



An Roinn Leanaí
agus Gnóthaí Óige
Department of Children
and Youth Affairs

Adapting environments for practice during Covid-19

Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare



Providing Safe Facilities for Learning and Care

The focus of Early learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) settings in Ireland must continue to be to ensure the well-being, safety and development of the children attending. In reopening ELC/SAC settings in line with public health guidance, the utmost care and attention is being paid to the provision of safe environments that support quality provision.

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs has sought health advice and recommendations to ensure the well-being of children and staff as ELC/SAC settings reopen. National policy in Ireland continues to place the needs of the child at the centre of practice. To achieve this goal children will not be expected to remain socially distanced from each other or from the adults caring for them. Neither will they wear masks or be cared for by adults wearing masks as part of their daily routine. Instead, the risk of infection transmission can be minimised by ensuring children and adults do not attend settings if they have symptoms of viral infection and by children remaining within a small group ('play-pod') throughout the day. Only ELC/SAC staff will generally have access to the setting, and they must remain socially distanced from colleagues but not from children. This guidance was developed to support practitioners when arranging environments and when thinking about how practice will work in individual setting contexts in advance of opening to best support safe and playful learning and care experiences for children.

This guidance incorporates current advice about measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in the settings providing childcare issued by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC). As the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) and HPSC continues to evolve, this guidance and the measures taken within settings may also need to change. Therefore, it should be noted that the details within this document are non-exhaustive and are subject to change. This is, therefore, a living document.

Practice Principles during Covid-19

- Practice will remain child-centred. This means children are at the heart of all policies and practices and involved in decision-making where appropriate;
- A service's primary concern should be children's health and well-being;
- Services should try to minimise and manage risk of infection. Some risk is inevitable but public health advice is that reopening is appropriate.;
- Children and adults (staff and parents) should not attend if they have symptoms of viral infection;
- Social distancing is not possible between young children. Instead, infection risk should be minimised through children remaining within a small group ('play-pod') throughout the day;
- There will be no change to the Early Years Regulations. Existing statutory adult-child ratios and space requirements for different age groups and care categories will remain the same as before;
- Good hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene should be practised among adults and children who are old enough. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is not required either for children or for staff during their normal interactions with children, except insofar as required by the Early Years Regulations (gloves / aprons for nappy changing; gloves for cleaning). If a child develops viral symptoms while in the service, the staff member assigned to care for him/her while they wait for a parent or guardian to pick them up may wear a mask. If a staff member feels that they need to use a mask in this instance, it is important that staff explain and discuss it with children prior to use to ensure the child feels no additional anxiety or stress.
- When not caring for children e.g. during break times, providers and staff should follow HSE advice on the use of masks (cloth face coverings);

- While DCYA is providing guidance for early learning and care and school-age childcare services, including practical examples, it will be for service providers to determine how best to comply with the public health guidance.

Arriving at the Learning and Care Centre:

The arrival at crèche, pre-school or school-age childcare setting is crucial for the introduction or reintroduction of children to the setting. Staggered arrival and pick-up times may be helpful but are not required if distance can be maintained otherwise. Where the necessary distance cannot be maintained, drop-off and pick-up should be arranged to minimise contact between adults. On arrival or collection, demarcated outdoor waiting areas for children and accompanying adults will be in place. A childcare worker will meet a child and parents at this allocated space with no or minimum contact with the parent/guardian, insofar as this is possible. Consideration may need to be given to whether the waiting area is sheltered. This demarcated outdoor waiting area should be as child-friendly as possible, for example through using colourful dots or footprints rather than lines as markings.

Under current public health guidance, visitors to the building should be restricted where possible. Consider how children and parents will experience the handover process. The addition of a well-marked 'hug, kiss, high five' zone, where safe handover from parents can happen, will reassure parents and children. Think of ways in which you can greet children to minimise contact where possible such as a wink, wave or heart-warming smile.



Think about how your practice will flow from your environment

Place emphasis on staff thinking creatively about how they can balance the need to prioritise safety and hygiene, while at the same time ensuring that early learning environments are calm, stress-free and playful in order to prevent potential discomfort and upset to children.

