

Position Statement on Covid-19 Vaccinations and the Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce

Introduction

The early childhood education and care sector (ECEC), along with the rest of the community, is experiencing the impacts of the COVID-19 virus and the significant challenges it poses to the children families, early childhood educators and providers of early childhood education and care services. The Commonwealth, State and Territory governments are focused on increasing vaccination rates in Australia as part of the national plan to have 80% of those aged 16+ to be fully vaccinated as soon as possible.

COVID-19 Impacts

ECEC services have been classified as essential services and continue to provide education and care to vulnerable children and children of essential workers. Despite implementing control measures such as wearing of masks, testing with symptoms, physical distancing and regular cleaning and hygiene practices, the risk of passing on the COVID-19 virus is not eliminated.

ECEC services have been impacted by lockdowns and other restrictions which have affected service delivery, workforce and continuation of education and care for children.

Risk for ECEC Workforce

The very nature of ECEC means that staff and children interact closely. ECEC staff interact closely with children, parents and colleagues during the course of their work and return to their families, friends and networks after work.

A NSW study conducted from 16 June to 31 July 2021 reported high transmissibility of the Delta variant resulting in a five-fold increase in the spread of COVID-19 in schools, early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and households, when compared to the 2020 experience with the original strain of the COVID-19 virus. Most children diagnosed with COVID-19 including those who caught the infection in educational settings, experienced mild or no symptoms, with only 2% requiring hospitalisation.

Transmission rates in ECEC services were mostly between staff members but also occurred from staff member to children. This study found staff and children who caught COVID-19 at school or ECEC service often passed it on to their household members¹.

Vaccinations in Australia

Vaccination roll out is the responsibility of state and territory governments with each setting out [eligibility and priority of access](#) to COVID-19 vaccines. ECA supports the measures taken by some state governments which have prioritised COVID-19 vaccinations for the ECEC workforce.

As at 17 September 2021, NSW and NT governments have issued public health orders making it mandatory for early childhood education and care staff to be vaccinated where they have direct contact with children.

¹ NCRIS, 2021. [COVID-19 in schools and early childhood education and care services](#) – the experience in NSW: 16 June to 31 July 2021.

Medical exemptions apply in particular circumstances. ECEC employees in other states and territories can access the COVID-19 vaccine through their state and territory vaccine programs. Employers should undertake planning to support staff to attend their vaccination appointments and any subsequent leave due to vaccine reactions.

Mandatory vaccine requirements apply to all residential aged care workers from 17 September 2021, in line with state and territory directions. This mandate requires residential aged care workers to be vaccinated as a condition of working in aged care facilities. Vaccination is strongly encouraged for others entering residential age care including volunteers, visitors, pastoral care workers and other relevant contractors.

Medical vaccine exemptions, both temporary and permanent, must be in line with the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) clinical guidance.

Considerations for employers and employees

Accurate information about COVID-19 vaccination eligibility, prioritisation and mandatory health orders is important for ECEC employers and employees. Under WHS laws, employers have a duty to eliminate or minimise risk (as far as is reasonably practicable) of exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace. Vaccination can be considered as one way of managing COVID-19 risk in the workplace.

It is likely that many employers would prefer a vaccination mandate to be made by government, rather than introduce an individual vaccination policy, as this would provide a clear mandate. Where state or territory public health orders requiring an employee to be vaccinated is not in place, employers can require employees to be vaccinated in the following circumstances²:

- the requirement is permitted by an enterprise agreement, other registered agreement or employment contract (see Agreements or contracts relating to vaccinations), or
- it would be lawful and reasonable for an employer to give their employees a direction to be vaccinated, which is assessed on a case-by-case basis (see Lawful and reasonable directions to get vaccinated).

Employers considering a change to workplace policy to include a requirement for COVID-19 vaccination should seek legal and IR advice and consult extensively with employees. The employer must take into account views expressed by employees.

The first step for ECEC employers considering a workplace policy change should be to engage with their employees to seek their views, intentions and concerns about COVID-19 vaccinations. Individuals should speak with their medical practitioner if they have any concerns about the COVID-19 vaccine. This engagement should be voluntary for employees, with opportunities to ask questions and be provided with support and information.

Summary of ECA Position

- ECA supports priority of access to COVID-19 vaccinations for the ECEC workforce in all jurisdictions.
- ECA supports the NSW, NT and VIC government decisions to mandate COVID-19 vaccinations for the ECEC workforce who have direct contact with children; we also support expanding mandatory vaccinations to other jurisdictions where adequate supply and access can be ensured (this needs to be a State/Territory decision so that public health orders and vaccination access issues are aligned).
- ECA strongly recommends a publicly funded, targeted communication strategy for the ECEC sector to encourage and support vaccination, build awareness and address concerns or questions.

² Fair Work Australia 2021. [COVID-19 vaccinations: workplace rights and obligations](#)

Useful Information

[ECA COVID-19 resources list](#) includes state and territory government websites and other useful contact information.

[Safe Work Australia](#) provides information for workplaces including early childhood education and care, including guidance on risk assessments.

[Fair Work Australia](#) provides guidance on COVID-19 vaccinations and workplace rights and obligations.

[ATAGI, 2021](#). Clinical guidance on use of COVID-19 vaccine in Australia in 2021 (Version 7.2).

About Us

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) has been a voice for young children since 1938. We are the peak early childhood advocacy organisation, acting in the interests of young children, their families and those in the early childhood field. ECA advocates to ensure quality, social justice and equity in all issues relating to the education and care of children aged birth to eight years.

For more information visit: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au

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