

Daycare workers deserve more protection from COVID-19^[1]

Child-care providers are essential workers who should have access to resources, including PCR testing, to keep them and the kids they care for safe

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EXCERPTS

As the mother of a six-year-old in Grade 1, I have been able to endure Ontario's roller-coaster ride of back-to-school announcements that has characterized the start of this year by fixing my gaze on one of the primary goals of a deferred to return to schools: making them safer from COVID-19.

But as the mother of a three-year-old in daycare, I am astounded, alarmed, and dismayed by the lack of discourse concerning the safety of child-care centres.

Most people in Ontario might be surprised to learn that, except during the first wave, daycares have never closed. Even as schools shut down at various points, and dispersed for the usual summer, winter and March breaks, child-care workers have quietly and tirelessly continued to provide care for preschool-aged children through the many crests of the pandemic — all of them more severe than the first, if measured by case counts.

It is outrageous, then, that daycares are again being left out and left behind in the conversation regarding safer environments for educators and children.

Child-care workers are a diverse group, unified by a few factors: they are overwhelmingly women, their work is demanding, and their wages are relatively low. Perhaps consequently, they lack a strong political voice.

In Ontario, child-care workers were not prioritized for vaccination or for boosters; in Ottawa, it is only now through the efforts of public health that there has been a push for booster doses for daycare staff — and possibly only because they have, thankfully, managed to slip in behind teachers (who rightfully should be prioritized for booster doses before returning to in-person school).

Daycares nurture and engage our children mentally, socially, physically and emotionally. By virtue of this work, daycare employees are in continuous close physical contact to little ones. Child caregivers change diapers and help with toilet training; they wipe the noses of children coming in from the cold and wipe their tears when they take a tumble. Children must be held to be comforted. They need helping dressing and undressing. They are served and fed communal meals.

Furthermore, daycare children are too young to mask, physically distance, reliably wash their hands or cover their mouths when they cough. Young children cannot dependably participate in interventions to reduce COVID-19 transmission.

I cannot think of another sector of employees working so intimately with a population ineligible for vaccination, and yet with so little attention being paid to protecting their health during the pandemic.

Ways to effectively mitigate the risk facing child-care staff are not new or surprising. As with classrooms, HEPA filters could be used in daycares, particularly during these winter months when it is untenable to keep windows open for long hours to improve ventilation. Daycare workers could also be supplied with N95 masks and given access to PCR testing. These measures do not require a great deal of ingenuity, only political will.

Child-care providers are essential workers, caring for infants and toddlers so that parents can continue their work keeping society and the economy afloat during the pandemic. Ostensibly, this is why daycares have stayed open when schools have closed: a working parent might be able to scrape by supervising online learning for a child in school, but it is inconceivable how someone might put in a full day of work and care for an infant or toddler at the same time.

I count myself in this group. As I transition back to work after maternity leave, I will have two children in a City of Ottawa-run daycare. I am relying on a consistent, healthy daycare workforce so that I can work as a doctor. Healthy child-care providers also lead to healthier children and communities, in all meanings of those words.

But ultimately, daycare staff ought to be protected because their work puts them at greater risk of exposure to COVID-19 and they

deserve protection commensurate to this risk, just like other essential workers.

Child-care providers care for one of the most precious and vulnerable populations in our society: our young children. The least we can do in return is care for them.

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/health-and-safety> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-care-workforce> [6]

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