

Parents with kids under age 5 feel 'left behind' with ending of mask mandates ^[1]

Ontario plans to remove most mask mandates on March 21; end remaining public health orders a month later

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EXCERPTS

Janna Dales started to worry about her young children as soon she heard of Ontario's plan to lift mask mandates in most settings, including schools and daycares, later this month.

Her one-year-old daughter is set to start daycare on March 21 — the day the masking requirements end — and Dales said the removal of the public health measure has left her concerned and frustrated.

"It's scary," the London, Ont., resident said in an interview.

"It's hard to believe that they would take away something that is proven to help. I think a lot of people with kids under the age of five just, once again, feel left behind."

Dales has a five-year-old whom she also worries about, but she noted that her older child was at least able to get both doses of a COVID-19 vaccine and will continue to wear a mask at school.

Many parents of children under five, who are too young to be vaccinated, say the province's latest move has them feeling let down.

New parent Nick Lecuyer says the upcoming lifting of mask mandates is making him and his wife feel even more isolated.

Lecuyer said he and his family will largely be staying home in an effort to keep his five-week-old daughter safe come March 21.

"I don't want her to get a cold, let alone COVID," he said.

"What's frustrating about this for me is that the solution is simple. If everyone was wearing masks and vaccinations were equitable, it would be OK for everyone to have some social activity ... Removing these mandates means that large groups of people, people in my situation, immunocompromised or aging people have to take much more extreme steps to protect our health."

Sophie Desrosiers, whose three-year-old son has an upper respiratory condition, said the lifting of mask mandates leaves her child even more vulnerable to COVID-19.

"People are saying that we have to adapt. I don't disagree, but I don't think it's too much to ask that we keep masks on until the under-fives have the opportunity to be vaccinated," she said.

Improving health indicators

Desrosiers said she and her family do everything they can to stay at home but potential exposures still creep into their lives, such as when they need to go out for errands or doctor's appointments.

"We haven't gone to a restaurant. We haven't gone to a movie. We haven't done anything since March 2020, why can't I at least feel safe going to the grocery store?" she said. "Can they not just wear a mask to go buy a bag of milk just until everybody has the opportunity to be vaccinated?"

The province said improving health indicators, such as a stable test positivity rate and declining hospitalizations, as well as Ontario's high vaccination rates and the availability of antiviral treatments, allow for the plan to remove most mask mandates on March 21 and end all remaining public health orders a month later.

Dr. Roderick Lim of the Paediatric Emergency Department at London Health Sciences Centre said the government has to balance the interests of public health in Ontario with the interest of people wanting to return to a "normal life."

Those who are feeling anxious about the recent announcement should reach out to a trusted health-care professional, he said, noting that it could help parents navigate their questions and fears.

For Shoshanah Jacobs and their partner, news of mask mandates being lifted prompted a decision to pull their children, aged four and seven, out of school.

They don't want to risk an infection, but also worry about their children potentially passing on the virus to someone who is more vulnerable, Jacobs said.

For now, their children are on a remote learning wait-list, although it's uncertain if their spots are guaranteed.

"We don't really know what's going to happen ... In the past, we've shifted, we've had the absolute privilege and flexibility to be able to shift our working hours to nighttime, which we will have to do again," said Jacobs.

"It feels like we are being punished."

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: health and safety guidelines ^[4]

COVID-19 ^[5]

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