

ECA response: COVID-19

ECA Member Summary: Health and Hygiene

Updated: 29 May 2020

Introduction

While many of you are confidently addressing changes to health and hygiene practices in these times, we've received some requests from ECA members for more information on the topic. Here we present an overview of current guidance.

Safeguarding and protecting children's health and safety are central to the *National Quality Standard*, particularly [Quality Area 2](#), and have been central to your everyday practice long before COVID-19.

We are conscious of the importance of this for educators, staff and children in your setting as well as their immediate and extended families. We also recognise that physical health is only one component of our overall health. Therefore, we will provide a future Member Summary on the topic of mental health and wellbeing.

ECA has produced this summary of key information based on government sources to help our members consider their current practices. We have provided references to these official government sources for more definitive guidance, but we encourage you to seek further health advice specific to your area and circumstances. We recognise the specific nature of working with children and that this means some of the recommendations for the broader population may be particularly challenging.

ECA takes no responsibility or liability for the decisions individuals or services make on the basis of this summary.

Current guidance

Federal, state and territory governments in Australia are regularly reviewing the latest data and advice on COVID-19. The body collating, assessing and distributing this data and advice is the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC).

The AHPPC has examined the circumstances facing early childhood education and care services, and provided the following risk-mitigation strategies for our sector:

- Excluding unwell staff, children and visitors.
- Reducing the mixing of children by separating cohorts (including the staggering of meal and play times).
- Ensuring enhanced personal hygiene for children, staff and parents.
- Adhering to the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) [Staying Healthy guidelines](#).
- Discouraging excursions, other than to local nature parks or open spaces.
- Ensuring that children, staff and parents get influenza vaccination.

The AHPPC also notes that alternative arrangements should be considered for highly vulnerable children. Further information on the AHPPC recommendations is available [here](#).

If the advice from the AHPPC changes, ECA will notify members through our 'Member Alert' and 'News Summary' services. Some other organisations or services are also developing their own health and hygiene plans, policies and risk-matrices that are more extensive than the measures recommended by the AHPPC. For example, the United Workers Union (UWU) has a [six-point plan](#) for early childhood education and care services, which you might find useful. In deciding on health and hygiene measures in your own setting, it is important to consider your particular circumstances and follow science-based advice.

The role of children in COVID-19 transmission

Despite considerable speculation on social media, there is no evidence to suggest that children pose a particular danger to adults in transmitting COVID-19. According to the AHPPC, children infected with COVID-19 tend to have milder symptoms than adults, but this does not mean that they are more effective in transmitting the virus to others. In fact, the AHPPC considers that people with milder symptoms 'are less likely to transmit' the virus.

If a child has or develops a fever or is unwell, you can follow your service procedures and guidelines—such as 'Staying Safe in Childcare'—but it may be appropriate to be more cautious at this time. It is important to be more diligent in monitoring children's health, including any signs of being unwell (a child presenting with a high temperature or complaining of a sore throat) and to take faster action by contacting parents and asking them to take the child home, and by taking steps to minimise contact with other children.

Some services are screening the temperature of children prior to entry—as recommended in the UWU six-point plan—but others are concerned that this might make the staff complacent or encourage families to mask a temperature that may be related to a known issue (such as teething). Above all else, it is important to maintain communication with families about keeping children at home if there are any signs that they are unwell, in order to keep everyone safe.

For both children and adults, the most important consideration in preventing the spread of COVID-19 is good personal hygiene.

Personal hygiene

Coronavirus (which causes COVID-19), like many other viruses, is contagious. So, educators need to take particular care and use good hygiene to help prevent infection both for themselves and others. The primary recommendation from governments is to promote good hygiene. Good hygiene practices ([adapted from the Department of Health](#)) include:

- covering coughs and sneezes with your elbow or a tissue
- placing used tissues (and used gloves if educators have assisted a child) straight into a bin and closing the lid
- washing your hands often with soap and water, including before and after eating and after going to the toilet—this includes all children and educators (ECA notes that the current recommendation is to use running water and soap, rubbing hands together for at least 20 seconds)

- using hand sanitiser, but only the kind that is alcohol-based (please note that alcohol-free hand rubs have not been shown to be effective against viruses like COVID-19)
- avoiding touching your face—especially eyes, nose and mouth
- cleaning and disinfecting frequently used surfaces such as benchtops, desks and doorknobs
- cleaning and disinfecting frequently used objects such as toys, keys and resources
- increasing the circulation of fresh air by opening windows or adjusting air conditioning
- teaching and reinforcing personal hygiene measures among children and their families.

