

COVID-19 Childcare Chaos: Perspectives from educators and parents in British Columbia

July 2020

- Many childcare workers felt unprotected and undervalued during the first wave of COVID-19
- Parents left work, and were unable to return to or find new work, because of uncertainty around childcare
- Lack of childcare is disproportionately affecting mothers in terms of unpaid care work and formal employment
- Lack of childcare made it difficult for single parents to access necessities while following physical distancing
- Both parents and childcare workers felt there was a lack of clear COVID-19 guidelines regarding childcare



Background

On 17 March 2020, Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry, declared COVID-19 a public health emergency in British Columbia and the majority of childcare centres across the province closed to all but the families of essential workers. Concurrently, many workplaces either closed or asked employees to work from home. Childcare facilities began reopening in June and July 2020.

Purpose

This brief provides an initial rapid analysis of experiences and perspectives

of both parents and childcare educators during the initial wave of COVID-19 in order to assess impacts and inform policy responses.

Methods

These preliminary findings drawn from interviews with childcare educators (8) from a variety of types of centres (including licenced and unlicensed/ non-profit and for-profit/in-home and institutional) and parents (11) who used childcare services prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Sampling was voluntary, with requests for participants circulated

through social media posts and non-profit organizations. All childcare educators interviewed identified as women; seven parents identified as women and four identified as men. Interviewees were located in the lower mainland of British Columbia. Interviews were conducted over the phone or by electronic means between 1 May and 15 June. Framework analysis was used to develop these initial rapid results, illustrating the multidimensional effects of childcare closures. Ethics approval was provided by the Office of Research Ethics at Simon Fraser University.

PARENTS	EDUCATORS
Impossible choices	
<p>Over half of parents interviewed were not working because of childcare closures. Some had left work due to centre closures:</p> <p><i>“The second reason why I left my work - my kid, she left preschool, because schools are closed, the preschool closed.”</i></p> <p>Other parents noted that lack of childcare prevented them returning to work:</p> <p><i>“I have no plans for his childcare. I have nothing. I don’t know what we’re going to do. If they said – if they told us right tomorrow that I need daycare for him, I don’t think I could figure that out.”</i></p>	<p>During the initial weeks of the outbreak many educators felt unprepared and uninformed about how to protect the children in their care, themselves and their families. As one educator stated:</p> <p><i>“I’m worried about the safety of the little people I take care off. That’s what I worry about.”</i></p> <p>Concerns about infection caused educators, particularly those that were older or with health conditions, to consider leaving work. However, if their centre stayed open, they were not eligible for the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit. Consequently, they had to choose between protecting their health or their income:</p>



PARENTS	EDUCATORS
Impossible choices	
<p>And for others it prevented them from finding work:</p> <p><i>“I’ve had one interview on the phone, but the kids were in the background. She asked how I would manage with them. I said I don’t know, because I don’t.”</i></p> <p>In heterosexual and cis gender families, mothers were most likely to give up work because they earned less than fathers:</p> <p><i>“women are under that logic of well I guess you make more so I guess I’m the one staying home. Yeah and [I wonder] how much it also will affect our career development in the long run because of this.”</i></p> <p>Employment among women with toddlers or school-aged children fell 7% between February and May, compared with a 4% decrease for fathers.</p>	<p><i>“It wasn’t an option to be laid off. If we chose not to take the work offered, that would mean just being at home and not collecting any money.”</i></p> <p>One educator interviewed did have to self-quarantine due to a possible exposure, which she was only able to do without financial penalty because of combined sick and vacation days:</p> <p><i>“I only had enough coverage for the first week, and then I wouldn’t have been paid the second. I was fortunate that it did go into spring break.”</i></p> <p>The average salary for educators in British Columbia is just \$18 per hour; many do not have access to extended health benefits or paid sick days.</p>

Women on the frontlines at home and at work	
<p>Not only were women giving up work to stay home, they were taking on the majority of childcare responsibilities:</p> <p><i>“I mean, I became, you know, the person responsible for the kids 24/7 and it sort of became obvious that I’m the person responsible for the kids. I mean, we both need childcare to work, right, my husband also needs childcare and he wants to go to work, but I don’t think he really gets that.”</i></p> <p><i>“And, again, it’s not just for obviously for women but women often come, they end up being, taking the brunt of this.”</i></p> <p>For single parents, lack of childcare meant they struggled to get necessities while keeping themselves and their children safe:</p> <p><i>“So grocery shopping and supply shopping has been a challenge again because they really encourage you not to go with your child, but when you’re a single mom what are you going to do? Leave the kid at home? So that has definitely been a challenge.”</i></p> <p>While Dads are doing more parenting in the context of COVID-19, Moms still spend the most time taking care of the children.</p>	<p>Educators caring for children of essential workers, often felt unprotected and at risk, something they felt was unrecognized by decision-makers and the public:</p> <p><i>“We’re not, and we’re not even allowed to wear masks, because it could scare the children. So even hospital workers, they’re still having protection, but for us in the field, we’re very, very exposed, because we can’t wear gloves, we can’t wear masks, and yet we are, like –“</i></p> <p><i>“We are people working without any protection really. We try, and we have our protocols for when the parents drop off, but sometimes, you know, you come within that six feet when you’re taking that child from the parent.”</i></p> <p><i>“I don’t think that people are really recognising how much we’re putting ourselves at risk.”</i></p> <p><i>“Like you have a desk to sit at. OK, you can isolate. Well, there’s no desks in childcare as you well know.”</i></p> <p><i>“I feel like, especially in the beginning, there were so many ECEs that were angry that they were considered essential workers and not a lot of resources were given to them, or information was given to them.”</i></p> <p>97% of childcare educators in Canada are women.</p>





PARENTS	EDUCATORS
Undervalued and under appreciated	

Almost all of the mothers interviewed described being made to feel like a “bad mom” for reasons ranging from having their children engage in more screen time than usual to having to take their kids grocery shopping:

“I go to the cashier who was like, ‘Why are you taking your kid to get groceries’ and I was just, ‘I don’t know where to put him’, like I can’t leave him alone, right... I feel like I was being a very bad mom.”

