



| NSW Department of Education

COVID safety in early childhood education and care services: Guidance

March 2022

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to services on a safe and practical approach to service delivery through the COVID-19 pandemic. Our first priority is the health, safety and wellbeing of children, educators and families.

This guidance has been prepared to assist businesses and is not a substitute for legal advice. This document has been developed in line with NSW Health advice, and the NSW Department of Education's school planning.

At the NSW Department of Education, we recognise the traditional custodians of the lands and waterways where we work and live. We celebrate the First Peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationship to Country and acknowledge the significance of Aboriginal cultures in Australia.

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Introduction

COVID-19 continues to present risks with transmission occurring in high-risk settings, including early childhood education and school-aged care.

This practical guide addresses practice and policy considerations to support services to continue to provide a safe care and learning environment for children while minimising opportunities for transmission.

Should a positive case arise, advice provided should enable the most effective containment measures to keep your service safe. Services should ensure that they consider and apply this guide with consideration of their own context.

This practical guide should be read in conjunction with Public Health Orders (PHO), noting that advice may be updated at any time.

The key components of this practical guide:

- COVID smart practices
- Meeting your regulatory responsibility
- Managing COVID positive cases in your service



COVID smart policies and procedures

Early childhood education and care services should consider the continuation of COVID smart policy and procedures to minimise the risk of transmission of COVID-19. This guide may assist with this.

Services should also review and revise their existing policies and procedures set out in regulations 168 and 169 of the National Regulations to ensure that their policies and procedures address all mandatory requirements as well as recommended practices in this document.

COVID-19 safety in your service

Mandatory COVID-19 safety requirements are based on health advice and Public Health Orders and must be followed by ECE services.

Services are obligated to ensure that they are up to date with all legal requirements and are applying these in practice at all times. This advice covers all service types including preschool, long day care, family day care, outside school hours care, vacation care, mobile and occasional care services.

COVID smart health measures include:

- Booster vaccinations are recommended three months following your second vaccine.
- Masks and face coverings are recommended in indoor environments where you cannot physically distance
- Covid safety plans
- Regular cleaning
- Strong hygiene practice, including hand washing.
- Physical distancing



Masks and face coverings

For the latest information on masks and face coverings indoor an early childhood education and care setting, please visit the covid safety [guidelines](#) page on the Department's website.

Vaccination requirements for ECE services

As the regulator of Education and Care Services in NSW, the Department's first priority is the health, safety and wellbeing of children and educators.

The [Public Health Order](#) relating to vaccination of education and care workers will not be extended beyond 13 May 2022.

In line with broader community settings, ECE services will now move to a risk-based assessment approach for their workforce, meaning that services may choose to implement their own policies around staff vaccination.

NSW Health continues to recommend two doses of the COVID-19 vaccination and a booster shot to reduce the risk of transmission within the community.

*Consider the Fair Work Ombudsman [COVID-19 vaccinations workplace rights and obligations guidelines](#) and adopt to service practices where relevant.

Booster vaccinations are recommended three months following your second vaccine.

Physical Distancing

The risk of transmission of COVID-19 can be reduced through physical distancing amongst staff members, children and visitors to service premises.

The below measures are recommended to support physical distancing within services:

- Practice physical distancing between adults of 1.5m, wherever possible.
- Where possible and applicable sleep children at least 1.5 metres apart or head to toe to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.
- Avoid any non-essential activities that involve close personal contact.
- Encourage appropriate outdoor programs to support distancing while considering sun safe practices.
- In school environments, it has been recommended that you should keep children in age cohorts. It is understood that this is not practical in OSHC services, and this is not a requirement. Services may choose to consider use of different play spaces as part of their COVID safety plan.

Where possible, services are recommended to implement the following controls to reduce direct contact with others:

- Install barriers to create space at sign-in areas, and seated areas.
- Modify shifts and rosters, or pick-up and drop-off times to reduce peak periods.
- Have parents collect children from outside the service.
- For families who are keeping their children at home for long periods, promote the [Early childhood learning packages \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://www.nsw.gov.au/early-childhood-learning-packages).

