

November 9, 2021

Dear Child Care and Early Years Providers,

I am writing to both child care and early years providers and the parents/guardians of children in care to share my assessment that the pandemic situation is improving and to thank you for your continued efforts to reduce risks for children in care. Quality child care and early learning makes such a difference for the well-being of children and families.

My outlook this fall is one of cautious optimism. I am hopeful that we can continue to have safer spaces to learn and work. I am pleased to say we have now reached the 90 per cent mark of people 12 and older who have received their first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine and few people are currently requiring hospitalization with severe COVID-19 illness. Thank you to all those parents/guardians, child care and early years providers, teachers and residents who have received their COVID-19 vaccines. It continues to remain extremely important that anyone in our City who has not received their COVID-19 vaccines do so as soon as possible to help reduce risks in our communities. We know that young children remain unvaccinated and COVID-19 rates are highest in children who are under 12 years old. I know it can be concerning when you hear of children and/or colleagues in child care or early years settings testing positive for COVID-19. We need your help to keep outbreaks rare and limited, so parents and guardians are not left without care for their children, children do not miss in-person development opportunities by having to stay home, and you and/or your colleagues cannot go to work after an exposure to COVID-19. For anyone looking for more information about vaccine eligibility, locations and options, please visit OttawaPublicHealth.ca/COVID19Vaccine

How to keep children as safe as possible

While many child care and early years staff, parents and guardians now have the protection of vaccination, it is still very important for everyone to continue to be cautious and keep choosing activities that make COVID-19 transmission to children less likely. The most common source of COVID-19 infections for children and youth are household members. Following the [public health guidance](#) for child care and early years settings, including daily [screening](#) for COVID-19 symptoms, staying home and getting tested when sick or identified as a high-risk contact, physical distancing, limiting the number of close contacts, wearing a mask when indoors or in close contact with others, and getting vaccinated if eligible continue to be very important. Please ensure parents and guardians, as well as staff, follow the guidance from OPH's [online screening tool](#), including instructions on when to keep a child home from school and/or child care and when to seek COVID-19 testing. Screening and testing help ensure that COVID-19 is not brought into child care and early years settings and/or schools.

Limiting close contacts, especially for unvaccinated children and youth, means:

- limiting the number of extra-curricular activities where there are different groups in close contact.

- choosing outdoor activities as much as possible,
- avoiding prolonged and unmasked indoor exposures such as playdates, and
- keeping social activities outside of child care and early years and/or school to smaller groups to make follow-up easier if there is a COVID-19 exposure.

OPH continues to work closely with your sector to promote and encourage vaccination for child care and early years providers.

Increasing testing options for families

There is a new option for parents and guardians to seek COVID-19 testing for their children and their families, in addition to the COVID-19 Assessment Centre appointment-based PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) testing. There is now a Do-It-Yourself Test Kit (PCR) available by appointment at the CHEO- Brewer Park Arena location. Parents can test children two months of age and older who have symptoms or have been identified as a high-risk contact, using a PCR test. This service is not available for adults through CHEO. CHEO manages the online appointment booking system and booking form. To book an appointment, please let parents/guardians know that they can visit OttawaPublicHealth.ca/COVIDtesting, where the form can be found.

The kit includes instructions, registration form and self-swab PCR test. Once complete, the test kit is then dropped off at the Brewer Park Arena location for processing at the lab (**not** a 'rapid result' form of testing). Results are usually available within 48 hours. For more information on testing, visit OttawaPublicHealth.ca/COVIDtesting.

Vaccines for children ages 5 to 11 are coming

In the weeks to come, we anticipate announcements from the federal and provincial governments that will make COVID-19 vaccine available for children aged 5 to 11. I know families will have questions about the vaccines, and we are working with community partners to make sure all the needed information is available when COVID-19 vaccines are available for children in that age group. Planning is underway, and we will be ready to offer approved vaccines when they are supplied to us.

I urge everyone who is eligible for their COVID-19 vaccine to get fully vaccinated. This will help to protect you, your family, and the community. The higher the vaccination rates are in our community, the better chance we have of protecting those around us and keeping COVID-19 levels in the community and in child care, early years settings and schools low. Vaccination can also help to reduce the burden on families; it helps allow child care and early years providers, parents and guardians to continue to work, as well as keep children in care and students in class. When child care and early years staff are fully vaccinated, they most often do not need to isolate after being exposed to COVID-19.

Communicating with your sector

You may have heard of, or received letters yourself, about people testing positive for COVID-19 in your child care or early years setting. OPH investigates all situations where someone in a child care or early years setting tests positive. We work closely with the sector to determine who is a high-risk contact and to quickly communicate with child care and early years staff, parents and guardians of children who are directly affected. Usually, high risk contacts are limited to one cohort dismissed, but

sometimes multiple cohorts can be affected. Rest assured, OPH uses the most cautious approach when deciding who is a high-risk contact to prevent further spread of COVID-19.

When there is transmission of COVID-19 at a child care or early years setting, OPH responds quickly to support the setting, cohort and families with targeted approaches to prevent wider spread. OPH may recommend setting-wide testing and/or closure if we think there could already be wider spread across different cohorts/classes. If a particular household is directly affected, they will receive the information from OPH on the next steps their family members need to take. Those who are contacted by OPH should please follow the directions given and seek testing if advised.

As a child care and early years provider, I understand that you need information so you can go to work and respond if COVID-19 impacts your job. I am committed to making sure you have clear, accessible, and transparent information. Feedback from providers also helps us improve our communications.

Reaching out for help

As the pandemic continues, I am aware that many members of our communities continue to struggle. This has not been easy. You are not alone. Please reach out if you need help. Call 2-1-1 or visit 211Ontario.ca to find out about financial and social support during COVID-19. If you need immediate help, call The Ottawa Distress Line/ Help Line at 613-238-3311 or The Mental Health Crisis Line at 613-722-6914.

We also have a number of resources on our website; OttawaPublicHealth.ca/COVID19 and [Supporting Child Care and Early Years during COVID-19](#) . You can also call our Ottawa Public Health Information Centre at 613-580-6744 to speak to a public health nurse.

I want to thank you for your understanding and resilience. Over the last 20 months, I have asked the residents of Ottawa to do hard things to reduce the spread of COVID-19, and I want to thank you for the sacrifices you have made. Please know OPH is here to support you, the children you care for, and our communities. We will continue to work closely with the child care and early years sector who have displayed incredible dedication in the most challenging of situations. We are all working together to reduce COVID-19 transmission to keep children healthy in both mind and body.

Sincerely,



Dr. Vera Etches, MD, MHSc, CCFP, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health
Ottawa Public Health