

Coronavirus (COVID-19): implementing social distancing in education settings in NI

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Background

This guidance is intended for education provision for children within the defined groups who cannot be safely cared for at home. Every child who can be safely cared for at home should be, to limit the chance of the virus spreading. Where this is not possible for example to enable key workers to attend work, or for vulnerable children who need care for their health and safety, then provision may be provided.

- Children are likely to become infected with coronavirus (COVID-19) at roughly the same rate as adults, but the infection is usually mild.
- The most common symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) are a new, continuous cough or a high temperature (over 37.8 degrees).
- For the vast majority of children and staff, coronavirus (COVID-19) will not cause serious illness.
- The Department of Health is implementing surge plans to address the health and social care needs of those for whom it is not a mild illness.

From 23 March 2020, all schools and non-statutory pre-school education settings in Northern Ireland were advised to remain open for distance learning and to ensure there is provision for vulnerable children and for key workers' children up to the end of Year 10. 'Vulnerable children' is defined currently as those children who are in need of protection, or in need, as defined by the Children (NI) Order 1995. The vast majority of children will not attend school.

The issue of vulnerable children has changed since we started dealing with COVID-19. The number of vulnerable children attending is low and this could mean some may be potentially more at risk from non-

attendance. If attendance is deemed in the child's best interest they should have access to school settings, either in their normal setting or a suitable alternative setting.

Detailed guidance on vulnerable children and young people, including the range of support available from the Education Authority, was published on 10 April 2020.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>

Key / critical workers are defined as parents whose work is critical to the COVID-19 response, including those who work in health and social care and in other key/critical sectors. However, many parents working in these critical sectors will be able to ensure their child is kept at home. Every child who can be safely cared for at home should be, to limit the chance of the virus spreading.

It was announced on 23 March that the UK would enter a stricter period of social distancing, with people only allowed to leave home for very limited purposes. The UK-wide measures are intended to delay the spread of the virus.

This advice seeks to support staff working in schools, other education and pre-school settings, to deliver this approach in the safest way possible, focusing on measures they can put in place to help limit risk of the virus spreading within education and pre-school settings. It should be read in conjunction with the advice on school and pre-school closures, and vulnerable children as set out within the current NI FAQs (and any subsequent updates). This advice will be updated as the situation evolves.

Which children can continue to attend education and pre-school settings?

The Government has made provision for vulnerable children and children of key workers to continue attending education and pre-school settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Children and adults at increased and very high risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19)

The government has issued guidance for everyone, including children, on social distancing measures we should all be taking to reduce social interaction between people in order to reduce the transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19).

Some adults and children are at increased risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19) because of their age, underlying health conditions or pregnancy.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people>

Some adults and children with underlying medical conditions are at very high risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19). They are strongly advised to stay at home at all times and avoid any face-to-face contact. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>

As far as possible, children and staff who fall in to these categories should not be attending school or pre-school settings. Children with underlying medical conditions which put them at increased or very high risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19) should have an individual risk assessment if continued attendance at school or pre-school is proposed. This should normally involve the GP and school nurse. In complex cases a consultant medical opinion may also be required. Schools should advise parents whether they are able to provide a safe environment for their child.

If a child in one of the categories outlined above lives in a household with someone who is at very high risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19), they should only attend an education or pre-school setting if stringent social distancing can be adhered to and the child is able to understand and follow those instructions, which may not be possible for

very young children and older children without the capacity to adhere to the instructions on social distancing. Settings should allow staff who live with someone in the most vulnerable health groups, to work from home where possible.

Households with possible coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms

The most common symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) are recent onset of:

- new continuous cough and/or
- high temperature

Anyone with symptoms of coronavirus illness (COVID-19), however mild, should follow the current guidance on staying at home.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>

Children of key workers

Key workers' children who are in the very high risk group for COVID-19 should not attend school or pre-school settings, as set out in the [guidance on shielding](#)

Children with underlying health conditions which put them at increased but not very high risk of COVID-19 can attend school or pre-school settings if, following an individual risk assessment, it is considered to be in their best interests to do so.

The education or pre-school setting should be informed by the parent/carer of any health conditions so that any concerns can be addressed. The number of social interactions in the education environment will be reduced as there are fewer children attending, and classroom social distancing is being practised.

The school will advise the parent if it is able to provide a safe environment for a child with an underlying health condition.

