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Guidance
Actions for early years and childcare providers during the COVID-19 pandemic

Updated 11 August 2021

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Main changes to previous guidance

From 9 August 2021, we updated the guidance as follows:

- updated the section on:
  - updated information on contingency planning, with hyperlinks to updated contingency framework
  - updated information on ventilation
  - updated to make clear that unvaccinated young people up to the age of 18 years and 6 months do not need to self-isolate when identified as a close contact
  - additional detail on what close contacts should do whilst awaiting their PCR test result
  - updated information on testing

We removed:

- references to 16 August and end of the summer term because the changes are now in place
- the guidance on routine vaccines and testing

Who this guidance is for

This guidance is for local authorities and early years providers in England. This includes early years provision in:

- maintained schools
- non-maintained schools
- independent schools
- alternative provision
- providers offering childminder services
- all providers registered with an early years childminder agency

For reception and year groups schools, in the next part, refer to guidance for schools during the coronavirus outbreak although some of the information in this guidance is relevant for reception.

Who this guidance does not apply to

This guidance does not apply to:

- nurseries or pre-schools, as they work in the child's or children's family home
- providers of childcare services for children aged 2 years and over who are not either:
  - the compulsory or voluntary childcare register - providers caring for children over the age of 5 should refer to the guidance on the protective measures for holiday or other school clubs and other out of school settings for children during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak
  - providers offering childcare through community activities, holiday clubs, breakfast or after school clubs - these providers should refer to the guidance on the protective measures for holiday or other school clubs and other out of school settings for children during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak

Summary

This guidance explains the actions you should take to reduce the risk of transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) in your setting. This includes public health advice which you must follow to manage your setting.

You should work closely with parents, carers, staff and, where appropriate, when agreeing the best approaches for their children/young people.

We use the terms 'must' and 'should' throughout the guidance. We use the term 'must' when the person in question is legally responsible for something, and 'should' when the advice set out should be followed unless there is a good reason not to.

Overview

The government continues to manage the risk of serious illness from the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) in a way that minimises the impact on education and children and young people, ensuring pupils from stringent restrictions is everyone's day-to-day lives, towards advising people on how to protect themselves and others, alongside targeted interventions to reduce risk.

As COVID-19 becomes a virus that we learn to live with, there is now an expectation that everyone will take up the offer of vaccination when it is their turn, and that people who are vaccinated and who test positive, and who are not part of a local or national outbreak, will be able to go to work, school or college.

The government's approach to testing has been high-quality education and childcare to all children. The evidence is clear that being out of education and childcare has a significant harm to educational attainment, life chances, mental and physical health.

We have worked closely with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and Public Health England (PHE) to revise this guidance.

Responsibilities of early years providers and local authorities

Responsibilities of early years providers

Settings are responsible for the following:

- safeguarding - local agencies, services and settings should work together to actively look for signs of harm given the greater risk of harm that some children may have experienced during the pandemic
- supporting children's learning, development and wellbeing - contribute to the early years foundation stage (EYFS) framework
- ensuring children are safe and healthy
- where you are also caring for children over the age of 5, you should also follow guidance on protective measures for holiday or other school clubs and other out of school settings for children during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak

Responsibilities of local authorities

Local authorities are responsible for the following:

Monitoring demand and capacity for childcare

Local authorities should work with providers to ensure there are sufficient places. This may involve providing place or alternative settings if necessary to ensure that neighbouring local authorities to co-ordinate provision, while keeping in mind the impact on children and families.

Safeguarding

Guidance to promote the welfare of all children in your area, working with partner organisations and agencies, as set out in working together to safeguard children.

Risk assessment

Continue to:

- support early years settings and access the risks for children whose education, health and care (EHC) plans they maintain
- ensure children with EHC plans are safely cared for whether in a setting or at home

Identifying harm

Work with local agencies with local agencies and services to actively look for signs of harm given the greater risk of harm some children may have been exposed to through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Actions for local authorities to monitor and manage their local early years markets

Local authorities should continue to:

- work with early years providers to monitor and manage their local childcare market
- ensure sufficient provision of early years places in childcare supply, as well as the barriers individual providers are experiencing

Stepping measures up and down

Local outbreaks

You should have contingency plans (sometimes called outbreak management plans), outlining what you would do if children or staff test positive for COVID-19, for how you would operate if you were advised to take extra measures to help break chains of transmission in your setting or your local community. Local authorities, in their local outbreak plans, are responsible for ensuring that local providers are prepared to respond to the increased number of settings or groups possible, and for the shortest amount of time possible.

Central government may offer local areas of particular concern of increased or extensive package to help limit increases in transmission.