Meeting your regulatory responsibilities

Policies and Procedures

You should review your service's policies and procedures for dealing with infectious diseases and illness (regulations 85, 88, 168 and 169). You can:

- Refer to the best-practice tool [Staying Healthy - Preventing infectious diseases in early childhood education and care services](#)
- Call your local public health unit on 1300 066 055 for advice if needed.

You should provide educators, staff parents and carers with updates on your service's policies and procedures, and help them to implement these across the service.

Reporting requirements

All services must continue to notify the Department of Education as the Regulatory Authority for NSW of prescribed incidents, allegations and complaints.

All notifications should be entered via [NQA ITS](#) and must:

- Be made within the prescribed timeframe for the notification type
- Be made regardless of whether or not the parent, family or carer has requested further action or information about the incident or complaint
- Contain consistent and accurate information e.g. Time of incident and the names of people involved

It is important that services submit the notification within the required timeframe and more information can be added later.

NSW Health or the NSW Regulatory Authority (Department of Education) may provide direction in relation to closures due to a possible or positive case of COVID-19 linked to your service. If directed to close your service, you should:

- Comply with this direction.
- Notify us by submitting an I01 Notification of incident – Closure or reduction in number of children attending the service through the National Quality Agenda IT System (NQA ITS) .

You must notify us within 24 hours of closure however, we ask that you notify us as soon as possible. If your service is directed to close or reduce numbers (by NSW Health or NSW Department of Education) you will need to complete the service closure notification in NQA ITS.

When your service re-opens, log back in to NQA ITS and amend this notification to reflect the reopening date. Community and Mobile preschools that receive Start Strong funding and are closed for a period of time, should also notify the NSW Department of Education's funding team as a requirement of your funding agreement.

Phone: 1800 619 113

Email: ecec.funding@det.nsw.edu.au

Visits from the Regulatory Authority

The Department of Education needs to continue service visits to check regulatory compliance and protect children's safety and wellbeing.

All authorised officers follow best practice hygiene and current health advice when attending services. As per the health advice, non-essential visits may not proceed during periods of high community transmission rates or during an outbreak. Services will be notified as required.

The following guidelines list some of the extra precautions that the department's authorised officers are taking when planning a visit to your service:

- Officers will be fully vaccinated prior to attending your service. The Department will take responsibility for checking this status before allowing staff to attend visits.
- Officers are required to monitor the latest health advice and changes to restrictions as they emerge, and in consultation with their manager ensure that their work plans continue to reflect the current situation.
- Our officers need to comply with any additional requirements services have established to minimise risk such as temperature checks. If you have a COVID-19 declaration which all visitors to your service must read and sign, the Officer will sign this.
- Where possible, officers are required to spread out the frequency of visits to minimise risk of transmission between services.
- Where possible, visits will be arranged for the least busy times for your service and avoid drop-off and pick-up times. For example, scheduling visits when children will be outside, such as between 10-11am or 2-4pm.
- If an officer feels unwell for any reason, they will not be conducting visits and your service will be called and advised.
- Where possible, the officer will only speak to one person, maintaining physical distance, and keeping at least 1.5m from others. If possible, discussions should be undertaken in the outdoor area or another well-ventilated space (avoiding small office spaces).

Assessment and Rating Visits

- Officers may request assisted access or evidence from any online platforms that your service uses for communicating with parents, so this can be assessed prior to the visit.
- Officers may make an appointment with the Educational Leader prior to the visit to discuss the program via phone or video call.
- The focus of the visit will be to observe practice and routines, and where possible will avoid heavy traffic times such as drop-off and pick-up times.
- Shorter visits over 2 days are preferred (this will also depend on service size).
- During the visit, time will be divided between sighting, observing and discussing practice.
- Closing discussions will be kept short, with a follow up phone conference if convenient.



Risk management planning

- Services and providers should ensure they have up-to-date emergency contact details in NQA ITS. These details will be used should NSW Health need to contact your service after hours.
- Identify children with compromised immunity or complex health care needs. Work with families to update any medical management, risk-minimisation and communications plans as required (regulations 90 and 168).
- Consider having regular time for handwashing for all children and staff within your learning programs and activities.
- Identify a suitable area, additional and separate to the regular sick bay, for children who may be showing [symptoms of COVID-19](#) to await pick up by their parent/carer.
- Consider canvassing casual educators and staff for availability in the event of critical educator and staff absences.
- Visit [SafeWork NSW](#) for information on managing the risk of COVID-19 to those at your service.
- You should have a [COVID-19 Safety Plan](#) in place.

