

The purpose of this guidance is to support early childhood services to continue to provide safe environments for children and staff.

Message from the Victorian Chief Health Officer



As Victoria's Chief Health Officer, and as a member of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee, I have supported the continued operation of early childhood

education and care services, with appropriate precautions in place.

I understand that with the return to on-site schooling for all Victorian schools and easing of some community restrictions, attendance rates at early childhood services may continue to increase.

The available evidence within Australia and globally largely indicates that transmission between children in the school or early childhood environment is low.

This growing evidence, coupled with low levels of community transmission in Victoria, means that the risk posed to staff and children attending early childhood services at this current time is very low.

While the risk is low, we continue to advise caution, particularly in relation to adults and more vulnerable members of our early learning communities. The following guidance provides some sensible steps early childhood services can take to reduce the risk of coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission while continuing to provide a safe working and learning environment for staff and children.

Everyone in the Victorian community has a role to play in protecting themselves and keeping the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) suppressed at very low levels.

Thank you for your incredible contribution to Victoria's response to coronavirus (COVID-19).

Adj Clin Prof Brett Sutton
Victorian Chief Health Officer



Actions for early childhood and care settings

Early childhood settings should consider a variety of strategies to support physical distancing and good hygiene practices to reduce the risk of coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission within the practical limitations of an early learning environment. The following actions are to be considered, adapted and implemented as necessary according to the education setting and the individual needs of the staff, children and the wider service community.

- Display educational materials, which can be downloaded and printed from the [Department of Health and Human Services \(DHHS\) website](#)
- Comply with National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) guidance [Staying healthy: Preventing infectious diseases in early childhood education and care services](#)
- Alert your approved provider about any large increases in child and staff absenteeism due to flu-like illnesses.
- Keep parents and staff informed of the actions you are taking.

Actions

Perhaps the most important action early childhood services can take to reduce the risk of transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) is to ensure that any unwell staff and children remain at home.

While the risk of transmission of the virus is very low, staff or children most at risk of severe illness should individually assess appropriateness for on-site attendance at this time, with support from their medical practitioner.

As the main risk of transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) in the early learning environment is between adults, it is important that visitors to early childhood services are limited to those delivering or supporting essential services and operations.

- All unwell staff and children must stay home.
- Parents/carers of children with complex medical needs (including those with compromised immune systems), should seek advice from the child's medical practitioner to support decision-making about whether on-site education and care is suitable, noting that this advice may change depending on the status of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in Victoria.

- If possible, limit the access of persons other than those supporting essential service operations. Additional staff, including parent volunteers, should be discouraged from attending the service at this time. Consider maintaining a visitor record to maintain details of any visitors (if necessary) entering the service, including their contact details.
- While it is not a requirement of entry to these settings for visitors to have been vaccinated against influenza, staff in these settings should encourage visitors to get vaccinated beforehand.
- Parent information sessions and interviews should meet physical distancing requirements of 1.5 metres between adults, or else be replaced with virtual alternatives.

Hygiene

Everyone can protect themselves and prevent the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) by continuing effective hand hygiene.

- All staff and children should undertake regular hand hygiene, particularly on arrival to the service, before and after eating, after blowing their nose, coughing, sneezing or using the toilet. You are a good role model for the children and their parents/carers, so actively talk about why everyone needs to wash their hands and the importance of everyone doing this.
- Make sure liquid soap and running water, or alcohol-based hand sanitiser, is available at the entrance of the facility and throughout.
- Tissues should be readily accessible with bins provided in each room and in outdoor areas for easy disposal.
- It is recommended that children do not drink directly from drinking fountains at this time. Children should bring their own water bottle for use (and refilling) at the service.
- Ensure the highest hygiene practices amongst food handlers as per NHMRC guidance [Staying healthy: Preventing infectious diseases in early childhood education and care services](#). Sharing of food should not occur.
- Use of mobile phones by staff should be discouraged if possible. Staff should be reminded to clean their phones regularly.

Arrival and departure

As the main risk of introducing coronavirus (COVID-19) to the early childhood environment is from adults, close proximity between adults should be avoided, particularly during drop-off and pick-up.

- Consider the arrival and departure procedures for children and, where possible, minimise opportunities for parents and carers to gather in groups, especially in foyers and in children's play areas.
- It may be possible, for example, for children to be dropped off and picked up in the service entrance or foyer, or to stagger start and finish times of some service types.
- While staggered start and finish times occur naturally in some service types, early childhood education and care settings will often have one arrival and pick up time. Consider how the arrival and pick up time could be spread out. One example may be to divide the group and allocate times, noting that it is not expected that session times are extended to accommodate additional arrival and departure procedures.
- Greeting parents and children at the front door in the morning and during pick up times will allow for one-on-one communication with families while practising physical distancing and providing opportunities to consider whether children are showing any signs of being unwell.