For most settings, it will make sense to think about taking extra action if the number of positive cases substantially increases. Information on what circumstances might lead local authorities to consider such a step and the steps you should work through can be found in the contingency framework.

The contingency framework describes the principles of managing local outbreaks of COVID-19 and the local government's role in managing outbreaks of COVID-19 in health and PHE health protection teams can recommend measures that should be put in contingency framework in individual education and childcare settings - or a small cluster of settings - as part of their outbreak management responsibilities.

Workforce

You are best placed to determine the workforce that is required to meet the needs of your children.

We welcome your support in encouraging vaccine take-up and enabling staff who are eligible for a vaccination to attend booster vaccine appointments when possible.

Staff who are clinically extremely vulnerable staff and children

Clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) people are advised, as a minimum, to follow the same guidance as everyone else. It is important that everyone adheres to this guidance, including those who are CEV, because it is the collective impact of everyone's actions which will ensure you don't overload your local NHS. This includes public transport, and testing and tracing.

Social distancing measures have now ended in the workplace and it is no longer necessary for the government to instruct people to work from home. Employers should now be preparing for their CEV staff to return to the workplace. The Department for Work and Pension (DWP) has published guidance on supporting CEV people at work, including advice for employers and employees on how to talk about vaccine uptake in the workplace.

We welcome your support in encouraging vaccine take-up and enabling staff who are eligible for a vaccination to attend booster appointments where possible.

Children who are clinically extremely vulnerable

All children who are CEV should attend their setting unless they are one of the very small number of children who are shielding (those who are living with someone who has been advised by their clinician or other specialist not to attend).

Children and staff travelling from abroad

All children and staff travelling to England must adhere to quarantine requirements, details of which are set out in red, amber and green list rules for entering England. Parents and staff should be informed that DHSC will be publishing quarantine requirements which may result from any requirement to quarantine or isolate upon return.

Risk assessment

You must comply with health and safety law and put in place proportionate control measures. You must regularly review and update your risk assessments - treating them as living documents to take account of any significant changes in the workplace or changes. This includes having extra arrangements in place to monitor whether the controls are effective and working as planned. For more information and examples on how to do risk assessments, see guidance on risk assessments and managing risk, and health and safety responsibilities and duties for schools.

Mixing

We no longer recommend that it is necessary to keep groups apart as much as possible.

You should make sure your contingency plans (sometimes called outbreak management plans) are in place, including being prepared to take extra measures necessary to minimise mixing between groups if the temporary local outbreak.

Any decision to recommend the reintroduction of bearing groups apart would not be taken lightly and would need to take account of the detrimental impact they can have on the delivery of education and childcare.

Tracing close contacts and self-isolation

Settings only needed to do contact tracing up to and including 16 July 2021. Close contacts identified after 16 August 2021 will not need to self-isolate and childcare providers will no longer be expected to undertake contact tracing.

As with positive cases in any other setting, NHS Test and Trace will work with the local authority to trace close contacts. Contacts from a setting will be asked to self-isolate if they are identified as a close contact. The local authority will be notified if it identifies the individual as being a close contact. This is likely to be a small number of people in the case of a positive case in a school or college. NHS Test and Trace will trace close contact. You may be contacted in exceptional cases to help with identifying close contacts, as currently happens in managing other infectious diseases.

Individuals are not required to self-isolate if they live or the same household as someone with COVID-19, or are a close contact of a positive COVID-19 case and any of the following apply:

- they are fully vaccinated
- they are under 18 years 6 months
- they have been part of a vaccine trial or part of an approved COVID-19 vaccine trial
- they are not able to get vaccinated for medical reasons

Instead they will be contacted by NHS Test and Trace, informed they have been in close contact with a positive case and advised to take PCR test. We would encourage all people to take up the offer of a PCR test.

Children who are aged under 18 years 6 months are identified as a close contact will be advised to take a PCR test the positive case is in their own household.

Staff who are fully vaccinated, and children who are under 18 years 6 months, and who have been identified as a close contact, should continue to attend the setting as normal.

18 year olds will be treated in the same way as children until 6 months after their 18th birthday, to reflect their status in school. After this point, they will be treated as an adult, be subject to the same rules as adults and so if they choose not to get vaccinated, they will need to self-isolate if identified as a close contact.

Children who are aged under 18 years 6 months who live in boarding provision in the case of residential settings. There is a requirement to keep the number of positive cases in a setting low (local outbreaks) and for more information) or if central government decides to impose a local lockdown, the ability of public health might advise a setting to temporarily reintroduce some control measures.