First Aid

The National Quality Framework includes requirements for educators to:

- Hold a current approved first aid qualification
- Have undertaken current anaphylaxis management and emergency asthma management training.

This is to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of children attending education and care services. Centre-based services must ensure one staff member or nominated supervisor who holds these qualifications is available at all times. The same person may hold one or more of these qualifications. Each family day care educator and educator assistant must also hold these qualifications.

Educators who need a new first aid qualification but cannot access face-to-face training should:

- Discuss the options with training providers.
- Complete the theoretical aspects and receive confirmation of progress from the training provider if the practical parts of a course can't be completed at this time.
- Complete practical parts of a course as soon as it is possible and safe to do so.

Educators who hold a first aid qualification but require a refresher should explore available options to complete this training by contacting a training provider. It may be possible to complete theoretical parts of a course.

If Regulation 136 is not able to be complied with then a waiver must be applied for. This includes the scenario where an educator has completed the theoretical aspects and is unable to complete practical parts of a course.

Fire Safety

Every reasonable precaution must be taken to ensure children being educated and cared for by your service are protected from harm and any hazard likely to cause injury. This includes protecting children from harm or hazards that may be caused by a fire by ensuring fire safety equipment is properly maintained.

Approved providers must ensure that all equipment and furniture used in providing the education and care service is safe, clean and in good repair, including fire safety equipment which should be checked, maintained and evidence kept in line with recognised industry standards.

Approved providers must ensure that staff have ready access to emergency equipment, such as fire extinguishers and fire blankets and that provision of training for nominated supervisors, educators, coordinators and family day care educator assistants in the use of emergency equipment. Fire safety equipment checks are not subject to a waiver as the health and safety of children is paramount.

Approved providers must ensure that matters relating to health and safety are set out in their service policies and procedures and must take reasonable steps to ensure that the nominated supervisor and staff members follow these policies and procedures.

Services should make their best efforts to maintain their COVID-safe practices in line with service policies and procedures where a visitor is essential to the service to conduct these safety checks. It is encouraged that checks are done outside of operation hours to minimise any exposure risk for the service.

Educator-to-child ratios

During COVID-19 it may be hard for services to know each day how many children will be attending and which staff members will be present. However, the health, safety and wellbeing of children in education and care remains the priority so:

Adequate supervision and educator-to-child ratio requirements continue to apply. If your service is unable to meet the educator to child ratios after taking reasonable steps (explored all options available) to meet the ratio requirements, you may consider applying for a waiver.

Waivers

As the Regulatory Authority, the Department of Education may grant waivers for:

- Staff qualifications – if services and educators have explored all options available to meet the regulations
- Ratios – in exceptional circumstances.

Waivers related to COVID-19 are:

- Considered on a case-by-case basis
- Only open to services in clear need – i.e. They do not have the staff capacity to meet ratios
- Fast-tracked – as long as there's no increased risk to staff or children's safety.

We'll consider the period of time a waiver is granted so services don't have to reapply each day they don't meet the requirements.

If the service's circumstances remain the same after the waiver expires, we may extend the waiver period on review.

To apply for a waiver:

- Submit an application in NQAITS.
- Pay the fee – we'll refund this fee as long as your application is related to COVID-19.

For advice on lodging a waiver application and meeting requirements due to COVID-19 contact us by:

- Calling 1800 619 113
- Emailing ececd@det.nsw.edu.au.



Recommended COVID-safe practices

Early childhood education and care services need to ensure that they have policies and procedures in place and adjust their practices to prevent the spread of COVID-19, as well as respond quickly in the event of a COVID positive case at the service.

The recommendations in this document are principles that services should consider when managing their service in a COVID-safe manner. These considerations are not exhaustive, and services should also consider how day-to-day duties such as mealtimes, safe sleep practices and playtime can be done in a safe and appropriate way.