To implement a 'play-pod' system within the setting that ensures a continuity of participation of adults and children, it may be necessary to consider some adaptations to both the environment and practice. Play-pods should be kept as small as is likely to be reasonably practical in the specific childcare context. Consider, how will play-pods operate in the setting? Does each room accommodate one or more than one play-pod? Where there is more than one play-pod in a room, play-pods may be separated from each other by light and/or transparent partitions of sufficient height to limit children having physical contact with children in a different play-pod. It is important that any partition cannot be easily knocked over and that children cannot climb on or over the partition. Usual health and safety rules still apply.

Consider the location of sinks, both indoors within each playroom and in the outdoor space.

Consider the location of toilet and changing facilities. Is it a shared block between a number of rooms, located in a shared area such as a hallway? How will children from different play-pods be supported to avoid contact in the toilet and changing spaces?

Consider what adaptations could be made to ensure the 'play-pods' keep separate and there is no mixing of children or adults outside of their designated play-pods.

Consider the provision of food. What are the facilities to prepare, cook, reheat and store food? A service must ensure care in food preparation and serving to avoid sharing of in-use crockery and utensils. In some settings children and staff may continue to eat meals and snack in their play room while others may use a communal dining space. N.B. crockery and utensils do not need to be disposable.

Consider spaces for sleep and rest. Where possible cots, sleep mats or day beds for children in one play-pod should be separated by a distance of 2 metres from those of children from different 'play-pods'. This may require additional floor space to be assigned for sleep or rest periods. Children may sleep in adjoining sleep rooms but it is important that regular cleaning and ventilation occurs. Cots and sleep mats ideally should not be used by more than one child. If these items need to be shared, cleaning fully of all parts and provision of clean bedding is required before a child from another play-pod may use the cot. Children aged 2+ may rest in the play room. Extra vigilance and very close adherence to sleep policies are necessary at this time.

Repurposing Indoor Spaces:

Auxiliary spaces

Services may need to consider their staff facilities to ensure that they can support social distancing of staff particularly during breaks and administration work. It may be necessary for some services not to open a designated childcare room in order to use that as a staff room.

In shared usage buildings, consider rooms that may not be used by other agencies at this time. Can these be re-purposed into staff rooms to support social distancing breaks between adults? Prioritise rooms that have direct access to the outside or garden for children.

Alternatively, some services have staff rooms or other spaces that may need to be reconfigured as an extra play space on a temporary basis. Make as much floor space available as possible for play and remove unsuitable furniture. Consider spaces normally used for storage or for meeting parents. Review the rooms that may be available with fire safety in mind, and note direct access and escape routes. It is not acceptable to have rooms within rooms. A risk assessment (appendix 1) must be completed on each additional space considered for repurposing.



Fire Safety

Fire safety must be carefully considered if repurposing spaces. Services should review the [Guide to fire safety in premises used for preschool services](#) (1999). If considering making any significant changes it is advisable to get expert advice from a competent person as defined by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA). Contact your local City and County Childcare Committee for a listing of competent persons.

Things to think about for all children and staff

- Escape routes
- Exits
- Assembly points
- Fire drills
- Fire equipment

Gaining More from Outside Space:

Play is crucial to children's emotional, physical and mental health and is central to their learning and development. Now more than ever is it necessary for adults to facilitate play and learning outdoors.

Using outdoor spaces as an active learning environment may create lots of opportunities for optimising space for play and learning. Review outdoor spaces in tandem with indoor space to ensure a good relationship between indoors and outdoors and to ensure children have direct access to the outdoors. Extending outside play opportunities at this time will enhance children's resilience and provide opportunities for working out pent-up frustrations and worries.

It is important that staff understand how to use and adapt the outdoors. Consider the outside space that is available and how it could be repurposed for play. Consider for example, whether car parking space can be safely repurposed to add to the area of play space available. Adding high value play and sensory experiences like a second sand pit or a mud kitchen will enhance any additional outside space. However, additional equipment/toys is not essential. Children can enjoy outdoor spaces without having to use equipment at all times, for example by supporting and encouraging children to run, jump or play chasing games.