Considerations for teaching and learning environments

Maintaining a physical distance of 1.5 metres will not be practical in early childhood services. Physical distancing is most important between adults.

Reducing mixing between different age or room groups is recommended as a precautionary measure to minimise risk of spread of transmission and aid containment in the rare event of a confirmed case of coronavirus (COVID-19) on-site.

- Consider small group play, staggered mealtimes and indoor/outdoor play opportunities whenever possible.
- Windows should be open during the day to promote air flow where possible.
- Consider the setup of the room and the placement of the activities and limit the number of whole group activities.
- Rather than having group times where everyone is sitting on the mat, consider using informal opportunities to engage with the children/read books/do storytelling with small groups of children at a time.
- For younger children, particularly consider the rotation of toys more often and increase the frequency of cleaning toys. Sharing of toys that have been placed in mouths should be monitored and avoided.
- Wherever possible and where you have enough staffing for adequate supervision, consider operating an indoor/outdoor program.
- A greater range of activities will encourage children and staff to spread out more broadly.
- Mixing of staff and children between rooms should be minimised where possible. It is acknowledged that staff may need to move between rooms to support breaks and, in these situations, staff should be reminded of the importance of hand hygiene.
- Where multiple staff are in a room, remind staff to maintain physical distancing from each other as much as practical.



Considerations for offices and staff facilities

As the greatest risk of transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) in an early childhood service is between adults, close proximity between staff should be avoided, where possible, and especially in offices and staff rooms.

- Workstations should be spaced out as much as possible, and the number of staff in offices limited. Where possible, staff should use separate offices.
- In line with other workplaces across Victoria, remind staff to maintain physical distancing from each other as much as possible in the reception, staff room and offices.

Cleaning and facilities management

Environmental cleaning, coupled with regular hand hygiene, remains important to reduce the risk of coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission.

- Services should maintain full adherence to the NHMRC childcare cleaning guidelines, in addition:
 - clean and disinfect high-touch surfaces at least daily (e.g. play gyms, tables, hard-backed chairs, doorknobs, light switches, remotes, handles, desks, toilets, sinks).
 - wash and launder play items and toys including washable plush toys, as appropriate, in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. If possible, launder items using the warmest appropriate water setting for the items and dry items completely.
 - note, disinfecting and cleaning of toys and equipment is not required after every use.

- Hand hygiene before and after use of shared equipment is recommended. (For example, prior to a new activity).
- Excursions should not be undertaken other than to local parks.

Provision of routine care and first aid

Physical distancing is not practical when providing direct care. In this situation, standard precautions, including hand hygiene, are important for infection control.

- Standard precautions are advised when coming in to contact with someone for the purpose of providing routine care, assistance or first aid. Also see NHMRC guidance [Staying healthy: Preventing infectious diseases in early childhood education and care services](#).
- Always wash hands with soap and water or use a hand sanitiser before and after performing routine care or first aid.
- Additional Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), for example face masks, is not required to provide routine care or first aid for children who are well.



Management of an unwell child or staff member

It is important that any staff member or child who becomes unwell while at an early childhood service returns home. While it is unlikely that a staff member or child who is unwell with flu-like symptoms will have coronavirus (COVID-19), there are some sensible steps services can take while a child awaits collection by a parent or carer as a precaution.

- Staff or children experiencing compatible symptoms with coronavirus (COVID-19), such as fever, cough or sore throat, should be isolated in an appropriate space with suitable supervision and collected by a parent/carer as soon as possible.
- Where staff or children are experiencing compatible symptoms with coronavirus (COVID-19), important actions to take include hand hygiene, physical distance and where possible putting on a face mask.
- Face masks should not be used in situations where an individual is unable to safely or practically tolerate a mask (e.g. a child with complex medical needs, including existing respiratory needs, and younger children).
- Urgent medical attention should be sought where indicated.
- Health care plans, where relevant, should be updated to provide additional advice on monitoring and identification of the unwell child in the context of coronavirus (COVID-19).
- If a staff member is unsure whether a child is unwell, it is advisable in the first instance to contact the parent/carer to discuss any concerns about the health status of the child and, taking a precautionary approach, request the parent/carer to collect their child if concerns remain. A trained staff member could take the temperature of the child, where appropriate, to support decision making. Gloves should be worn for the purpose of taking a temperature.
- Staff or children experiencing compatible symptoms with coronavirus (COVID-19) should be encouraged to seek the advice of a healthcare professional who can advise on next steps. A medical certificate is not required to return to an early childhood setting after a period of illness, however staff and children should not return until symptoms resolve.
- Follow cleaning guidance according to the situation of the case. If a child spreads droplets (for example by sneezing, coughing or vomiting), clean surfaces immediately with disinfectant wipes while wearing gloves.