Face coverings

Face coverings are no longer be recommended for staff and visitors in corridors or communal areas. You can find more information on face coverings, when to wear one, exemptions, and how to make one.

The government has removed the requirement to wear face coverings in law but expects people to continue to wear face coverings in some settings where it is reasonable since they make crowds safer when people can't maintain social. This includes public transport.

In circumstances where face coverings are recommended

If you have a substantial increase in the number of positive cases in your setting (and/or local outbreaks), PHE may recommend that you should, for a short time, put in place extra might advise you that face coverings should temporarily be worn in communal areas (staff and visitors (unless exempt). You should make sure your contingency plans cover this possibility.

In these circumstances, transparent face coverings, which may assist communication and understanding, may be more suitable than fabric face coverings, which communicate, can also be worn. Transparent face coverings may be effective in reducing the spread of COVID-19. However, the evidence to support this is currently limited. Fabric face coverings, if worn properly, are effective in reducing the spread of the face to cover the nose and mouth and to trade-offs with a breathable material capable of being washed and dried.

The main benefit from a transparent face covering is that they can aid communication. For example enabling lip reading or allowing for the full visibility of facial expressions, but this should be considered alongside the comfort and breathability of a face covering and the practicalities, and the risk that the face covering is more likely to become a layer of cross.

Face visors or shields can be worn by those exempt from wearing a face covering but they are not an equivalent alternative in terms of source control and transmission. They may protect the wearer against droplet spread in specific circumstances but are not a substitute for face coverings in the wider environment. Face shields can be used alongside an additional face covering. They should only be used after carrying out a risk assessment and ensuring that the face shield is fit for purpose and is used correctly.

The use of face coverings may have a particular impact on those who rely on visual signals for communication. Those who are exempt from wearing a face covering or those who do, are exempt from any requirement to wear face coverings in education and childcare settings.

Control measures

You should:

1. Ensure good hygiene for everyone
2. Maintain appropriate cleaning regimes, using standard products such as detergents.
3. Keep ventilation spaces well ventilated
4. Follow public health advice on testing, self-isolation and managing confirmed cases of COVID-19.

1. Ensure good hygiene for everyone

Hand hygiene

Frequent and thorough hand cleaning should take be regular practice. You should encourage your children to wash their hands regularly. This can be done with soap and water or hand sanitiser.

Respiratory hygiene

The 'catch it, bin it, kill it' approach continues to be very important.

Place tissues and bins in classrooms for you, including materials to encourage children to use them.

Use of personal protection equipment (PPE)

Most staff in settings will not require PPE beyond what they would normally need for their work.

More information on the use of PPE in COVID-19 can be found in, and DFE's education, childcare and children's services.

2. Maintain appropriate cleaning regimes, using standard products such as detergents

You should put in place and maintain an appropriate cleaning schedule. This should include the cleaning of frequently touched surfaces (for example, fabrics plan daily with a particular focus on frequently touched surfaces.

Find new guidance on COVID-19: cleaning of non-healthcare settings outside the home.

3. Keep occupied spaces well ventilated

When your setting is in operation, it is important to ensure it is well ventilated and that a comfortable environment is maintained.

You should identify any poorly ventilated spaces as part of your risk assessment and take action to improve ventilation. Ventilation is a key part of managing the risk of airborne holding exports where outdoor such as parents are on site, for example for a drop-off.

Mechanical ventilation is a system that uses a fan to draw from an, or extract air from a room. This can be a simple ventilation fan in a window or a complex system of ducts connected to a unit that heat and cool fresh air. Mechanical ventilation can be used to control the movement of air between rooms, or between rooms and the outside air is circulated.

If possible, systems should be adjusted to full fresh air. If this is not possible, then systems should be operated as normal as long as they are within a single room and supplemented by an outdoor air supply.

Where mechanical ventilation systems exist, you should ensure that they are maintained in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.

Where it is safe to do so, opening external windows can improve ventilation and comfort. In addition, opening internal doors, can also assist with creating a throughout air. If weather conditions allow, windows may also be used if they are in the room, or where safe to do so.

You should balance the need for increased ventilation while maintaining a comfortable temperature.

The Health and Safety Executive guidance on ventilation and air conditioners during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers' coronavirus (COVID-19) advice provide more information.

4. Follow public health advice on testing, self-isolation and managing confirmed cases of COVID-19

When an individual develops COVID-19 symptoms or has a positive test

Children, staff and other adults should follow public health advice on testing, self-isolation and staying at home. They should not come into the setting if they have symptoms of COVID-19, or have tested positive for COVID-19. Children should not come to school if their parents are exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms. They may be required to quarantine.

If anyone in your setting develops symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19), however mild, you should send them home and they should follow public health guidance.

