



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.

Program Statement

Although Quality Assurance inspections will cease during the reopening phase, Quality Assurance Advisors will be working with operators and educators to support the continued focus on quality child care. Operators and educators are encouraged to continue implementing their program statement and align activities with How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years.

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 to the physical and emotional states of children and respond in a warm and sensitive manner.
- Connect with each child individually and observe children 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., newsletters, email, electronic documentation applications, phone calls).

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 while also promoting exploration.
- Continue to promote children as co-investigators and co-planners, drawing on 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 express 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.

In-program considerations

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 educators, staff and home child care 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 meters/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 continue physical distancing during snack and meals.
- Separate groups when possible to alternate lunch and outdoor times.
- Avoid getting close to faces of children where possible; if not 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 as a precaution to limit droplet exposure. Use appropriate positive redirection practices for children if they are engaging in these activities.

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.