Considerations for services include but are not limited to:

- Attendance
- Cleaning
- Drop offs and pick ups
- Visitors
- Orientation
- Transition to school
- Excursions
- Personal hygiene
- Sick children or staff
- Ventilation
- Celebrations or in-house events
- Optional use of RAHT testing in services



Attendance

Services should ensure their attendance policy clearly articulates how they will manage attendances in the event of an outbreak and ensure that this is communicated clearly to families.

- Limit staff moving between services
- Ask families to advise if children are attending other services and discuss risk management with them
- Keep a log of all staff and children who have been moving between services

Cleaning

Services should maintain high standards of hygiene to help prevent the risk of COVID-19 transmission at the service in line with NSW Health advice.

This will also be in accordance with National Regulation 103. This includes ensuring the following hygiene practices are embedded:

- Clean target areas including high-touch areas and other hard surfaces, door handles, lockers, light switches, handrails in stairways and movement areas as part of a daily cleaning schedule and more frequently if relevant.
- Wipe down any playground equipment with a disinfectant between use wherever practicable.
- Regularly disinfect and maintain toys and resources in accordance with Staying Healthy: Preventing infectious diseases in early childhood education and care services.

Services can access the most up-to-date advice on cleaning after a confirmed case of COVID-19 from the Department of [COVID-19 guidelines for ECEC services \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19-guidelines-for-ecec-services)



Drop offs and pick ups

Drop-offs and pick-ups should be arranged in a way as to minimise the need for contact between adults.

Reducing direct contact will help reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. This may be managed in many ways, for example through staggered drop-off or pick-up times, or some services may prefer to have their staff collect children from outside the service. Individual services should evaluate what is most appropriate for their service and their unique circumstances.

During periods of high community transmission rates or during an outbreak of COVID-19

To limit the risk of COVID-19 transmission during drop-offs and pick-ups services should consider the following procedures during these periods where possible:

- Stagger drop-off and pick-up times.
- Request that parents/carers drop-off and pick-up their child/ren at the service entrance/exit without entering the indoor/outdoor areas of the service premises. Staff members could collect children from the service entrance/exit.
- Make reasonable adjustments for parents/carers with physical needs, or children who require additional support during pick-up and drop-off.
- OSHC/services on school site, if it is not possible to organise drop-off/pick-ups at the school gate (due to staffing and other practical or safety issues), then parents/carers may enter school grounds and drop-off/pick-up at the service entrance. Health and safety precautions will be taken including physical distancing and wearing masks.
- OSHC/services on school site, services should discuss drop-off and pick-up procedures with principals. Principals have the flexibility to allow parents and carers to enter the site for drop-off and pick-up purposes for OSHC services to ensure the safety of students. This is particularly important when the entry/exit of the OSHC service is located at a distance from the schoolgate.

Visitors

During periods of high community transmission rates or during an outbreak of COVID-19

Services should consider the following actions to manage parents, carers and visitors attending service premises:

- Exclude non-essential visitors from attending service premises (such as official visitors and dignitaries, media and production crews, and visits by local members).
- Exclude parents, carers and children and visitors with symptoms of COVID-19 from entering service premises.
- Workers supporting the infrastructure development and maintenance of services must be vaccinated. This may include contractors, general assistants, and other support staff.
- Vaccinated Allied Health partners and other providers that are unable to deliver services off site may be permitted to enter service premises.
- Vaccinated Authorised Officers from the NSW Regulatory Authority are permitted to enter service premises at any time education and care is being provided.

Services can access the most up-to-date advice on managing visitors from the Department of Education COVID-19 Guidelines for ECEC services.



Orientations for new families

A positive start at your service is important and relies on everyone working together to make it happen – family, community and the early childhood education service. An orientation visit helps children and families become familiar with their new environment, the educators, staff and your services processes and procedures. It helps to settle children and provides information for families to support a smooth transition to your service.

Services will need to ensure that they follow current local health and department advice around external visitors when considering planning their orientation approach.

For orientation visits to take place within your service, the following requirements should be in place:

- Ensure you have adequate contact details for any child or family member in attendance at the visit.
- Undertake a risk assessment for any child with additional learning, health care or behavioural needs in discussion with their parent or carer.
- Confirm that all attendees including parents and carers, children and staff are well and free of any COVID-19 symptoms.

