

Child care safety: 50 experts and organizations send letter to premier Ford including Sudbury daycare ^[1]

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EXCERPTS



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The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care has sent a letter to Premier Doug Ford calling on him to take immediate and concrete action to support the safety and viability of licensed child care programs in the province. It has the backing of more than 50 experts and organizations including Discovery Early Learning & Care in Sudbury.

"This call to action is for our government to really step up and recognize the essential work that we do every single day. We need to think about decent work and wages and the safety of the children, families and our staff its definitely a priority," Tracy Saarikoski, Discovery Early Learning & Care's executive director.

She said despite the government providing unfitted N95 masks and rapid tests for families recently it just isn't enough.

"We don't know if we are getting more rapid tests. Right now, we had to take the boxes that came in -- let's say amounts of 25 tests in a box -- and divvy those up and put them in little baggies, so administration and time for us to do all of that and then we dispense them. But if you're in a family, those kits may be gone you know, sometimes in a family, somebody is presenting a few days later. Well, you don't have a rapid test to confirm," Saarikoski said.

"It's all of this assuming that you have COVID based on symptoms. So we're asking that PCR testing come back for all families and children and our teams. It's super important. It takes away that doubt, it also takes away the time period that if I'm negative, with a PCR test, I could go back in one or two days instead of this isolation period for five."

Colin Furness is an infection control epidemiologist and assistant professor at the University of Toronto. He said he's proud to be a signatory on this letter. He said while young children didn't get COVID as much in the first couple of waves in the pandemic, the Omicron variant is behaving more like a respiratory virus. He said this means that for those too young to be vaccinated this is a very risky situation.

"Right now, the age group (of) zero to four is the fastest-growing age group in terms of hospitalization. It is unprecedented. No prior wave was anything like this and we seem to be applying logic from a year ago, two years ago, that we don't need to worry about the kids well we do," Furness said.

In the letter, the Coalition said child care programs need:

- Enough rapid antigen tests (RATs) for all children, families, early childhood educators, child care providers and staff in their child

care programs

- Adequate and ongoing supplies of high-quality N95 masks, other necessary personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Enough HEPA filters to ensure one per classroom and common area in each of Ontario's 5,000+ child care programs.

"I think if we've got it we need to take care of our young ones first. So we need to have a guaranteed supply of N95 masks, of rapid tests and we should ideally be increasing HEPA filtration in daycares as well," said Furness.

"We can't do too much. We can not do too much to protect our youngest children and so we need all of those things and I would put rapid tests at the top in terms of greatest need."

In addition to these health and safety concerns, officials said Ontario must ensure long-term viability in the sector by signing onto the federal child care plan.

"That plan would provide Ontario more than \$10.2 billion in child care funding which could make such a difference for families and also for programs, early childhood educators and our communities so the Ontario government should sign on as soon as possible," said Carolyn Ferns, Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care public policy coordinator.

Ferns said she met with the Ministry of Education this past week and was told that while it has flagged the concern, ultimately the issue surrounding PCR testing is a decision that the Ministry of Health and the chief medical officer of health could always review. She said she hopes this is something that can be changed.

As for proper PPE and filtration, Ferns said the government has said supplies are on the way to centres, but most have only received enough masks for a week at best.

The government has promised 5,000 HEPA filters to child care centres across the province. She said that will only allow for each centre to get one when there is a need for many more than that.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: COVID-19 ^[4]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9040> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/health-and-safety> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/advocacy> [7]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-care-workforce>