

OP-ED

Protecting the children must be the priority before childcare centers reopen | Opinion

BY SUSAN NEIMAND

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Before childcare centers reopen, well-thought-out and stringent rules should be in place to protect children and teachers. GETTY IMAGES

I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees. I speak for the trees for the trees have no tongues.

Dr. Seuss

I am the Lorax. I speak for the children. I speak for the children, for the children have no voice.

COVID-19 has meant most childcare centers have closed, creating issues for parents who need to work during this challenging time. Much attention, in articles and otherwise, has focused on childcare from a business perspective. But children need to be front and center in any discussion. We cannot reopen the economy without reopening childcare centers. Early childhood is the time of the most brain development, and children need high-quality brain stimulating centers.

But what will the reopening of childcare centers look like?

Typically, children come to centers with a family member. They are brought to their classrooms and signed in. Teachers are in those classrooms with children working on puzzles, drawing pictures, dressing up, etc. Children and teachers participate in welcoming rituals, which include hugging their teachers and friends. The daily schedule includes circle time — maybe 15 children sitting in a circle and sharing. Playground time has numerous classes using equipment in rotations. Snack and lunch times teach children manners and proper etiquette. Children are dismissed to their family members and signed out from the classroom.

Will children be dropped off at the door of the childcare center and not walked to their classrooms by a relative? Many centers serve infants and toddlers from six weeks to 2 years old. Many of these tiny children have difficulty separating from parents; many older children have difficulty, as well. After such a long period at home, separation anxiety may increase.

Will children's temperatures be taken at the front door? This would ensure the safety of the centers. Who will take their temperatures? How will daily temperature-taking be explained to 1-year-olds?

Will children be greeted by teachers in masks, gloves and other protective garments? People in protective gear can scare even adults. Now imagine a 2-year-old faced with someone in a mask and protective wear. And who will enforce the rules of protective equipment — and social distancing — in centers?

Will children need to wear masks? Who would ensure that the masks stay on? Imagine how many times an adult teaching toddlers might need to place the mask on each child.

Will children be able to move freely, to dress up, to be active, to be social in the centers? These are hallmarks of high-quality early-childhood education. How can this be done while social distancing? How can social distancing be explained to a 3-year-old?

Will children be hugged as they used to be when greeted? How will children react to not being hugged? How will lack of contact be explained to young children? How will diapers be changed? Faces washed? Noses wiped? Boo-boos bandaged?

Children get dirty and carry germs. They have accidents. They don't always properly wash their hands. What consideration has been given to these "leakers"? How will classrooms be adequately sanitized?

Many children left their centers without closure. How will they reintegrate into the center? How will children transition successfully from the home back to the school environment? Many homes have different rules and behavioral expectations for children than do centers. While children are flexible, how can this be achieved while social distancing? And while wearing masks?

What about the children's mental health? Many teachers deal with mental-health issues, but these times are much different. Are teachers capable of successfully dealing with issues that arise because of food insecurity, no income and increased financial pressures on families? I'd like to think that every early-childhood teacher is well-trained; but many teachers work with the most basic childcare training and minimal teaching requirements. How will they address these needs? And how will the teacher mental-health issues be addressed so as not to spill into the classroom?

The business community needs to recognize the importance of the child side of childcare. Positive early-childhood experiences lay the foundation for positive school experiences for the children's entire educational future. Ignoring these questions will only complicate matters for children and affect an entire generation of young children.

I don't have the answers. But I do have questions that must be considered. I know it will be imperative for a cross-section of stakeholders to be impaneled and consulted before state and local authorities inadvertently make broad-brush decisions that may be to the detriment of our youngest citizens.



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