

Parents, opposition call on Ontario to allow COVID-19 tests for daycare kids ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Calls are growing for the Ontario government to make COVID-19 tests available to children attending the province's daycares, with parents saying the lack of access is stoking anxiety.

Last week, the province said PCR testing for COVID-19 would be limited to high-risk groups amid soaring infections and the government said it would stop reporting cases in schools and child-care settings due to "changes to case and contact management."

Schools across the province are moving classes online this week in response to the rapidly spreading Omicron variant, but daycares -- which care for many children too young to be vaccinated -- are still open.

Stephanie Muskat, a pregnant front-line hospital worker with two children in daycare in Toronto, said she's "been incredibly anxious" about the recent changes and how they affect her entire household.

Not knowing if her children have COVID-19 means she won't know if she's carrying the virus to work if she happens to be asymptomatic, thereby putting patients and others at risk, she said. She's also concerned that the virus could get passed on to her 73-year-old mother, who lives with her.

"It's a very confusing and rough time for me, but also all of my colleagues and friends who have also have kids in child care," said Muskat, whose children are four and two.

Under the province's new rules, gold-standard PCR tests are available only for high-risk individuals who are symptomatic or are at risk of severe illness. Others with symptoms need to assume they have COVID-19 and isolate, with their household contacts, for at least five days if they're vaccinated or under the age of 12. Isolation ends if symptoms have improved for at least 24 hours.

Muskat said she'd like to see PCR testing made available to children in child-care settings again, adding she doesn't see "how the economy is going to continue" if working parents have to isolate as soon as their children have symptoms.

Ottawa parent Sarah Kennell, who has a one-year-old in daycare, was similarly concerned, saying the changes have made her feel "incredible disappointment and panic and fear."

"We're just scrambling now as parents, I think, to make the best possible decisions," said Kennell, who also has a four-year-old in kindergarten.

"The burden and the onus is placed on the individual and particularly individuals who are caring for unvaccinated, immunocompromised, vulnerable people in our society."

An online petition calling on the government to give children in daycare access to PCR tests had more than 4,000 signatures by Tuesday afternoon.

The government's changes also have daycare staff expressing concern.

Thayanithi Sri, a registered early childhood educator working in Toronto, said she felt "fearful, stressed and worried" at the lack of testing for staff and children.

"It's really hard during these times, to be able to run a centre and make sure everyone is safe. It's a huge responsibility," she said.

Alana Powell, the executive director of the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario, criticized the government.

"The new changes to the COVID guidelines, we think, are really a misstep and really compromise the health and safety of early childhood educators and child-care workers and children and families," she said.

"We've been calling throughout the pandemic for increased support to child-care programs and this really feels like a step in the wrong

direction."

Powell said there are "huge" staff shortages at child-care centres, which have resulted in program closures or limited hours, and expected those issues to worsen without provincial support for the child-care sector.

Her association is calling on the province to speed up the delivery of N95 masks to daycares, provide HEPA filters in every room, reinstate COVID-19 reporting of daycare cases and make PCR testing available to everyone in those settings again.

Liberal Leader Steven Del Duca said the policy halting the reporting of daycare cases amounts to a "coverup" by Premier Doug Ford's government.

"Doug Ford needs to get PPE and tests into daycares immediately, and stop hiding the number of COVID cases," he said in a written statement.

The New Democrats also called for the policy to change, calling it dangerous to stop reporting cases when children attending daycare are too young to be vaccinated.

"It's not ok to leave anyone at heightened risk of getting the virus, and when it comes to unvaccinated little ones under five, it's atrocious," child-care critic Bhutla Karpoche said in a written statement. "Babies cannot be collateral damage for Ford's attempt to cover up the COVID numbers."

In a written statement, Education Minister Stephen Lecce said the government is enhancing safety protocols for child-care settings. His ministry said that includes updating the province's online screening tools and sending N95 masks to licensed child-care programs.

The government is also providing front-line workers with school-aged children free emergency child care while learning moves online.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: COVID-19 ^[4]

health and safety ^[5]

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