Ensure each parent and carer:

- Maintains physical distancing.
- Signs your external visitors' book
- Follows the relevant advice for their location including wearing a mask if required.
- Maintain a record of names and contact details for all attendees for at least 28 days after the event. This record must only be used for the purposes of contact tracing for COVID-19 infections and stored confidentially and securely.
- Adopt and promote good hand hygiene practices and make sure that all hand washing stations are well stocked with hand soap and paper towels or hand dryers and have hand sanitiser at key points around the venue such as entry and exit points.
- Implement cleaning protocols for any shared items or high-touch surfaces used during the orientation.

Transition to school programs

[Kindergarten orientation and transition to school](#) should be flexible and responsive to current local COVID-19 advice. These guidelines complement the positive transition strategies services have in place for children entering Kindergarten and will vary across the state in response to local area restrictions and government advice.

Services should connect with local schools to understand current department advice around external visitors to school sites when planning their orientation approach.

- Connect remotely with local schools and ask about their transition to school plans so that you can work together to support children in your service
- Follow the guidance provided by your local school in response to current Health advice and the Level that the school is operating at.
- Assess individual family needs and health vulnerabilities when deciding how to engage with local school.

If COVID-19 restrictions prevent an onsite visit at school or to your service:

- Arrange an online meeting with the principal or Kindergarten teacher at local schools to support a smooth transition for children in your service, including the completion of transition to school statements.
- Engage children with any digital platform information provided by local schools.

Excursions

Services are also encouraged to liaise closely with families to ensure the safety of the children.

Services are required to follow a risk-based approach and consider the following measures:

- Conduct a thorough risk assessment and undertake excursions after risk minimisation strategies are implemented (in accordance with Regulation 100)
- Where possible, avoid excursions that require using public transport or visiting venues where there are likely to be large numbers of people
- Choose outdoor excursions if possible
- Excursions to aged care facilities should not take place prior to a conversation with the facility.



Personal hygiene measures

Services should ensure the following personal hygiene measures are implemented (Regulation 168(2)(a)):

- Staff members will clean hands for 20 seconds with soap and water (or an alcohol-based hand sanitiser) frequently and assist children to clean hands when needed.
- Ensure staff/children sneeze or cough into their elbow or a tissue/place used tissues straight into a bin.
- Prevent staff/children from sharing food or drink.
- Display health and hygiene promotional materials from the NSW Government, including translated resources in prominent places within the service including, but not limited to:
 - The kitchen
 - Hand wash and toilet areas
 - Learning spaces
 - Staff room.
- Use children-friendly resources such as the Wiggles resource to teach children about cough etiquette and handwashing.

Services can access the most up-to-date advice on personal hygiene measures from the Department of Education COVID-19 Guidelines for ECEC services.

Managing a sick staff member or child

Anyone who has even the mildest of any symptoms of being unwell should not attend the service and should be immediately tested and isolate until they get a negative test result.

COVID-19 symptoms include but are not limited to:

- Fever
- Cough
- Sore Throat
- Shortness of breath
- Runny nose
- Loss of smell/taste
- Muscle/joint pains
- Diarrhoea
- Nausea/vomiting
- Extreme tiredness.

The most recent variants and symptoms can be found at [Health NSW](https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/COVID-19/Pages/default.aspx).

Children and staff who have been unwell should only return to your service when they are free of symptoms

Sick staff

- Instruct staff not to attend if they feel unwell
- If staff attend and appear unwell, send them home.
- Encourage unwell staff to get tested for COVID-19. They should receive a negative test and be symptom-free before returning to the service.
- Read about meeting educator-to-child ratios and qualification requirements during COVID-19.
- Close contacts of positive cases should not attend services unless cleared by NSW Health.

Sick children

- Communicate with all families asking them to keep unwell children at home.
- If a child appears unwell on drop off, ask the parent/carer to take them home.
- If a child appears unwell while in care, contact the child's family to collect them as soon as possible.
- If possible, and your supervision and ratio requirements allow, keep the child in isolation until they are collected.
- Encourage families to get their child tested. They should receive a negative COVID-19 test and be symptom-free before returning to the service.

