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Opening child care service with restricted regular operation

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Minister Stamp: As of 8 June, all children can attend child care within limited scope

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The Ministry for Children, Family, Refugees and Integration has issued the following state:

North Rhine-Westphalia is continuing its clear concept of gradual relaxation of day care services, pending the development of the pandemic. Day care facilities for all preschool children will reopen as of 28 May 2020 as planned. On 8 June, North Rhine-Westphalia will take the next step in its reopening plan and switch from the expanded emergency care to limited regular operation. All children can then attend their day care or child care facilities to a reduced extent.

"I know that many families have reached the limits of their capacity over the past weeks, and many children have lost opportunities every day due to the lack of early childhood education," says Family Minister Joachim Stamp. "I was firm in my conviction to give all children the chance for care services as quickly as possible to the extent that it was responsible. Thus, I am very pleased that we can take the next step of our reopening plan from extended emergency care to limited regular operation, in light of the reduction in the infection rate."

In the event of lowering infection rates, the North Rhine-Westphalian Ministry for Families has drafted early conceptual recommendations, with interdisciplinary scientific monitoring from the fields of children's education and hygiene, as to how day care and child care can resume operation with a growing number of children during the pandemic. Limited regular operation shall occur within the framework of infection protection. Furthermore, the state is giving the facility operators time to be able to carefully prepare for the necessary switch. Limited regular operation as of 8 June has, like all steps in the reopening plan, been closely coordinated with the municipalities and all other beneficiaries.

Limited regular child care operation starting on 8 June:

- The ban on entering day cares and child cares will be lifted;
- prior emergency care will end;
- all children can come to day care with a reduced service of 35, 25 and 15 hours per week instead of 45, 35 and 25;
- day cares that feel they are capable of offering more hours due to space and staffing capacities can do so in coordination with the responsible supervisory authorities;
- day cares that, due to staffing, are incapable of offering this service can also offer reduced hours in coordination with the local youth office, but this should only happen in exceptional cases;
- cases of child protection and particular hardship must be considered in the service scope.

Limited regular operation starting on 8 June also applies to children whose parents were able to make use of more extensive care on an individual basis during the prior emergency care period. "I am appealing to all parents' solidarity," explains Family Minister Stamp. "The transition into this new phase of limited regular operation will be a great challenge. Not everything will go smoothly. All sides must be willing to compromise."

The commencement of child day care services with limited regular operation will entail quantitative and qualitative restrictions. The standards of the Children's Education Act cannot yet be reached, and the specialist requirements cannot be met. But the Family Ministry of North Rhine-Westphalia has defined clear standards for the limited regular operation:

- There are only fixed groups, no open concepts;
- each group will have at least one specialist;
- the groups will continue to be physically separated from each other;
- all contact must be reasonable, and hygiene concepts must be followed.

The ban on entering child day cares will be lifted on 8 June. All children may return to their caretakers. Yet because this field cannot yet be fully staffed, there may be reduced scopes of services.

The Family Ministry is monitoring the transition from expanded emergency care to limited regular operation via scientific supervision of a model municipality. Thousands of children and specialists at day care facilities are tested on a regular, weekly basis as the pandemic is observed and evaluated precisely.

The safety measures are undergoing occupational health-related inspection through additional scientific monitoring, and the extent to which workplace safety and hygiene measures must be taken to protect employees and children.

"We are keeping a close eye on employees' needs," says Minister Stamp. "That is very important to me, which is why we have not only opted for a sufficient amount of time leading up to this, but we will also concretely assist the day cares on site."

This includes:

- Delivery of 2 million FFP-2 masks and 3 million OP masks to the youth offices as initial help with work safety measures;
- financial allowance for the operators to balance out extraordinary additional strain caused by the work safety measures;
- telephone hotline for all day care lines in order to professionally answer questions of hygiene and workplace safety. This consultation has been available since 26 May 2020;
- personnel recruitment programme, which aims to acquire staff for day cares who can relieve the educational staff on site (e.g. washing hands, putting shoes on and taking them off, etc.).

According to Family Minister Stamp, "The step we are now taking is a big challenge for everyone involved. We are taking it cautiously, responsibly and with scientific supervision." The phase of restricted regular operations is expected to continue until 31 August 2020. The next steps will be decided in mid-August based on the scientific knowledge at the time.

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Please direct enquiries to the press office of the Ministry for Children, Family, Refugees and Integration, telephone 0211 837-2417.

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