

Approved Family Day Home Monitoring and Ratios: Questions and Options

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The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in temporary changes to the rules and regulations for family day home agencies and approved family day homes in Edmonton and Alberta.¹ These changes have included an increase in the number of children allowed in day homes and a decrease in the monitoring of those day homes by agencies.

Decreased monitoring, combined with increased ratios, may adversely affect early learning and care in day homes.² Some key concerns of family day home agencies, approved family day home educators, and families with young children are the following:³

- Edmonton agencies are concerned about how best to monitor and oversee day homes during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Edmonton day home educators are concerned about managing numerous new challenges brought by the COVID-19 crisis, including additional time spent cleaning and disinfecting, purchasing necessary supplies and equipment, maintaining physical distancing between children, modifying programming towards developmentally appropriate individual activities, and emotionally and mentally supporting children.
- Families are concerned about the health and safety of their children in child care settings during the pandemic period. Families expect that there are quality-enhancing requirements in place in day homes to assure a higher-quality level of early learning and care.

Questions remain about the changes to monitoring and ratios for family day homes and agencies in Edmonton and Alberta during and after the COVID-19 crisis.

Question 1: What does monitoring of day homes by agencies look like right now, and what will it look like after the COVID-19 crisis?

In-person monitoring of day homes during the COVID-19 crisis has been reduced. Prior to COVID-19, agencies were required to send a home visitor/consultant to each of their active day homes a minimum of six times per year for home visits, and to complete a minimum of two safety checks per year. In addition, an agency was to increase the frequency, content, and

¹ For definitions of family day home agencies and approved family day homes in Alberta, please see the note at the end of this brief. In this brief, the term “agency” refers to family day home agencies, and “day home” refers to “approved family day homes.”

² *Defining and measuring the quality of early learning and child care: A literature review* (2019). Retrieved June 8, 2020 from <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/early-learning-child-care/reports/2019-defining-measuring-quality.html>.

³ From April 17-28, 2020, agency directors and coordinators representing the seven Edmonton family day home agencies participated in one-on-one telephone interviews about what their agencies and day homes are experiencing, as well as what they are hearing from families of children in their care.

duration of home visits based on the day home educator's experience and need for monitoring, training, and support; the number, age, and needs of children in care; and the agency's history with the day home educator. For recruitment and screening of new day home educators, agencies were to conduct two home visits.⁴

On March 30, due to concerns about COVID-19, agencies were ordered to replace regular home visits and safety checks of approved family day homes with remote options until further notice; only urgent in-person visits are currently allowed.⁵ In response, the seven Edmonton agencies implemented a range of modifications to their routine monitoring procedures. Edmonton agencies are currently conducting home visits, but with varying levels of frequency and depth. Three agencies are doing home visits monthly by video, two agencies monthly by telephone, one agency biweekly by telephone, and one agency biweekly by a mix of both. Some agencies are also continuing to complete safety checks, with four choosing to do agency-led video safety checks and one administering educator-led written safety checks. However, one agency has postponed safety checks and another has put safety checks on hold altogether. Many agencies paused the processing of applications from new educators because remote screening was not seen to be as effective as in-person methods. Some agencies indicated that remote monitoring may lessen the ability of agency staff to identify and address instances where day home educators are not meeting standards and regulations.

Options. To ensure the consistency and effectiveness of processes across Edmonton and Alberta, day homes and agencies could benefit from more clarity and direction around remote monitoring. On May 25, agencies were told that at least 50% of routine monitoring and safety check visits per day home educator per year should now be made in-person and more guidance is coming.⁶

There is opportunity to learn from the experience of the baseline regulations being temporarily relaxed during the pandemic period. A best practice going forward could be for agencies to connect with the day homes they oversee on a more frequent basis through remote communication. This would add another level of oversight to regular monitoring procedures, in addition to the in-person monitoring already required through routine home visits and safety checks.

A return to regular in-person monitoring of day homes by agencies is essential following the crisis. While temporary changes are no doubt necessary to ensure public health and safety, in-person monitoring was in place before COVID-19 to assure a higher-quality level of learning and care.⁷ A return to regular monitoring is especially important because accreditation was recently

⁴ *Family Day Home Standards Manual for Alberta* (March 2019). Retrieved May 25, 2020 from <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/9781460143124>.

⁵ *Re: Approved family day home - Provider to child ratio and home visits*. Sent March 30, 2020 by Alberta Children's Services.