Ventilation

Regulation 110 requires indoor spaces to be well ventilated. COVID-19 has raised the need to be even more vigilant about ventilation.

NSW Health advises open or well-ventilated spaces reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission because infectious particles are more quickly diffused in the open air than in spaces with less ventilation. Increasing outdoor air ventilation and using outdoor spaces is an important strategy in reducing the risk of aerosol transmission by increasing circulation of outdoor air.

To mitigate the risk of transmission while indoors services should reduce the number of people in an indoor space at any one time, by separating children and educators into small groups and encouraging them to use different areas of the service; and reduce the amount of time children spend indoor together.

Services can access the most up-to-date advice on ventilation from the Department of Education COVID-19 Guidelines for ECEC services and [Safe Work Australia](#).

To improve ventilation and reduce the risk of transmission in indoor areas:

- Reduce the number of people in an indoor space at any one time by separating children into groups and encouraging them to use different areas around the service premises.
- Reduce the length of time that children spend indoors all together.
- Use outdoor settings wherever possible when providing education and care.
- Group times (including group singing or chanting) should be scheduled for the outdoor space or in a well-ventilated, indoor area.
- Ventilate indoor space by keeping doors and windows open and considering the risk of vector-borne disease and air pollution.
- Avoid directing fans towards children's faces, aim them continuously towards the ceiling or floor. For services that cannot modify the ventilation or choose an outdoor location:
- Regularly inspect, maintain, and clean Heating, Ventilation and Air-conditioning Devices (HVAC).
- Avoid using only recirculated air in HVAC systems and increase the outside air intake where possible.
- Where relevant, disable ventilation controls with automated settings that reduce air supply based on temperature or occupancy.
- If in place, ensure that exhaust fans are operational.
- Support staff to take breaks and eat lunch outside if possible.
- Switch air handling units with central recirculation to 100% outdoor air.

Current ventilation requirements can be found on the [department's](#) website.

Out of school hours services

OSHC services located on school sites should discuss the school's ventilation plan with the Principal and ensure that the spaces made available to the OSHC have complied with that plan.

Open or well-ventilated spaces reduce the risk of transmission of COVID -19.

For more information, refer to the NSW Government's COVID-19 guidance on ventilation (nsw.gov.au)

Celebrations or in-house events

In-house events or celebrations may proceed where COVID-safe measures are in place. Your service should include:

- Your COVID-safe plan.
- Utilising outdoor spaces only.
- Physical distancing.
- Hygiene practices for every visitor, including handwashing and recommended mask wearing.
- Enhanced cleaning measures after visitors leave the service.



Rapid Antigen Testing

To minimise disruption in education and care settings, the use of rapid antigen testing (RAT) is an option for services in NSW.

It is a service-based decision to include use of RAT kits in your COVID safe procedures. Service participation in the program is not mandatory for staff or services but may be implemented where a person is symptomatic or is a household contact, for example.

The department supplied a number of RAT kits to ECE services. Current supplies are to be used as required.

Services should continue to follow other COVID-safe guidelines indicated in this document to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of the community.

[Resources are available on the Department's website to help services manage a positive COVID case](#)

Managing COVID-19 positive cases

It is anticipated that despite best practice and preventative measures, services may continue to have instances of positive COVID -19 cases.

The department will continue to provide guidance and advice in conjunction with NSW Health to providers who have positive cases connected to their service. The current process for managing COVID-19 positive cases is available on the department's website.

Considerations following a positive case

If notified of a positive case, your service should also consider:

- General support to services
- Support to services during a lockdown
- Business continuity payments
- Gap fee waiving
- Additional allowable absences
- Active enrolment period extensions
- Community and mobile services receiving Start Strong funding

You can read more about funding implications on the Australian Government's website or on the NSW Department of Education's website for state funded services.






For more information

We encourage staff to review our COVID-19 guidelines for ECEC services webpage regularly, and to access our sector updates.

Educators are encouraged to check the NSW Health website and NSW Government website regarding up-to-date restrictions in NSW.

Say hello

-  @NSWEarlyChildhoodEducation
-  @NSWEducation
-  @NSWEducation

Phone: 1800 619 113
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