



Child Care During the Pandemic: British Columbia

A Case Study to Accompany
"Child Care in Post-Pandemic Canada"

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September 8, 2020

CARDUS

OVERVIEW

From the beginning of the pandemic in British Columbia, child care was declared an essential service. Providers were not ordered to close but were also not forced to stay open. According to various child-care providers, the pandemic did not so much create problems as exacerbate existing challenges. Diverse forms of child care were available to families during the pandemic, but the crisis highlights the province’s inequitable treatment of providers based on the type of care they provide.

It is helpful to understand the types of care recognized in the province. British Columbia has four categories of care: licensed child care, registered license-not-required child care, license-not-required child care, and in-child’s-own-home care. The province has embarked on the creation of a \$10-a-day system, converting approximately 2,500 spaces to a prototype system primarily funded through the multilateral agreement with the federal government.

According to 2019 Statistics Canada data, 58 percent of children in BC under the age of six were in non-parental care. The chart below indicates the type of non-parental care in which children were enrolled.

Type of child-care arrangement among those in non-parental care, household population aged zero to five years

Type of Care Among Those in Non-parent Care	
Daycare centre/preschool	56.2
Relative other than parent	34.8
Non-relative in child’s home	8.5
Family child care home	12.8
Before- or after-school program	7.6
Other arrangement	2.9

Note: Respondents selected all that applied resulting in a sum exceeding 100%
Source: Statistics Canada. [Table 42-10-0005-01 Type of child care arrangement, household population aged 0 to 5 years](#)

For the 56.2 percent of children using daycare centres or preschools, these may be licensed or unlicensed and may be not-for-profit or market based.

CHALLENGES

Communication and trust. Child-care providers received little guidance from government as the pandemic began, and in important instances they received new information from government only on the nightly news. Parents got a one-sided look at child-care problems in the pandemic, largely from the media. At the same time as families were told to stay home with their children and schools were closed, child-care providers were told that they were an essential service and needed to stay open. Marley Jane Cummings, a Montessori child-care provider in Victoria, told Jane Boyd at *45 Conversations* that she typically follows school closures, so this was a confusing deviation for her.¹

Poor communication between providers and the government prior to the pandemic did not improve after the pandemic began in mid-March. Child-care providers' trust in government actions remains low. Continuing confusion exists over pre-pandemic government funding that appears to prioritize centre-based, not-for-profit group care over in-home or private providers.

Funding. Prior to the pandemic, the CCOF (Child Care Operating Funding) was inequitably applied, based on the type of care. For example, the rate of CCOF for the category of licensed group child care for a child under thirty-six months for more than four hours is \$12.00. For a child in a licensed family child care, under the same circumstances, the amount was \$3.70.² (Funding rates differed again based on the credentials of the early childcare educator.) This existing inequity had vast ramifications during the pandemic, because temporary emergency funding (TEF) was based on the CCOF amount.

Planning. Another challenge has been planning for the future. Many child-care providers were unable to make decisions until the province released the back-to-school plan. This situation was exacerbated by the poor communication from the government.

Staffing. The retention of early childhood educators (ECEs) in British Columbia was a challenge before the COVID-19 pandemic. Adding to the existing challenge, many providers have young children of their own and will make decisions about their own employment based on BC's back-to-school plan.

Health and safety. Child-care providers in BC are not subject to changing staff-child ratios. That said, providers need to put health measures in place, which may include parents (adults) not entering the child-care space. The cost of personal protective equipment is a challenge unique to the pandemic, alongside the cost of additional time and resources to clean more often and more carefully. Many daycares did not hire additional cleaning staff, and after the pandemic the demands for this level of cleaning will no longer be feasible.

¹ Jane Boyd, "Talking Child Care with Marley June Cummings During COVID-19," *45 Conversations* (blog), April 2, 2020, <https://45conversations.com/talking-child-care-marley-june-cummings-covid-19/>.

² See "Child Care Operating Funding—Base Funding," <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/family-social-supports/caring-for-young-children/running-daycare-preschool/child-care-operating-funding/base-funding>.

PROVINCIAL RESPONSE

The provincial government offered monetary support in the form of TEF to child-care providers already in receipt of CCOF. The funding was seven times the CCOF amount if the child care stayed open and two times the CCOF amount if the child care closed.

TEF has been extended as of writing until August 31, 2020. The TEF contributed to the following outcomes depending on the circumstances of the provider:

- saved some providers from closing permanently;
- compelled some providers to stay open even if few spaces were being used or the owners didn't want to be open, due to health concerns;
- allowed some providers to close with a comfortable profit; and
- compelled some providers to close permanently, because they couldn't make ends meet.

The problem with the TEF appears to be (at least) twofold: First, the initial inequity of the CCOF was exacerbated in this crisis. Second, the TEF was based on enrollment, not attendance.

One anecdotal example illustrates the TEF problem. Experienced family-child-care provider Corey Sunray explained the problem with the TEF in a statement released to the media. She cared for seven children before the pandemic, but only one child required care after public health officials advised parents to keep children home. Corey would have liked to close her operation to protect the health of her family, but would receive only two times the CCOF funding—not enough to meet costs while closed. If she remained open, she would receive seven times the CCOF funding, but this would still be less than half of her income if no children attended. She calculated that if she stayed open with the TEF funding, she would still need five children to attend in order to remain viable. This was an unlikely scenario. Some larger centres were able to navigate the situation in large part because they receive significantly more TEF funding. Corey was in contact with a large centre that was able to remain viable by laying off staff, collecting the larger TEF payout for licensed group child care while retaining about one-sixth of the children in their care.³

Child care was declared to be an essential service, but families were told to stay home, and they did. The extent to which stay-at-home orders would be enforced or followed was unknown especially at the start of the pandemic. The result was empty spaces even in child-care spots for essential workers.

The provincial government is committed to implementing its \$10-a-day daycare system. The province has prioritized not-for-profit care, yet 80 percent of child care in BC is in-home or privately run, says Pamela Wallberg, founder of the Child Care Professionals of BC.⁴ When the pandemic hit, the BC government was focused on implementing the \$10-a-day system. The pandemic required shifting priorities toward the provision of child care as an essential service. This shift required rapid engagement with all providers in the province, including those outside the \$10-a-day framework, who had less established relationships with the government.

³ Statement by Corey Sunray presented in "Child Care Providers Speak Out Re: Inadequate COVID 19 Funding Offered," March 27, 2020.

⁴ Pamela Wallberg, interview by Andrea Mrozek, phone, June 16, 2020.

CONSIDERING THE FUTURE

The child-care providers operating in homes or privately may feel left out, exposed in the current health crisis, and unsupported by government while simultaneously being told they are an essential service. Funding inequities and poor communication from the province have left providers feeling ignored and unappreciated.

Even as COVID-19 cases rise in British Columbia, just in advance of children's return to school on September 10, the province is not considering another shut down. Rather, reports indicate that managing the spread will be accomplished in other ways, such as by increased contact tracing. This known plan may help decrease uncertainty for all types of child-care providers through a second wave.

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