

# 'We need a plan': Daycares and preschools call for more government guidance as they deal with COVID-19 cases <sup>[1]</sup>

As the highly transmissible omicron variant continues to drive a surge in COVID-19 cases, some daycares and preschools have had to temporarily shut down due to positive cases of the virus. Jasmine Bala reports.

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

At Nightingale Preschool and Junior Kindergarten, the rooms are empty and no one is playing with the toys.

"One of our children got COVID on Wednesday evening and then my staff member got COVID too, so it left me scrambling a bit," said Catriona Brown, director and teacher of the preschool.

After 20 hours of researching and making calls to regional and provincial health services about what to do when there's a positive case in a childcare setting, Brown says she still didn't have an answer.

"These children are unvaccinated, so they are a vulnerable population," she added, noting that they're all under the age of 5 and aren't eligible for the vaccine.

Based on the 10-day isolation policy for individuals that are unvaccinated, she made the decision to close their doors for the same amount of time.

"We are planning to open on Monday, but here's the kicker. If at the moment, a child on Tuesday gets sick, then we go through the whole process again," Brown said.

Nightingale Preschool isn't the only childcare setting dealing with exposures and positive cases.

The full scope of exposures occurring at daycares and similar facilities isn't known because there has been limited reporting from public health officials throughout the pandemic.

However, Island Health data recently obtained by CHEK News via a Freedom of Information request shows 169 exposures recorded at daycares on Vancouver Island between January and November of last year. April was the highest with 37 exposures recorded followed by October with 31 and November with 28. June was the lowest month on record, with just one exposure.

Data for December was not available as CHEK's request was filed in late November and data for 2020. The data does provide a breakdown of how many were students and how many were staff members. Island Health also notes that if a case was "also a student or staff elsewhere but also linked to the daycare" they may not be counted in the daycare statistics.

At Saxe Point Daycare in Esquimalt, there has already been one positive COVID-19 case this year.

"Numbers have gone up, it's made everyone nervous," said Meagan Brame, owner of the daycare. "We've decided to fully mask at daycare — including the children, which, they say children under 5 don't have to. But children under 5 lick each other, who's kidding who."

"Kids like to play close to each other, you can give them a thousand square feet and those kids will all clump in the middle next to one toy even though you have lots of toys out."

Brame said the daycare team is doing everything they can to keep everyone safe, including rotating toys, cleaning constantly and a zero illness policy. But a lot of the daycare's COVID protocols are policies Brame said they've come up with themselves, without guidance from the government.

"Everyone's kind of making it up as they go along because nobody has given us clear direction," she explained. "It's hard. They've given a lot of guidelines to schools, we haven't gotten the same amount."

In an emailed statement to CHEK News, the Ministry of Health says generally, if children have mild illness, they should stay away from school or childcare settings until their symptoms resolve — regardless of vaccination status or exposure to COVID-19 positive cases.

"They do not need a test unless symptoms persist or worsen," the statement reads. "If symptoms worsen, they should consult their primary

care provider, 811, or the local Urgent and Primary Care Centre/Emergency Department.”

The problem with that, Brame explained, is that childcare providers don’t have a clear sense of what “sick” means in the case of unvaccinated children under the age of 5.

“They say if you’re sick stay home,” she said. “We’re talking children here, who always have a runny nose, always have little coughs and things like that. What is ‘sick and needs to stay home?’ Instead, they leave it up to us.”

Although there are health and safety guidelines established by the BCCDC, they do not provide specific instructions on what to do if there is a positive case or when to shut down.

Brown said a plan needs to be in place or daycares and preschools won’t be able to operate.

“One child gets COVID and has to isolate, the daycare won’t operate. They’ll have to close for five days or 10 days,” Brown said. “I mean that’s unrealistic. That’s unrealistic for daycare providers, for early childhood educators. It’s unrealistic for parents. We need a plan. We need a plan and we need it now.”

Emily Gawlick, executive director of Early Childhood Educators of BC (ECEBC), said the provincial government has largely forgotten about daycares, learning centres and other educational settings, particularly when it comes to their recent decision making around K-12 schools.

“We’re not even being referred to or talked about,” she said. “And that really has to change because it is early childhood education that is filling the spaces or at least trying to with very little guidance and very little support or acknowledgement of the work that we’re doing.”

Valentina Mahecha, an early childhood care worker in Victoria, agrees and said the province has not provided enough safety measures, supports, recognized the ongoing challenges childcare centers are facing or even valued ECE workers.

“There has been no recognition from the government for those working in childcare. We have been open since pandemic hit and we’ve had no wage increase and no payments from government when they announce frontline workers payments back in May 2020,” said Mahecha, who also believes the government should require all early childcare educators and others in the sector to be vaccinated.

Yesterday, ECEBC released a letter, which was signed by Gawlick, that recommends future changes to the K-12 education system should be made in consultation with the child care sector. It also implores the B.C. government to provide early childhood educators with access to rapid tests, N95 masks, and prioritize them for booster shots.

“The recent direction taken by your office supporting the K-12 education system has blatantly neglected the early learning and childcare sector and missed another opportunity to recognize simultaneous impacts and direction needed. Once again, early childhood educators (ECEs) working in early learning and childcare settings are not being acknowledged, nor addressed. Many of the decisions made around the delayed start of school for the K-12 system had a direct impact and strain on the sector and early learning programs,” the letter reads.

According to Gawlick, there was no consultation with the child care sector, even though any changes made to K-12 schools have a huge impact on their industry.

“When a school closes down for a week that has a direct impact, particularly on school-age programming, and other programs in the province,” she said.

Gawlick said the early childhood education sector is wide-ranging with many different types of operations from daycares to home-based daycares, to learning centres and preschools among others. She said she would like to see the B.C. government create a provincial early care and learning system which she believes would unify the entire sector and create one set of professional protocols.

“Each individual program is reacting individually. They’re trying to figure out when a change is made to policy or recommendations, how does that affect their program individually,” said Gawlick. “Other systems, like the health system or the school system, they get to do that in a more structured systematic way because they have the infrastructure and we need that as well.”

**Region:** British Columbia [3]

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