

Early childhood education and care workers: Minimising the risk of exposure to COVID-19

The model Work Health and Safety (WHS) laws require all employers to take care of the health and safety of their workers (staff, contractors, volunteers) and others (children, parents and visitors) at the workplace. This includes:

- > providing and maintaining a work environment that is without risk to health and safety, and
- > providing adequate facilities for staff to carry out their work.

Employers must identify risks at the workplace, and where possible eliminate or minimise those risks so far as is reasonably practicable.

Where possible, to minimise the risk of exposure to the COVID-19 in the workplace, employers should allow workers to work from home in isolation from others where possible (e.g. book keeper). However, since it is not feasible for most centre-based early childhood education and care workers to perform their job from home, employers must do all that they can to minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19 so far as reasonably practicable.

Managing the risks of exposure to the COVID-19 virus

Physical distancing

One of the most effective ways to minimise the spread of the COVID-19 virus is to limit physical proximity between people. Put in place practical measures to encourage physical distancing:

- > calculate the area of each room, and the number of staff and children in attendance each day
- > encourage workers and visitors to physically distance themselves through increased [signage](#) and information
- > encourage the use of outdoor space as much as possible

- > stagger staff breaks and encouraging workers to physically distance themselves in break rooms and when using shared spaces
- > limit the number of visitors to the centre (e.g. cancel incursions and non-essential training), and
- > discourage use of public transport by staff if possible, or if not feasible, recommending that workers:
 - travel at off peak times
 - wash hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, or sanitise hands with alcohol-based hand sanitiser, before and after travelling on public transport, and
 - maintain physical distancing measures during any trip.

Hygiene

Environmental cleaning

The amount of time the COVID-19 virus survives on inanimate objects and surfaces will vary. Environmental cleaning is one way to remove the virus that causes COVID-19. Employers should ensure:

- > that frequently touched surfaces and objects such as doors, windows, tables, benchtops, nappy change areas and toys are cleaned and disinfected frequently using appropriate detergent and disinfectant solutions, and
- > that people cleaning the workplace wear gloves and use alcohol-based hand sanitiser before and after wearing gloves.
- > See the Department of Health information sheet on [environmental cleaning and disinfection-principles for COVID-19](#) for further information.

Worker Hygiene

Workers should be required to practice [good hygiene](#), including:

- > frequent hand washing
- > limiting contact with others, where possible, and
- > covering their mouths while coughing or sneezing.

Washroom facilities for workers should have adequate facilities for good hygiene such as adequate supply of soap, water and toilet paper. These must be kept clean, properly stocked and in good working order. Supplies of alcohol-based hand sanitiser should be provided around the centre, where possible.

Staff should also be informed about the risk of exposure and good hygiene through increased signage and information. The Australian Government Department of Health has a range of [posters and other resources](#) aimed at educating the public about COVID-19. These posters can be placed in client-facing work environments.

Further information about health and hygiene in the childhood education and care services is also available in the National Health and Medical Research Council publication, [Staying healthy: Preventing infectious diseases in early childhood education and care services](#).

General advice for workers, families and others

- > Avoid touching your mouth, eyes, and nose with unwashed (or gloved) hands.
- > Clean your hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds using soap and water, or alcohol based hand rub.
- > Cover your nose and mouth when coughing and sneezing with a tissue or a flexed elbow. Put tissues in the bin.
- > Avoid close contact with anyone with cold or flu-like symptoms.
- > [Physical distancing](#) – try maintain a 1.5 metre distance to others (two arms length).
- > Stay home if you are sick.
- > Seek medical advice if you have a fever, cough, sore throat or shortness of breath (call your doctor or [healthdirect](#) on [1800 022 222](#)).

Consultation and communicating with workers

You must consult with your workers on health and safety matters relating to COVID-19. Allow workers to express views before you make any decisions.

Workers are most likely to know about the [risks](#) of their work. Involving them will help build commitment to this process and any changes.

The [model Code of Practice: Work health and safety consultation, cooperation and coordination](#) can provide more information about your duties to consult.

You need to communicate clearly with workers about control measures. Provide clear direction and guidance about what is expected of workers.

Workers should know:

- > when to stay away from the workplace
- > what action to take if they become unwell
- > what symptoms to be concerned about.

Remind workers they have a duty to take reasonable care for their own health and safety and to not adversely affect the health and safety of others.

Provide workers with a point of contact to discuss their concerns, and access to support services, including employee assistance programs.

What else can I do?

- > Keep your knowledge of the COVID-19 situation up-to-date. Follow advice from authoritative sources such as the Australian Government Department of Health and check daily for any updates to safety advice.
- > Understand your business and its [WHS hazards](#) and [risks](#). It may not be possible because of the work you do to facilitate all workers to work from home, but there are many steps you can take to minimise the risks in an early childhood education and care service.



- > Make sure your service is properly resourced to manage [WHS risks](#) during the COVID-19 outbreak, and check that the resources are being used.
- > Review your policies, procedures and reporting process to ensure they remain current for any incidents, [hazards](#) and other [WHS](#) issues that arise during this time. Update these materials if necessary.
- > Ensure all that these are communicated clearly and processes are being followed.
- > Consult with workers and ensure there is a means for them to raise any concerns about the steps you are taking to manage the risks.

Further information

- > For general advice for employers on managing risks to exposure to the COVID-19 virus, go to [COVID-19 Information for workplaces](#).
- > For further information on risk management, see the model [Code of Practice: How to manage work health and safety risks](#).

Further information is also available in each jurisdiction on managing risks to exposure to the COVID-19 virus, including the following information for early childhood education and care services:

New South Wales

- > [Simple steps for slowing the spread by social distancing: Act now](#)
- > [Early childhood education – COVID-19 \(novel coronavirus\) – FAQs for services and providers](#)

Queensland

- > [COVID-19 and service operation](#)

Australian Capital Territory

- > [Information on novel coronavirus \(COVID-19\) for Early Childhood](#)
- > [Novel coronavirus \(COVID-19\) social distancing and hygiene measures for early childhood services](#)
- > [Novel coronavirus \(COVID-19\) social distancing and hygiene measures for preschools](#)

South Australia

- > [Frequently asked questions about COVID-19 for schools and preschools](#)

Victoria

- > [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) advice for early childhood services](#)

Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment

- > [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) information sheet for child care providers and services](#)