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, safety and welfare of their workers (staff, contractors, volunteers) and others (children, parents, visitors) at the workplace. This includes:

> providing and maintaining a work environment that is without risk to health and safety,

> providing adequate and accessible facilities for the welfare of workers in carrying out their work; and

> monitoring the health of workers and the conditions of the workplace for the purpose of preventing illness or injury.

As an employer, you must identify risks at the workplace, and where possible eliminate or minimise those risks.

Early childhood education and care workers are at risk of exposure to COVID-19

To minimise the risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus in the workplace, employers should allow workers to work from home in isolation from others where possible (e.g. a book keeper for a childcare centre may be able to work from home).

However, since it is not possible 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.

swa.gov.au/coronavirus

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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 use alcohol based hand rub with at least 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol as the active ingredient.
> 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 - maintain a 1.5 metre distance to others (two arm's 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).

Managing the risks of exposure to COVID-19

Physical distancing

One of the most effective ways to minimise the spread of the COVID-19 virus is to limit physical proximity between people to at least 1.5 metres apart. 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, and directing workers to space at least 1.5 metres apart to continue performing their duties, acknowledging that staff will have to come into contact with children
> 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.

Put processes in place to regularly monitor and review the implementation of physical distancing measures to ensure they remain effective.

If physical distancing measures introduce new health and safety risks (e.g. because they impact communication), you need to manage those risks too. The Safe Work Australia website has links to a range of posters and resources to help remind workers and others of the risks of COVID-19 and the measures that are necessary to stop its spread.

Health checks and quarantine

You must monitor the health of your workers for key symptoms of COVID-19, such as fever.

> Direct all workers (whether they are at the workplace or not) to report to you if:
>   > they are experiencing any symptoms
>   > they have been, or have potentially been, exposed to a person who has been diagnosed with COVID-19 or is suspected to have COVID-19 (even if the person who is suspected to have COVID-19 has not yet been tested), or
>   > they have undertaken, or are planning to undertake, any travel.
> Stop workers working if they are displaying symptoms.
> Stop workers who have contracted COVID-19 from returning to the workplace until they provide evidence they are clear of the virus.

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:

> frequently touched surfaces and objects, such as doors, windows, tables, benchtops, nappy change areas and toys are cleaned regularly using appropriate detergent solutions. Once cleaned, they should ideally be disinfected regularly using appropriate disinfectant solutions.
> personal items such as phones and glasses and work station equipment such as keyboards are cleaned and ideally disinfected frequently (e.g. using isopropyl alcohol wipes), and
> amenities including kitchens, lunch rooms, communal areas, change rooms, toilets, showers and drink fountains, should be cleaned industrially and the frequency of this cleaning should increase.

Workers should be provided with cleaning agents and trained to clean down and disinfect equipment immediately after use. Workers should each be provided with their own equipment if possible.

The workplace should provide closed bins for workers to hygienically dispose of waste and rubbish, such as used tissues, immediately after use. Hand washing facilities or alcohol-based hand sanitiser should be available for workers to use after they dispose of their waste.

To minimise the risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus the person cleaning should wear gloves and wash their hands or use alcohol-based hand sanitiser before and after wearing gloves. Gloves and hand sanitiser should be made available throughout the workplace. Workplaces should consider reducing the number of touch points for workers. For example, by removing any magazines from the centre staffroom.

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Put processes in place to regularly monitor and review the implementation of environmental cleaning measures to ensure they remain effective.

If the increased availability of hand sanitiser introduces new health and safety risks (e.g. accidental ingestion by children), you need to identify and manage those risks too.

See Safe Work Australia's [Cleaning to prevent the spread of COVID-19 page](#) or the Department of Health information sheet on [environmental cleaning and disinfection-principles for COVID-19](#) for further information.

Worker Hygiene

Workers must practice [good hygiene](#). Workers must wash their hands with soap and running water for at least 20 seconds. Hand washing should be done before and after eating and after going to the toilet. Other hygiene measures should include:

> covering coughs and sneezes with an elbow or a tissue
> immediately disposing of tissues properly
> using alcohol-based hand sanitisers with at least 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol as the active ingredient
> cleaning and disinfecting surfaces and shared equipment after use
> washing body, hair (including facial hair) and clothes thoroughly every day
> staying more than 1.5 metres away from others, and
> reporting and staying home if experiencing any symptoms.

In addition, to prevent the spread of COVID-19, workers should also:

> avoid touching their face
> avoid handshakes or any other close physical contact, where this is possible
> refrain from spitting at all times, and
> put cigarette butts in the bin.

Adequate and accessible facilities

You must ensure there are adequate and accessible facilities to support the implementation of measures to achieve physical distancing and [good hygiene](#).

Washroom facilities for workers must be properly stocked for good hygiene and have adequate supplies 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.