Outdoor spaces should be constantly evolving and changing in line with children's interests and needs. Children are co-creators of their learning and understanding in their environment. Outdoor spaces should facilitate different functions such as allowing children to enjoy quiet time, play alone or in small groups (play-pods). It may be necessary to split time outside with other play-pods of

children or to split the outside space into areas so that play-pods can be kept separate. If outside space can only accommodate one play-pod at a time it will be necessary to incorporate cleaning of equipment between uses by different play-pods.

Things to think about when creating your outdoor spaces

- Providing shelter – potential natural shelter, temporary or permanent coverings
- Boundaries
- Handwashing/toileting
- Sleep/rest
- Clothing, footwear and accessories
- Provision of storage for suitable clothing for playing outside in all weathers
- Adverse weather



Transitional Spaces

Consider the use of transitional spaces as part of your environment. Doors that can be kept open and routines that allow for free movement between inside and outside spaces should be considered where possible. Think about transitional spaces that work well for children and adults, joining the indoors and outdoors and creating a tranquil third space. The creation of usable transitional spaces extends the learning opportunities, expands the environment and supports a natural flow within and between spaces.



The Provision of Shade

Consider the provision of shade for children and staff outside to facilitate as much use of the outside play space as possible. To provide respite from the elements children need to be able to access shelter independently. Building dens can create shelter as well as playing other important roles. Ensure any temporary sails, tents or pergolas are securely anchored.



External Toilets and Handwashing Facilities

The provision of external toilets or direct access to toilets from external play areas will benefit children and staff and promote children's independence and sense of competence due to easier toilet access. Handwashing sinks should be added where possible in the outside area. Handwashing is preferable to the use of sanitiser as it promotes the development of valuable well-being and independence skills. Children should be able to wash their hands independently. Think about access to sinks and the disposal of paper towels for hand drying. Where possible, warm water should be available outdoors as it improves comfort and therefore encourages better hand washing practice. Consider environmental factors such as using biodegradable liquid soaps and individual hand towels. Face cloths are a good option for children's hands.





Spaces for Sleep, Rest and Dining Outside

Children can also rest outdoors. Children should be able to have a rest at any time either indoors or outdoors. Consider how you can incorporate this into your outdoor space. Ensure the rest space is comfortable and cosy, includes insulated mats and blankets, that children have appropriate clothing and that the space is sheltered from weather (sunshine, rain, wind).

Enabling children to have enjoyable food and drink experiences outdoors as part of the routine is essential to facilitate seamless play experiences. If the outdoor space is an extension of the indoor environment, consider how suitable outdoor spaces are for eating, how to ensure children can access suitable drinking water at all times, and how to ensure hygiene standards are maintained.

Parental partnership

Parental partnership is an opportunity for sharing lots of information which can help parents understand your approach and can also be a chance for parents to actively engage and support the changes you are making. During this period supporting effective parental partnership is key to supporting children, parents and staff transition back into settings.

Appendix 1 - Sample Risk Assessment for Environmental Changes to Early Learning and Care Services in Response to the Covid-19.

Service Name and Address:

Location of Proposed Change:

Risk Assessment Undertaken by:

Date:

All proposed changes to the internal and external environment should go through a process of risk assessment prior to implementation:

- 1) Record and keep, using photographs, evidence of the pre-COVID environment.
- 2) Consider fire safety and exit routes as a priority. Blocking or potential obstruction of fire exits or exit routes are an unacceptable risk.
- 3) Describe the proposed change including its impact on the rest of the space.
- 4) Complete the risk assessment for each space of proposed changes identifying the level of risk.
- 5) High risk plans are to be discarded.
- 6) Identify control measures for medium and low risk changes
- 7) Reassessment of Risk: Once changes have been made a risk assessment is under taken again to ensure the risk level is managed.
- 8) Changes that lead to a high level of risk are to be discarded.

Provide a Description of Proposed Changes to Environment	Tick the relevant risk level		
	Low Risk	Medium Risk	High Risk
Changes to Service Entrance/Doorway			
Changes to Service Exit			
Changes to Room Entrance/Doorway			
Equipment Added			

Equipment Removed			
Changes to Flooring/Surfacing			
Sink Added			
Furniture Added			
Changes to Lighting			
Changes to Window Dressing			
Changes to Room Access to Outdoor Area			
Access to Toilets			
Partition Added			
Changes to Heating			

