

Hamilton childcare 'unsung heroes of pandemic' cope with Omicron ^[1]

Childcare centres in Hamilton cope with fear and shifting protocols.

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EXCERPTS

As with previous lockdown-style phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hamilton families relying on childcare and early-childhood educators continue to feel the ripple effect, this time from the Omicron variant wave.

Taniesha Gerrish, manager of children's services at St. Matthew's House on Barton Street East, said staff and parents face the challenge of deciphering whether a child has COVID symptoms, in the absence of testing.

And making that call can lead to a child's five-day isolation period at home, that in turn can keep a parent from going to work.

"We aren't doctors ... It's just a lot," said Gerrish. "Parents are flustered; it is a sticky situation for us."

For some, the uncertainty is too much to take.

Jennifer Melo told The Spectator that she recently pulled her four-year-old daughter, Tatianna, out of the Tiny Hoppers centre on the Mountain.

Melo said she follows social media highlighting the rapid spread of Omicron — milder in symptoms than the Delta variant, but more contagious — and finds it all terrifying.

She is worried for the health of her daughter, and also that infection could impact her ability to work and put her colleagues at risk. Melo's husband is working from home to be with their daughter.

"She thrives at daycare, and being out of her routine is not good," said Melo. "I'm just going to hang on for the next couple of weeks and see what happens."

The childcare sector has had to answer the bell throughout the pandemic, apart from the initial provincewide lockdown in 2020.

That has also meant providing emergency care for children of parents classified as essential workers, said Marni Flaherty, CEO of Today's Family, a childcare organization active in 70 Hamilton-area neighbourhoods.

Flaherty said that she understands the concerns of parents, but added that the evidence to date suggests childcare centres are safe places for kids.

"We do our best to mitigate risk for everybody ... We are proud of our work to date, and we have wonderful staff dedicated to serving children and families."

As for the impact on workers, Kyla Kumar, a spokesperson for the YMCA, told The Spec that childcare educators are "unsung heroes of the pandemic."

YMCA childcare facilities serve 226 kids in full-day, preschool care in Hamilton. Kumar said staff work to ensure a "safe and nurturing environment" while following shifting safety protocols and "assuming an inherent level of risk caring for unvaccinated children ... Like all essential workers, they are tired but resilient."

Kumar said 19 of the Y's 65 childcare educators are not at work, in part from COVID isolation, but also due to parental leaves and existing vacancies.

She said prior to the pandemic there was already a "critical workforce shortage of registered early-childhood educators."

Andrea Burley, supervisor of the Queen Victoria YMCA Child Care Centre, is mother to a two-year-old daughter in care at a different Y site.

"If I didn't feel our centres were safe, I wouldn't send her," she said. "But I feel confident about the measures in place, and for her to be

successful later, it's important for her to go to childcare."

On Wednesday, Burley picked up the first order of 60 N95 protective masks for her staff of eight.

She said staffers experience nervousness working through this new wave, but are also "excited to be at work and supporting the children."

She added that some parents have stopped sending their kids to the centre, but not for fear of COVID, but because with schools closed and siblings at home, they elect to keep the whole family together for now.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: health and safety ^[4]

child care workforce ^[5]

COVID-19 ^[6]

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