For everyone with symptoms, they should avoid going public transport and, wherever possible, be collected by a member of their family or household.

If a child is awaiting collection, appropriate PPE should be used if close contact is required. Further information is available in our guidance for parents and carers, childcare and children's social care. Note that there may be an exception to this rule.

The household (including any siblings) should follow PHE's stay at home: guidance for households with possible or confirmed coronavirus (COVID-19) infection.

Asymptomatic testing

Testing remains important in reducing the risk of transmission of infection within settings. It is a key part of our plan to live with COVID-19 and to manage the risk of vaccines, in response to the latest epidemiological data, we are further expanded to step measures up or down in future depending on local circumstances.

Over the summer, staff should continue to test twice weekly if they are attending settings that remain open. Regular testing will take place in settings over the summer if they are open to children and young people, to identify those who may be infectious and to catch infected others from your school/college or childcare setting.

Early years staff should undertake twice weekly home tests whenever they are on site until the end of September, when this will be reviewed.

Early years children are not included in the rapid testing programme. PHE has advised that children in early years are at very low risk of being affected by COVID-19 and have high rates of asymptomatic COVID-19 infections. For example, they are required to quarantine.

If anyone in your setting develops symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19), however mild, you should send them home and they should follow public health guidance.

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Confirmatory polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test

Staff and children with a positive rapid lateral flow test result should self-isolate in line with COVID-19: guidance for people with coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms and should also book a free PCR test to check if they have COVID-19.

While awaiting the PCR result, the individual should self-isolate.

If the PCR test is taken within 3 days of the positive rapid lateral flow test, and is positive, the individual should self-isolate for 10 days from the date of the test, as long as the individual does not develop COVID-19 symptoms.

Test and Trace Support Payments

Some staff, parents and carers may be eligible for a one-off Test and Trace Support Payment of £500 if they have been told to self-isolate by their education setting. This is payable in one lump sum from the local authority.

Further information is available on claiming financial support under the Test and Trace Support Payment scheme.

Other considerations

Further information is available in supporting pupils with medical conditions at school.

You should ensure that big contacts are aware of the setting's control measures and ways of working.

Admitting children back to the setting

Children who have been absent from school or that a child who symptoms should not attend the setting, given the potential risk to others. If a parent or carer insists on a child attending your setting, you can take the decision to refuse the child. If in your opinion, the child's presence in the setting would pose a risk to others, you should inform relevant with COVID-19. Your decision would need to be carefully considered in light of all the circumstances and current public health advice.

Other considerations for operating the setting

Operating breakfast and after school clubs and other providers of extracurricular

Providers of extracurricular activities should refer to protective measures for holiday or other school clubs and other out of school settings for children during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Arrangements for providing meals

Where children qualify for benefits-related free school meals, because they meet the criteria set out in the government's guidance on free school meals, they will be able to, at least time, they should make this support in kind. In any instance where an eligible child's staff supporting income due to COVID-19, this support should continue to be provided (where possible) for the remainder of the provision of a school.

In all other settings, where free meals do not apply, you may charge for meals in the normal way. Government does not provide free meals for children from disadvantaged families. Arrangements should comply with the COVID-19: guidance for food businesses.

Staying in touch with parents or carers whose child is at home

All children should be able to attend as normal, with the exception of those children who may still have to self-isolate.

We recognise that many settings have already shared resources for children who are at home and we are grateful for this.

You should consider how:

- to continue to support the learning of children who do not attend settings including how these children can maintain contact with their key person and peers through the early years setting
- parents and carers can be supported to provide a positive learning environment at home

You can also direct parents and carers to:

- Hungry Little Minds - provides simple fun, activities for kids aged 0 to 5 for parents to do at home with children to support their early learning
- BBC Tiny Happy People - activities for babies, toddlers and children
- Words for Life
- Help children aged 2 to 4 to learn at home: coronavirus (COVID-19)

You should work with local authorities to monitor the welfare of:

- vulnerable children who are not attending provision
- other children they might wish to keep in touch with, for safeguarding purposes

Children's wellbeing and support

Some children may be experiencing a variety of emotions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as anxiety, stress or low mood.

You may need to provide more focused support for children's individual issues, drawing on external support where necessary and possible. To support this, you may wish to access the free resource MindEd learning platform for professionals, which contains materials on peer support, stress, fear and trauma, and bereavement. MindEd has also developed coronavirus staff resilience tips with advice and tips for frontline staff.

Application and disapplication of the early years foundation stage framework

The early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework sets the standards that schools and childcare settings must meet for the learning, development and care of children from birth to 5 years old.

