a difference," she replies.

I stayed working during COVID-19 because I wanted to be a consistent part of the children's lives while they went through massive changes and stress. Loving children and wanting to be a positive part of their lives is what drove me to stay for as long as I possibly could — but within the first few months of working in a daycare setting, I knew it wouldn't be my permanent career.

I left the child-care field in March. That doesn't mean I won't ever return, but after five years in daycares, and 11 in child care as a whole, I was flickering to the end of my flame.

One day I admitted to Sofia that the stress ate at me right from the start and never really let up. "The first year I was crying every day after work. It's so overwhelming!"

"Oh yeah, a hundred per cent!" Sofia agreed.

In a sense, we were a bit tricked into it. Early childhood educator programs require practicums intended to prepare you for the workplace. But most don't set realistic expectations for what child care really, truly looks like.

A practicum student works under a daycare teacher and always has additional support, is always being watched and mentored. But as soon as you're certified, it's easy to stick an educator in a room with eight kids and no other assistance.

And there are vast expectations that go beyond simply watching children and cleaning. "You can be a janitor, you can be a caregiver, you can be an administrative assistant, all while you're on the floor," says Sofia. She is preparing her own exit. She has enrolled at the University of Victoria in the child and youth care program, in the child protection stream. She hopes to become a children's counsellor one day. "If I were to stay in child care, a lot of things would have to change," Sofia said. "I hope they do one day."

Perhaps officially naming child care "essential" amidst the pandemic will prove to be the start of ramping up respect for those who choose the field. If so, maybe that feeling of respect will convert into more pay and better working conditions, which in turn will lead to less churn within the profession.

The federal government has promised to build a national child-care system. Good, but now begins the necessary conversation about how to insure that system nurtures rather than exploits those who staff it.

I'd like to think that by the time I have my own children, I won't have to worry about the state of child care or the well-being of daycare teachers. I can only hope so.

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Region: British Columbia ^[3]

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