You must ensure all facilities are in good working order and are clean and safe and must put processes in place to regularly monitor and review the implementation of hygiene measures to ensure they remain effective.

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 to inform and remind staff about good hygiene practices.

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](#).

Deliveries and contractors attending the workplace

> Non-essential visits to the workplace should be cancelled or postponed.
> Deliveries and other contractors who need to attend the workplace should be given clear instructions of your requirements while they are on site.
> Minimise the number of workers attending to deliveries and contractors as much as possible. Make alcohol-based hand sanitiser available for workers after physically handling deliveries.
> Direct visiting truck drivers to remain in vehicles and use contactless methods such as mobile phones to communicate with your workers wherever possible.
> Use, and ask deliveries and contractors to use, electronic paper work where possible, to minimise physical interaction. Where possible, set up alternatives to requiring signatures. For instance, see whether a confirmation email or a photo of the loaded or unloaded goods can be accepted as proof of delivery or collection (as applicable). If a pen or other utensil is required for signature you can ask that the pen or utensil is cleaned or sanitised before use. For pens, you may wish to use your own.

Keep workers informed

You must provide all workers information about the risks of exposure to COVID-19. Where required, workers should be trained in infection control.

The Australian Government Department of Health has a range [of posters and other resources](#) aimed at educating the public about COVID-19.

Consultation and communicating with workers

You must consult with your workers on health and safety matters relating to COVID-19. This means you must consult when:

> assessing the risk COVID-19 presents to the health and safety of workers
> deciding on the control measures to put in place to eliminate or minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19
> deciding on the adequacy of facilities for the welfare of workers (e.g. hand washing facilities), and
> proposing other changes to the workplace as a result of COVID-19 which may affect health and safety.

If you and the workers have agreed to procedures for consultation, the consultation must be in accordance with those procedures.

You must allow workers to express their views and raise work health and safety issues that may arise directly or indirectly because of COVID-19. You must take the views of workers into account when making decisions and advise workers of your decision. Workers are most likely to

know about the risks of their work. Involving them will help build commitment to this process and any changes.

Consultation does not require consensus or agreement but you must allow your workers to be part of the decision making process for COVID-19 related matters.

If workers are represented by Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs) you must include them in the consultation process.

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. This means providing clear direction and guidance about what is expected of workers.

Workers must know:

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

You should 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.

You should provide workers with a point of contact to discuss their concerns, and access to support services, including employee assistance programs. A list of support services is provided below.

How can I meet my officer duty during the COVID-19 outbreak?

> 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.
> Ensure you understand your business and its WHS hazards and risks. Risk assessments are a useful tool to help identify WHS hazards and risks, as well as strategies to help manage them. Where you have risk assessments in place, they may need to be reviewed to ensure they are up to date.
> Make sure your workplace 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 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 is available on who is an officer in the workplace and their health and safety duty.

Further information and resources

SWA resources

> 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.
> For further guidance on providing and maintaining a safe work environment and adequate facilities, see the Model Code of Practice: Managing the work environment and facilities

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:

> Statement from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee about COVID-19 in children and early childhood and learning centres
> National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)
>> o Staying healthy: Preventing infectious diseases in early childhood education and care services
> New South Wales
>> o Simple steps for slowing the spread by social distancing: Act now
>> o Early childhood education – COVID-19 (novel coronavirus) – FAQs for services and providers
> Queensland
>> o COVID-19 and service operation
> Australian Capital Territory
>> o Information on novel coronavirus (COVID-19) for Early Childhood
>> o Novel coronavirus (COVID-19) social distancing and hygiene measures for early childhood services
>> o Novel coronavirus (COVID-19) social distancing and hygiene measures for preschools
> South Australia
>> o Frequently asked questions about COVID-19 for schools and preschools
> Victoria
>> o Coronavirus (COVID-19) advice for early childhood services

National Industry support resources

> Fair Work Ombudsman – Coronavirus and Australian workplace laws
> Australian Government Treasury – Support for Businesses
> Family and mental health support — Department of Social Services.
> Australian Taxation Office – COVID-19: information for small business
> Australian Government Coronavirus app (Apple App Store, Google Play)
> World Health Organisation – Advice for workplaces
> Information on the recent restrictions announced by the Australian Government is available at Australia.gov.au

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Other support services

> [Beyond Blue Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service](#)
> [Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman](#)
> [HeadsUp – Healthy Workplaces Support](#)
> [Lifeline](#)

*Please note. To ensure this information is accessible and easy to understand, it talks about employer responsibilities. Under the model WHS laws, duties apply to a broader range of people than just employers. Any person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) is covered by the model WHS laws.

For more information see the [Interpretive Guideline – model Work Health and Safety Act – the meaning of 'person conducting a business or undertaking'.](#)

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