Children with a Social Worker or Vulnerable Children

Separate guidance is available at:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/guidance-vulnerable-children-and-young-people-10-april-2020>

How to implement social distancing

To help ensure that the risk of virus spread for both staff and children is as low as possible, education and pre-school settings that remain open should:

- tell children, parents, carers or any visitors, such as suppliers, not to visit the education or pre-school setting if they are displaying any symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19)
- consider how children arrive at the education or pre-school setting and reduce any unnecessary travel on coaches, buses or public transport
- ensure class sizes reflect the numbers of teaching staff available and are kept as small as possible
- stagger lunch times, break times and the movement of pupils around the school to reduce large groups of children gathering
- discourage parents and carers from gathering at school gates
- follow the [social distancing guidelines](#)

Social distancing within education and pre-school settings with very young children may be harder to maintain. Staff should implement the above measures as far as they are able, whilst ensuring children are safe and well cared for within their settings.

We are asking you to:

- think about how the above can be implemented in your education or pre-school setting
- make sure anyone who is feeling ill stays at home.
- ensure all staff and children wash their hands with soap and water for 20 seconds frequently, and are encouraged not to touch their face, while using a tissue or elbow to cough or sneeze and using bins for

tissue waste. If children or young people have trouble washing their hands, ensure help is available

- inform parents, carers and communities about the measures that you are taking and get their help to implement them
- increase cleaning of surfaces in classrooms, including desks and handles, and within toilet blocks and changing rooms, adhering to [guidance on cleaning of non-healthcare settings](#)
- for children and young people with a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN), work with HSC Trusts as well as with parents and carers to decide how best to continue supporting these children and young people to stay healthy.

What parents and carers can do

- If their child can be safely cared for at home they should be, to limit the chance of the virus spreading. Children should spend as little time in school/pre-school as possible. It is recognised however that school can be a protective factor for vulnerable children and as such their continued attendance at school should be facilitated where it is safe and appropriate to do so.
- Talk to their children about coronavirus (COVID-19), social distancing and hand washing.
- Follow [guidance for households with possible coronavirus infection](#).
- Do not gather at entrances or in playgrounds, and model social distancing so that their children learn good practice.

Q&A

Social distancing

Q: What does effective social distancing involve, in practice, in educational settings?

As much as possible, children, young people and staff should be spaced apart at all times. This means sitting children at desks that are far apart; ensuring everyone queues and eats further apart than normal; keeping apart when in the playground or doing any physical exercise; visiting the toilet one after the other; staggering break times; putting guidelines on the floor in corridors; and avoiding unnecessary staff gatherings. Social distancing measures should also be in place when providing meals.

Clear messaging to young people attending the setting about the purpose of social distancing and personal hygiene is likely to be particularly important.

Q: What does social distancing involve in settings where children are very young?

We acknowledge that social distancing for settings with very young children may be harder to maintain. Staff should implement the recommended measures as far as they are able, whilst ensuring children are safe and well cared for.

Staff should pay particular attention to handwashing before and after supporting children who need help with toileting or eating, as well as avoiding touching their own face whilst at work. Teachers and other staff may want to use age and developmentally appropriate ways to encourage children to follow social distancing, hand-washing and other guidance, including through games, songs and stories, visual supports and videos. They should encourage parents/carers to reinforce these messages at home, by asking them to remind their children.

As much as possible, settings should seek to prevent the sharing of food, drink, utensils, equipment and toys. Equipment, toys and surfaces should be cleaned and disinfected more frequently.

Protection and cleanliness in schools and childcare settings

Q: Do schools and childcare settings need Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)?

The scientific advice indicates that educational staff do not require personal protective equipment – this is needed by medical and care professionals providing specific close contact care or procedures that create airborne risk– such as suctioning and physiotherapy for anyone who has coronavirus (COVID-19) and is displaying symptoms. If you are not providing this care to someone with the virus and displaying symptoms, PPE is not needed

The virus that causes COVID-19 is mainly transmitted through droplets generated when an infected person coughs, sneezes or speaks. These droplets are too heavy

to hang in the air. They quickly fall on floors or surfaces. The advice for schools, colleges and childcare settings is to follow steps on [social distancing, handwashing and other hygiene measures](#) and [cleaning](#) of surfaces.

Some children and young people with special educational needs may be unable to follow social distancing guidelines or require personal care support. In these circumstances, staff need to increase their level of self-protection, such as minimising close contact (where appropriate), cleaning frequently touched surfaces and carrying out more frequent handwashing.

If a child displays symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19), they should not come to the setting, or should be sent home with their parents/carers if symptoms arise during the day. If a child is awaiting collection, they should be moved, if possible, to a room where they can be isolated behind a closed door. Ideally a window should be opened for ventilation. If it is not possible to isolate them, move them to an area which is at least two metres away from other people. Staff should clean in line with routine [cleaning](#) guidance after this.

Q: Will educational settings have enough cleaning equipment?

The Education Authority can provide emergency supplies to those schools that find themselves short of supplies. The Education Authority will be able to provide either a collection or delivery service if schools need supplies. Individual schools will need to contact the Education Authority's COVID-19 operations centre 8am to 8pm. The number is: 028 38368186.

Q: What should educational settings do in terms of daily cleaning regimes?

