



Best practices for early learning and child care settings during the COVID-19 pandemic

To maintain safe and healthy environments during COVID-19, early learning and child care centres should consider implementing the following best practices in addition to established policies and procedures from the [Ministry of Education](#) and [Public Services Health and Safety Association](#). Infusing developmentally appropriate pedagogy with infection prevention strategies has been considered in this document.

The Ministry of Education has developed a [guidance document](#) entitled “Building on How Does Learning Happen? Pedagogical approaches to reopening licensed child care.” All operators and educators in Durham Region are encouraged to review this document during the reopening phase.

Program Statement

Although Quality Assurance inspections will cease during the reopening phase, operators and educators are highly encouraged to continue implementing their program statement and align activities with How Does Learning Happen? Ontario’s Pedagogy for the Early Years.

Program statements ensure licensees meet the requirements of the Early Years and Child Care Act, 2014 (O. Reg 137/15, Section 46). The Ministry of Education and The Regional Municipality of Durham recognize that some elements of the program statement may not be feasible during the reopening phase. Licensees are encouraged to openly communicate with children, families, educators, and community partners on the approaches that will be used to meet program statement goals as best as possible. Licensees are not required as part of reopening to revise their program statement, full parent handbook and other policies.

Promote a sense of belonging

Every child has a sense of belonging when he or she is connected to others and contributes to their world (How Does Learning Happen, 2014).

Establishing positive, caring, and respectful relationships with children is incredibly important during their transition into licensed child care. Educators are encouraged to:

- Stay attuned with the physical and emotional states of children and respond in a warm and sensitive manner.
- Connect with each child individually and use observational skills to identify what brings them joy and how they relate to others and their environment.

- Build connections between home and centre by regularly communicating with families using virtual tools (e.g., email, electronic document applications, phone calls) and at daily screening checks.

Nurture healthy development and well-being

Every child is developing a sense of self, health, and well-being (How Does Learning Happen, 2014).

There are many ways to care for children's physical health and mental well-being while applying the new regulations to stop the spread of COVID-19 in licensed child care:

- Foster the development of self-help skills by helping children learn how to wash their hands on their own.
- Provide regular daily opportunities to be physically active outdoors, encouraging physical distancing while doing so.
- Be responsive to children's efforts to self-regulate to stressors they encounter throughout the day. Help children learn strategies for becoming calm and focused.

Create contexts for learning through exploration, play, and inquiry

Every child is an active and engaged learner who explores the world with body, mind, and senses (How Does Learning Happen, 2014).

Licensed child care environments will be set-up to promote physical distancing, however, classrooms and outdoor spaces can stimulate learning. Some ideas include:

- Provide single-child learning stations that include open-ended materials, which will inspire investigation, problem-solving, and communication.
- When selecting toys to include in programming, consider those that can be easily sanitized and promote exploration.
- Continue to promote children as co-investigators and co-planners, drawing in their interests to help shape their learning.

Foster communication and expression in all forms

Every child is a capable communicator who expresses himself or herself in many ways (How Does Learning Happen, 2014).

During this unprecedented time, it is of utmost importance that educators give children a voice to hear their thoughts, feelings, concerns, and moments of joy. Consider the various forms of children's expressions in daily programs.

- Provide individual art-kits to children so that they may demonstrate expression in a way that is safe.
- Practice active listening and engage in authentic conversations with children both as initiator and equal partners.

- Seek out additional resources from reputable organizations and agencies to find ways of supporting the mental health and well-being of children of various ages.

Value educators as competent, capable, curious and rich in potential

- Involve educators in the planning for reopening by having them share their expertise in planning, knowledge of the children, and experience in delivering high-quality programming.
- Share feedback with educators to inform them of their valued work.

Value families as competent, capable, curious and rich in potential

- Invite parents to share their ideas, questions, concerns, and hopes for their child(ren) during reopening.
- Use daily screening routines to check-in with parents.
- Discuss with educators how to keep families informed and engaged throughout the reopening phase.

In-program considerations

Cohorting

Effective September 1, 2020, cohort sizes are set to maximum group sizes set out under the Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014.

Full details on changes to group sizes and updated guidelines for reopening can be found in the latest version of the [Operational Guidance During COVID-19 Outbreak](#) document.

Physical distancing

Alongside the Ministry of Education, The Regional Municipality of Durham recognizes that physical distancing between children in a child care setting is difficult and encourages child care staff and providers to maintain a welcoming and caring environment for children.

In addition to the mandated procedures for space set-up and physical distancing, the following best practices are encouraged for all early learning and child care centres in Durham Region:

- Remove extra furniture to increase space between seating and playing areas so that children and staff are better able to naturally maintain at least two metres/six feet apart.
- Apply concepts of invitations to play as visual cues for children to self-select single-activity learning stations and encourage individual play.
- Create visual cues on the floor/seating to maintain physical distancing during group activities (e.g., story time).
- Create visual cues on tables to help children keep physical distancing for snack and meals.

- Separate groups when possible to alternate lunch and outdoor times.
- Increase distance between cots/resting mats/playpens or place the children head-to-toe or toe-to-toe if the space is limited.
- Avoid getting close to faces of children where possible; follow appropriate Personal Protective Equipment protocols.
- Ensure a schedule is in place to avoid having two or more cohorts mix in common areas (e.g., hallways, playgrounds, gymnasiums).
- Encourage children to greet each other using non-physical gestures (e.g., wave or nod or a verbal “hello”) and to avoid close greetings (e.g., hugs, handshakes).
- Encourage children to keep “hands to yourself.” Be mindful of using developmentally appropriate language to encourage children to respect the space between themselves and their peers, when possible.
- Avoid singing, shouting or speaking loudly indoors. Use appropriate redirection practices for children if they are engaging in these activities.
- Shared spaces and structures that cannot be cleaned and disinfected between cohorts should not be used.

Food provision

In addition to the mandated procedures regarding food provision, the following best practices are recommended:

- Food will be served to children by a staff.
- Each child will have their own individual meals and snacks.
- No food sharing will take place.
- All dishware and cutlery will be cleaned and sanitized after use.

Equipment and toy usage and restrictions

- Children must not share personal items – bottles, soothers, toothbrushes, facecloths – label personal items with child’s name to discourage accidental sharing.
- Limit the number and types of personal items that can be brought into the child care setting and provide individual cubbies or bins for each child’s belongings.

Outdoor Play

- Outdoor play is encouraged. Activities from indoors may be brought outside to increase children’s choices.
- Play structures must be disinfected after each use according to cleaning schedules implemented to support COVID-19 practices.
- Children will have more space to use their loud voices and exude appropriate levels of energy to support happy children.
- Summer outdoor waterplay may happen with COVID-19 safe practices. Ensure no standing water is used. Sprinklers and hoses should allow for the water to make contact and disperse with only one child at a time.

- Infants may go on walks with strollers if the stroller allows for a solid barrier between infants and/or two meters/six feet between seats.
- Strollers must be disinfected between children or seats should be labelled so sharing seats does not occur.

Contact with The Regional Municipality of Durham

Operating Child Care that supports healthy, happy children during COVID-19 is new to everyone. The Durham Health Department and Children's Services Division is working to support educator teams to build confidence in their practices.

Please contact your Quality Assurance Advisor and/or Early Learning Training Specialist to share your ideas and/or concerns. The Children's Services Team will seek answers and connect with the Health Department as necessary to offer support.