Many reported extreme stress and anxiety stating:

“I feel powerless. It is a nightmare.”

Without childcare they did not have the time and space to take care of themselves, as one mom asked:

“When are we actually going to talk about our pain, and suffering when our kids are not around to listen?”

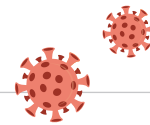
[71% of Canadian women report feeling more anxious, depressed, isolated, overworked or ill because of increased unpaid care work caused by COVID-19.](#)

Not only did many educators express frustration that their risk was not recognized, they felt “taken for granted” compared to other essential workers and repeatedly noted that “no one is clapping for us”, referring to the 7pm neighbourhood noise making to show support for healthcare workers.

“You know, there were a lot of like, you know, they’re clapping for the nurses, they’re clapping for all the essential workers, but they never mention us. Like, we’re taking care of your children and yet nobody’s clapping for us.”

Many noted this reflected a long-standing disregard for the essential work of childcare educators:

“I still find a little bit that we’re not valued as much as maybe we should be sometimes. I mean, I’ve felt that for thirty years, I’ve never from the public and felt very much valued.”



Unclear guidelines	
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Parents felt that communications around childcare closures and openings was unclear. One parent took his daughter to childcare only to find it closed. Many parents interviewed in June expressed confusion around re-opening policies for childcare centres, particularly compared to the school system:

“I would say one last thing is more again from a daycare perspective is that the communication around the opening of daycares is not very clear. Like so I don’t really know like – they’ve said that schools are back 1 June. I’m assuming that, that means that daycares are also back 1 June, but again it’s not very – and I don’t know if they’re trying to on purpose make it very vague because they’re trying to leave it up to people.”

“In my mind I was thinking to myself how is a five-year old who’s in kindergarten any different than a five-year old that’s in daycare? Why is it that it’s so clear-cut from a school perspective but yet it’s this really, extremely grey area on the daycare perspective?”

[Childcare advocates recommend childcare be integrated into the Ministry of Education.](#)

Childcare educators felt that provincial guidelines during the early phase of the outbreak were unclear and that there was a disconnect between guidelines from the Ministry of Health, regional health authorities and Ministry of Education. One educator explained:

“The government needs to be more cut and dry.”

Lack of clear policies and guidelines resulted in a downloading of responsibility on to educators, which in turn resulted in inequities reflecting differences in capacity, particularly between large well-resourced, and smaller facilities. One educator in a group center noted colleagues in family facilities did not have the same access to information:

“They only could rely on the communication from the government, so they were calling me and just going, like, what do we do? Like, do we have these families, are they allowed to come in the centre? They felt that there were a lot of unanswered questions.”

[British Columbia was one of the few provinces that did not mandate childcare centres close, even when educators asked for a temporary province-wide closure.](#)





PARENTS	EDUCATORS
Looking ahead	
<p>Many parents expressed ambiguity about what was to come. Some decided not to put their child back in care because of concerns about the costs and having to pull children out if they had a cold or cough:</p> <p><i>“Like it’s inexpensive, so if we do decide to go, I mean, kids pick up stuff from each other so quickly that all of a sudden we could be like a week in and then we have to be out for two weeks, and if she gets sick that means the whole family has to isolate for two weeks to take the precautionary measures to make sure that we don’t have something like COVID.”</i></p>	<p>Educators expressed frustration that their concerns were not being prioritized as centres began to reopen:</p> <p><i>“I felt a little bit too, like, okay, you’re ECEs can you just go back and take care of these children. And I think the fear that a lot of people had going back, wasn’t addressed. They just felt like they weren’t being heard, and I think that just gave them some – they just felt sort of marginalised and just kind of not valued.”</i></p> <p><i>“I don’t feel like we were really heard... I just don’t feel like priority was given to us at all.”</i></p>

Recommendations

- As essential workers, childcare educators require paid sick days, extended health benefits, income support and job security; during a public health emergency risk of infection should be a justifiable reason to leave work and access income support.
- In the case of a further COVID-19 wave, or similar crisis resulting in childcare centre closures, financial support that allows parents/guardians to work reduce hours so they can care for their children may prevent parents giving up work entirely in order to access programs like the Canadian Emergency Relief Benefit, and will ease the double labour burden particularly born by women.
- In the case of a further COVID-19 wave, or similar crisis resulting in childcare centre closures, single parents and priority populations should have access to childcare for periods of time they need to access necessities, look for work and care for themselves.
- Synchronising guidelines and regulations for schools and childcare facilities would reduce the confusion and anxiety experienced by both parents and educators.
- There is an urgent need for greater recognition and appreciation of the essential role childcare educators provide at all times, and especially in the context of a public health crisis.

[The province should continue to meet its commitments](#) to developing a more accessible and affordable childcare system.

- The federal government’s COVID-19 recovery strategy should include increased funding for childcare.

About

This brief reports on the initial findings of the [Gender and COVID-19 Project](#), funded by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research and based in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University. The project aims to document the gendered dynamics of the COVID-19 outbreak and gender gaps in preparedness and response measures, providing rapid guidance and recommendations to those crafting policies and delivering public health interventions. Following guidance from [UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee](#), early research outputs prioritize rapid analysis over perfect analysis. More in-depth research analysis will be provided in due course.

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For more information on this project, please contact Dr Julia Smith, Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University: jhs6@sfu.ca

