

Parents pull children out of daycares in Ontario due to recent COVID-19 testing changes ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Karen Aagard wanted to send her daughter back to daycare this week but decided to keep her toddler home.

As COVID-19 cases soar and testing is limited to high-risk groups, which so far doesn't include daycares, the pregnant Toronto mother and her husband are keeping their two-year-old home.

"We really felt like we didn't have a choice," she said.

"With the numbers of COVID cases rising and the lack of safety measures in daycare, we just felt like the only way we could keep our daughter remotely safe, and even keeping her home isn't a guarantee right now for safety, but it was the only thing that we could do."

Aagard is among a number of parents who are opting to keep their young kids -- who aren't yet eligible for vaccination -- out of daycares.

Kara Pihlak, executive director of Oak Park Co-Operative Children's Centre in London, Ont., said out of the 42 children who usually attend her centre, about 10 of them have been pulled out in recent days.

"Some of our parents are choosing to pull their children of child care because they're obviously nervous about the COVID-19 virus, or they're wanting to keep their children home as they have siblings in elementary school," she said.

On Thursday, the Ontario government announced that it would accelerate booster doses for child-care and school staff, in addition to other safety measures like providing those staff with N95 masks and updating child-care screening measures.

It also said it's working to make more rapid-antigen tests available "to support the ongoing operations of child-care centres, and schools when they return to in-person learning."

"We thank education and child care staff, operators, and all Ontario families for their hard work, vigilance and kindness through this incredibly difficult time," Education Minister Stephen Lecce said in a news release, announcing the new measures.

Carolyn Ferns, public policy coordinator for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, said while this is a step in the right direction, there is still more that needs to be done.

Her advocacy group and the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario are 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.

"The provincial government's inaction on childcare or their sort of disregard for the sector at this point is dangerous," Ferns said.

"You can't keep childcare programs open face to face without doing everything you can to make them safe. And that means testing, reporting and adequate PPE."

A spokeswoman for the Ministry of Health said the government updated its testing and isolation guidelines "to ensure those living and working in our highest-risk settings are protected and to maintain the stability of critical workforces, including frontline health care workers."

Alexandra Hilkené added that as the situation around the Omicron variant "continues to evolve, we will continue to assess PCR eligibility on an ongoing basis in the context of capacity for specimen collection and lab processing."

Amy O'Neil, director of Treetop Children's Centre in Toronto, said her centre's board of directors decided on Tuesday to close the daycare's doors until in-person learning resumes at schools, or until it sees COVID-19 testing resumed for individuals in daycares.

"It was a principled decision, based on the fact that we felt that it was unsafe to continue to put the staff and children in a dangerous situation basically because we don't have any access to rapid testing, we don't have any access to PCR testing," she said.

"So the board of directors just said, 'You know what, this is not worth the risk or the liability of having potential outbreaks and having children and staff get sick. We were also worried about staff shortages.'"

Even before this decision was made, O'Neil said some parents planned to pull their kids out of the daycare and the centre was already seeing staff shortages.

The Learning Enrichment Foundation, another child-care centre in Toronto, has also decided to keep its infant, toddler and preschool programs closed until Jan. 10 in light of the recent changes announced by the government and the current COVID-19 situation in Ontario.

"Given the significant changes with the new variant it seemed unsafe to open without a full picture of what is needed to protect our staff and families," said Nicola Maguire, director of the centre, in a written statement.

"It seemed unwise and unsafe for us to be opening under old rules during this confusing transition."

Ferns said she's concerned that more centres will close, as many did in previous waves of the pandemic, due to lower enrolment and the ongoing risks associated with COVID-19. She said this is why the child-care sector is calling for the provincial government to provide emergency funding to child-care programs "to get them through this."

"If the child-care program closes now, because of low enrolment, they're not going to be there when we need them for social and economic recovery," she added.

Ontario is the only province that hasn't reached an agreement with the federal government to provide \$10-per-day child care.

A spokeswoman for the Ministry of Education did not make Lecce available for an interview. In a written statement, she said, "Talks continue with the federal government on a deal for child care."

As Aagaard continues to pay for her daughter's spot at the daycare, with hopes to send her back some day soon, she said she and her husband are juggling working from home and taking care of their daughter, with her mother lending a hand as well. But she acknowledged not every parent can do the same.

"We recognize what a privilege all of this is, that we can continue paying for our spot, that we can take (our daughter) out, that we have flexibility from our respective employers and we have a little bit of help on the side," Aagaard added.

"And it just boils down to the onus being completely on the parents because we've essentially been abandoned by the latest measures and protocols, or I should say lack thereof."

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: COVID-19 ^[4]

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