Physical distancing

Physical distancing has been a challenge for many in our sector. Safe Work Australia has made a particular note of this in one of this on its [Early Childhood Education](#) page and made a number of recommendations on physical distancing in the early childhood sector.

Please note that SafeWork Australia has clarified that the four square metre of space per person, which is recommended for work places generally, applies to adult-to-adult interactions but does not apply to adult-to-child interactions or to children.

As far as it is reasonably practical SafeWork Australia recommends that for self-distancing in early learning settings:

‘...all adults have 4 square metres of space each and maintain a physical distance of 1.5 metres from other adults in all areas of the facility. This includes staff facilities such as kitchens and break rooms and in play rooms.

Adults do not need to undertake physical distancing when interacting with or providing care to children. This means you do not need to count or include children in implementing physical distancing measures for adults. does not apply to children and adults do not apply physical distancing when caring for children.’ *Source: www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au.*

The overall recommendations that SafeWork Australia make include:

- calculating the area of each room, noting the number of staff and children in attendance each day, and directing workers to stay at least 1.5 metres apart from each other while performing their duties (the fact sheet acknowledges that staff will have to come in contact with children)
- displaying more [signage](#) and information to encourage workers and visitors to physically distance themselves
- encouraging the use of outdoor spaces as much as possible
- staggering staff breaks and reminding employees to physically distance themselves in break rooms and when using shared spaces
- limiting the number of visitors to the centre (e.g. cancelling incursions and non-essential training)
- discouraging the staff to use public transport, if possible; if that is not feasible, recommending that they:
 - travel at off-peak times
 - wash their 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
 - follow physical distancing measures during any trip.

Staff with underlying health conditions

Your service may have educators or other staff who could be more vulnerable to COVID-19. The AHPPC advises that the following people (vulnerable workers) are likely to be at higher risk of serious illness if they are infected with the virus:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 50 years and older, with one or more chronic medical conditions.
- People aged 65 years and older, with chronic medical conditions.
- People aged 70 years and older.
- People with compromised immune systems.

If your service employs vulnerable workers, then the AHPPC advises that you must undertake a risk-assessment for them. [Safe Work Australia](#) can help you to do this.

ECA recently had a panel discussion with Goodstart Early Learning on what social distancing can look like in our sector. See it here: [Teaching and learning - not as we know it](#), or read additional practical advice in [this blog post](#).

Environmental cleaning

Environmental cleaning is something that most in our sector are familiar with. However, COVID-19 has heightened awareness of this need. ECA notes the need for services to engage in 'frequent cleaning' and recommends that services revise their use of the NHMRC's 'Staying Healthy (5th edition)' guidelines. This document is available [here](#). However, it is currently recommended that cleaning be increased from 'daily and when visibly dirty' (as mentioned on p. 52 of the document) to frequently. Surfaces should be wiped or 'mechanically cleaned' using detergent solution or disinfectant wipes. Some states provide specific guidance on this. See, for example, the South Australian Department of Health fact sheet [here](#).

[Safe Work Australia](#) also highlights the need for closed bins, and the minimisation of touch points in early learning settings. And its [guidance for cleaners](#) outlines appropriate cleaning techniques for prevention, and provides specific guidance for cleaning if a diagnosis of COVID-19 has occurred in a workplace. Should your setting be notified of an infection, the Department of Health will provide additional information on cleaning requirements.

Other resources

- Safe Work Australia [guidance for the early childhood sector during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- [Information, support and guidance from ACECQA](#)
- Information for families and services from [Starting Blocks](#)
- [Information from the World Health Organisation](#)
- [The United Workers Union has released a six-point plan of guidelines for the ECEC sector.](#)
- Guides for states and territories:
 - 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](#)
- Northern Territory
 - [Coronavirus information from the Northern Territory Government](#)
- Western Australia
 - [Healthy WA advice on Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)

Stay up-to-date

If new information becomes available, we will update our [COVID-19 webpage](#) where you can also find the latest news and resources for the sector in relation to the pandemic.

You can also contact our customer service team and we will try to connect you to the information you need. Reach us via email: eca@earlychildhood.org.au, or phone: 1800 356 900 (free call in Australia).



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