You can use specific temporary EYFS disapplications if COVID-19 national or local restrictions in England prevent you from delivering the EYFS as normal.

Details can be found in the guidance on early years foundation stage: coronavirus disapplications.

The disapplications end on 31 August 2021.

Reporting COVID-19 cases to Ofsted

You must notify Ofsted, or the childminder agency with which you are registered, of any confirmed cases in the setting, whether a child or a staff member. You should also tell Ofsted if you have to close the setting as a result. It is a legal requirement as set out in paragraph 3.51 of the statutory framework for the early years foundation stage. Report as soon as you are able to, and in any case within 14 days. See tell Ofsted if you have a COVID-19 incident at your childcare business to assure all the information required is included.

Ofsted inspections

Ofsted resumed on-site Education Inspection Framework inspections of registered early years providers on 4 May 2021. You can find out more about Ofsted's return to graded inspections on Ofsted: coronavirus (COVID-19) rolling update.

Parent and child groups

Parent and child groups can operate as normal and without restrictions on attendance.

You should follow the control measures in this guidance, which will help towards mitigating the risks of COVID-19 for all children and adults.

There are no limits on the number of people who can sing indoors or outdoors. Some activities, however, can increase the risk of catching or passing on COVID-19. This happens where people are doing activities which generate more droplets as they breathe heavily, such as singing, dancing, exercising or raising their voices. The risk is greatest where these factors overlap, for example in crowded indoor spaces where people are raising their voices.

In situations where there is a higher risk of catching or passing on COVID-19, you should be particularly careful to follow the guidance on keeping yourself and others safe.

Charging parents and carers if their child is unable to take up their place

Providers should continue to be fair and balanced in dealings with parents or carers and must continue to avoid unfair charging practices. Providers should refer to:

- CMA open letter to the early years sector published by the Competitions and Markets Authority (CMA) on 28 July 2020
- CMA's detailed advice on nursery and early years sector: COVID-19 restrictions and consumer law
- CMA's broader statement on coronavirus (COVID-19), consumer contracts, cancellation and refunds

Each case needs to take account of individual contracts considered from the perspective of both parties and the application of the law and guidance to both providers as businesses and parents as consumers. The general principle is that providers should not charge parents or carers for services that cannot be provided. If there is a barrier to accessing childcare, based on government guidance or the law, the provider should not charge the parents or carers for this period.

Insurance

Educational visits

Given the likely gap in COVID-19 related cancellation insurance, if you are considering booking a new visit, you are advised to ensure that any new bookings have adequate financial protection in place.

Business interruption insurance

For childcare providers that have a policy which covers government-ordered closure and unspecified notifiable diseases, you should seek advice from your insurer or broker as to whether the terms and conditions in your policy allows you to make a claim. Advice may also be sort from the Association of British Insurers (ABI).

Public liability insurance

It is a legal requirement that providers must carry the appropriate insurance (for example, public liability insurance) to cover all premises from which they provide childcare, including childminding. Nurseries should check the terms and conditions of their public liability insurance policies and consult with their insurance providers and brokers to determine their coverage for COVID-19. For general advice on insurance matters (but not on specific policies) including those related to COVID-19, the ABI can be contacted by telephone on 020 7600 3333 or email at info@abi.org.uk.

Other guidance available

Infection prevention and control

Guidance is available on the use of PPE in education, childcare and children's social care.

Self-isolating

Guidance on self-isolating is available in:

- If you need to self-isolate or cannot attend work due to coronavirus
- COVID-19: what to do if you're employed and cannot work
- COVID-19 restrictions: what you can and cannot do
- the guidance for contacts of people with confirmed coronavirus (COVID-19) infection who do not live with the person

Funding

Guidance on funding is available in:

- COVID-19: financial support for education, early years and children's social care
- use of free early education entitlements funding during the COVID-19 outbreak
- 30 hours free childcare
- Tax-free childcare

Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

Guidance is available on:

- how to check if you can claim for your employees' wages through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme
- the furlough scheme extended and further economic support announced
- how to claim for wages through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme
- the coronavirus Job Retention Scheme: step by step guide for employers

Other business support

Guidance is available on:

- COVID-19: financial support for education, early years and children's social care
- how to check if you can claim a grant through the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme
- business rates: nursery (childcare) discount 2021 to 2022 - local authority guidance
- ABI business insurance

EYFS disapplications

Guidance is available on early years foundation stage coronavirus disapplications.

Ofsted

Guidance is also available in the Ofsted: COVID-19 rolling update.

Supervised toothbrushing programmes

Guidance on COVID-19: supervised toothbrushing programmes is also available.

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Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance and support

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