

Making Connections on the Front Lines of Child Care

"It's very rewarding for me to have the opportunity to still come in to work, do what I love, and see the children that I work with continue to grow and continue to develop"

- Brittney Donaldson

Brittney Donaldson has been working in YMCA of Oakville child care for seven years. On meeting Brittney, even virtually, it's easy to see why children in her care gravitate to her. She has an infectious positive, and welcoming energy that is accentuated only by her easy, kind smile. She loves working with children and "having a front row seat to how they are growing and developing". Which is why it was difficult on many levels for Brittney, when YMCA child care centres were temporarily closed in March of 2020 due to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

"When it first shutdown, we were only expecting to be off for three weeks. And then it just continued to go on and on and before we knew it, it was five months," said Brittney. She recalls the uncertainty of returning to work but appreciated the support and communication of her supervisor that kept her team connected through group chats and phone calls. "My director at the time, Stephanie, was very supportive of us, keeping us informed to the best of her ability." Recalled Brittney.

On top of worries about coronavirus, Brittney worried that even when the child care centres reopened that if enough parents chose to keep their kids at home, that due to staff to child ratios, she feared she may not have a job to return to. But in July, the YMCA sent out a survey to staff to see if they were interested in returning to work – which Brittney appreciated. "They weren't forcing anyone, they understand, everybody might have different feelings with regards to coming back to work, so I really appreciated that. I looked at that as at least we know we are good to go," said Brittney.

Brittney was happy to be returning to work but was apprehensive about returning to her job. Public health guidelines said the best way to prevent the virus was keeping physical distance from others, but in her toddler classroom with 1.5 to 3 year olds, the young children were not required to wear masks and part of her responsibilities include wiping noses, diapering, potty training and comforting them when they are hurt or upset. All of which required close contact. To address these concerns, the YMCA introduced new safety protocols and procedures and offered training to staff before returning to work. "We had to go over new policies and procedures, new sanitization protocols, all these different things just to make sure that we were safe and we were keeping the children safe and our families safe. So going back in August, I felt confident. I felt safe. I will say that" said Brittney.

In addition to cohorting, increased disinfection and removal of soft materials in the centres, staff are now required to wear face masks, protective eye goggles and gloves. This new personal protective equipment was an adjustment for staff and the children. Brittney was impressed with how well the children adapted. "The children are amazing. Of course at first they were a little bit like, who are you, you're new, I don't know you, and plus now I can't even see your whole face. I can't see you fully. But when you build a relationship with the children, it still comes easy. Even though they can't see

you, they get to know you through your voice and your action.” Brittney recalls at first smiling at the children but felt she didn’t know if they knew she was smiling through all of the protective equipment. Over time, she knew they could tell because they would smile back. They could see the smile in her eyes.

Brittney felt there were many benefits to the return to child care this year. For the children, it provided them an opportunity to get to develop socially, to know other children and build meaningful relationships and helped them to continue to grow and to develop.

As a profession, Brittney is thrilled that the pandemic has shone a light on the importance of the child care profession. “It’s great to know that now we are being appreciated and now other can look at us in a more serious way. We are not just babysitting, we are actually helping to not only cultivate their potential and help them develop to the best of their abilities we are also really needed in the community and to support the economy as well. So people can do what they need to do to take care of their family.”

Brittney is one example of the many amazing staff in our child care centres who put themselves out on the front line of child care to be there for the children in our care, our families and our community. Thank you to all of our child care workers!