Where healthcare and certain personal care support is delivered within settings (particularly special schools), then additional measures may apply: Settings should clean and disinfect equipment, toys and surfaces more regularly. This includes keyboards, mouse, tables, chairs, door handles, light switches, bannisters etc. See UK guidance on cleaning

Q: Why is handwashing advised over hand sanitiser?

Soap and water and regular handwashing for at least 20 seconds is the best way of staying safe. Handwashing with soap employs mechanical action that loosens bacteria and viruses from the skin, rinsing them into the drain. Drying hands afterwards makes the skin less hospitable to the virus. Hand sanitiser can be effective if soap is not available or the situation makes using soap less feasible (i.e. when outside) but using hand sanitiser provides none of the virus-destroying friction that rubbing your hands together and rinsing with water provides.

Q: How often should staff, children and young people be washing their hands during the day?

Staff, children, young people and families should be reminded to wash their hands for 20 seconds more frequently than normal, including on arrival at the setting, before and after eating and after sneezing or coughing. Staff should supervise young children to ensure they wash their hands for 20 seconds with soap and water (or hand sanitiser if soap is not available/feasible in the particular situation) and catch coughs and sneezes in tissues. Bins for tissues should be emptied throughout the day.

Consider how to encourage young children to learn and practice these habits through visuals, games, songs and repetition.

Some children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities may require additional support in following public health advice, or may find frequent handwashing distressing. Staff will know where this is likely to be the case, and how they can best support individual children and young people.

Q: Is it safe to wear jewellery?

Yes. It is fine to wear jewellery as normal, provided handwashing guidance is being followed.

Q: Does my educational setting need deep cleaning on an ongoing basis?

No. Clean and disinfect regularly touched objects and surfaces more often than usual using your standard cleaning products.

Q: Someone in my educational setting has become unwell with coronavirus symptoms, what do I do?

If anyone becomes unwell with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature in an educational setting they should be sent home and advised to follow the home isolation advice on the PHA website

If a child is awaiting collection, they should be moved, if possible, to a room where they can be isolated behind a closed door. Ideally, a window should be opened for ventilation. If it is not possible to isolate them, move them to an area which is at least two metres away from other people.

If they need to go to the bathroom while waiting to be collected, they should use a separate bathroom if possible. The bathroom should be cleaned and disinfected using standard cleaning products before being used by anyone else.

If a member of staff has helped someone who was taken unwell with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature, they do not need to go home unless they develop symptoms themselves. They should wash their hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds after any contact with someone who is unwell.

Staff should follow guidance on coughs and sneezes and disposal of waste

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>

Q: Should educational settings ask parents/carers to report pupils' temperatures at the start of each day?

Educational settings should reiterate to parents/carers the need to follow the advice on coronavirus (COVID-19), including the whole household entering 14 days of self-isolation if anyone in the household develops a fever or a new, continuous cough. They are advised to follow the Parents/carers advice / information and schools do not need to take children's temperature every morning but should be vigilant about signs of a temperature.

Q: Why are we not testing educational staff who display symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19)?

Testing is being prioritised for those most at risk of severe illness from the virus including those in hospital with pneumonia or acute respiratory illness and people

with symptoms in residential care settings as well as some health and care workers. Updates in relation to priority groups for testing can be found on the Public Health Agency website.

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus>

If a member of staff becomes unwell with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature in an education setting they should be sent home and advised to follow the [staying at home guidance](#).

Q: Are there extra precautions staff need to take after work, for example washing clothes?

There is no need for stringent cleaning of people or clothes following a day in an educational or childcare setting, unless involved in a child or young person's personal care needs. This is only required by medical and care professionals providing intimate care to people with coronavirus (COVID-19). The advice for settings is to follow steps on [social distancing \(as best as possible\)](#), [handwashing and other hygiene measures](#) including [cleaning](#) of surfaces.

Number of Children/Young People Attending Educational Settings

Q: Are settings with these limited numbers of children or young people attending safe, especially special schools and alternative provision where a higher proportion of children may be attending?

Settings remain safe places for children. But the fewer children making the journey to school, and the fewer children in educational settings, will protect the NHS and save lives by reducing the risks of spreading the virus.

As far as is possible, social distancing should be adhered to in all settings and class or group sizes should be kept small.

Parents should discuss arrangements for their children with their school. The school should advise if it is able to provide a safe environment for the child.

Q: How do I know if I have too many children or young people attending?

There is no specific target or limit on children attending educational or pre-school settings. This should be assessed based on what is being delivered in the classroom bearing in mind guidance in relation to PHA advice on social distancing.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people>

If you think you have more children / young people than you can manage with the staff available, and particularly if this is impacting on your ability to implement social distancing, you should speak to the Education Authority (for example via your link officer) about how this can be managed.