⁶ *Re: Approved family day home – Updated directive on home visits*. Sent May 25, 2020 by Alberta Children's Services.

⁷ *Become an approved family day home*. Retrieved June 8, 2020 from <https://www.alberta.ca/become-an-approved-family-day-home.aspx>.

discontinued in Alberta and has not been replaced with any comparable measures to ensure quality in day homes.

Agencies may also require more funding and support to maintain the staffing levels necessary for appropriate monitoring and oversight of day homes during the COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, as of the end of April, four of the seven Edmonton agencies had laid off one home visitor/consultant each, indicating a reduced ability among agencies to conduct monitoring and oversight. With the increase in the number of children in some day homes (see below), thorough and transparent oversight by agencies right now is critical.

Finally, a plan for monitoring day homes during crisis situations, like the COVID-19 pandemic, could be created. This plan may include clear guidelines for how agencies are to conduct urgent visits, safety checks, home visits, and screening visits of day homes. Ideally, this monitoring plan would be part of a larger crisis plan for all early learning and care in Alberta during emergencies. Any such plan needs to include full and open engagement of the entire early learning and care sector in Alberta.

Question 2: What do the ratios in day homes look like right now, and what will they look like after the COVID-19 crisis?

Ratios for care can affect quality.⁸ Prior to COVID-19, day home educators could care for up to 6 children between 0 to 12 years of age including their own children, with no more than 3 children aged 36 months or younger and a maximum of 2 children aged 24 months or younger.

On March 30, agencies were advised that day home educators were temporarily allowed to care for up to 6 children in their day homes, *not including their own children*. This rule change allowed day home educators' own school-aged children to remain in their homes while schools are closed. This change means that for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis, day homes have been allowed to increase their ratios to the same as those allowed for unregulated private providers. This essentially means that in any given day home, there could be an increase in the number of children between the ages of 3 to 12 equal to the number of the day home educators' own children in that age range. Over 30 of the estimated 480 approved family day homes in Edmonton are currently operating at this new, higher ratio.

Options. The lower day home ratios in place before COVID-19 were intended to ensure a higher-quality level of early learning and care. A reversal of the temporary change to ratios in day homes is important as soon as the crisis is over.

In addition, given the importance of ratios to safety and quality, an analysis of the effects of the temporarily increased ratios on the quality of care and the safety of children in day homes could be conducted. This analysis could provide valuable guidance for future crisis situations in Alberta.

⁸ One of the quality-enhancing benefits of choosing a day home is that “a maximum of 6 children in care supports safety and supervision of children.” For more information, see *Finding quality child care* Retrieved May 26, 2020 from <https://www.alberta.ca/finding-quality-child-care.aspx>.

Looking Ahead

The Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care believes that increasing the availability, affordability, and quality of early learning and care is a key element in our community's effort to reduce and eliminate poverty. Family day home agencies and approved family day homes play a vital role in providing regulated, approved early learning and care in Edmonton and Alberta. By addressing the questions and options described above, we both minimize any problems stemming from temporary changes to monitoring and ratios during the pandemic period and learn important lessons from the COVID-19 experience.

This brief is part of a series of documents created by the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care to address current topics in early learning and care that impact Edmonton. Jennifer Fischer-Summers is a Research Assistant at the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families at the University of Alberta. Correspondence can be sent to jfischers@ualberta.ca.

Note: Definitions

Family day home agencies are organizations contracted by the Government of Alberta to monitor approved family day homes according to provincial laws and regulations.⁹ Each agency employs administrative staff and home visitors/consultants that work closely with day home educators and parents to ensure the safety and well-being of children in approved family day homes.¹⁰

Approved family day homes offer child care in an individual's private residence to children of all ages with one day home educator. Each day home educator is contracted with and overseen by a family day home agency. This is in contrast to unlicensed, non-approved home-based child care, where there is no government oversight of care arrangements and caregivers are not monitored.¹¹

⁹ *Family Day Home Standards Manual for Alberta* (March 2019). Retrieved May 25, 2020 from <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/9781460143124>.

¹⁰ *Become an approved family day home*. Retrieved May 25, 2020 from <https://www.alberta.ca/become-an-approved-family-day-home.aspx>.

¹¹ *About child care in Alberta*. Retrieved May 25, 2020 from <https://www.alberta.ca/about-child-care-in-alberta.aspx>.