



Guidelines for Northern Territory Early Childhood Education and Care Services

Guidelines for Northern Territory Early Childhood Education and Care Services

Introduction

These guidelines have been developed to support the operation of Northern Territory (NT) early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Department of Education will follow health advice provided by the NT Chief Health Officer and the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) on the operation of schools and ECEC services, including possible closures.

The department will work in support of ECEC services by co-ordinating and responding to health advice; leading communication with the sector, coordinators and staff to support communication with parents and families; providing additional resources and materials; establishing systematic responses where needed; and supporting service autonomy and decision-making.

1. Continuity of Early Childhood Education and Care Services

AHPPC has advised that it is safe for schools and ECEC services to remain open. In the NT, with no community transmission of COVID-19 and strict border controls in place, students are expected to physically attend school and families are encouraged to continue to send their children to ECEC services.

Australian Health Protection Principal Committee coronavirus (COVID-19) statement on COVID-19 in children and early childhood and learning centres

This statement included the recommendations listed below.

Recommendations

AHPPC considers ECEC services are essential services and should continue operation at this time, but with risk mitigation measures in place. These measures should include:

- exclusion of unwell staff, children and visitors
- reduced mixing of children by separating cohorts (including the staggering of meal and play times)
- enhanced personal hygiene for children, staff and parents
 - o make sure liquid soap and running water, or alcohol-based hand sanitiser are available at the entrance of the facility and throughout
- full adherence to the National Health and Medical Research Council childcare cleaning guidelines, in addition:
 - o clean and disinfect high-touch surfaces at least daily, for example, play gyms, tables, hard-backed chairs, doorknobs, light switches, remotes, handles, desks, toilets and sinks
 - o wash and launder play items and toys including washable plush toys as appropriate in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. If possible, launder items using the warmest appropriate water setting for the items and dry items completely

- discouragement of excursions other than to local parks, and public playground equipment should not be used
- influenza vaccination for children, staff and parents.

Alternative care arrangements should be considered for those children highly vulnerable to adverse outcomes should they be infected with COVID-19. AHPPC recommends parents seek medical advice for these children.

Restrictions on entry into early childhood education and care services

The following visitors and staff (including visiting workers) should not be permitted to enter the facility:

- those who have returned from overseas in the last 14 days
- those who have been in contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19 in the last 14 days
 - o a contact is defined as anyone who has been in contact with a known case, including the 24 hours before the case became symptomatic
- those with fever or symptoms of acute respiratory infection (cough, sore throat, runny nose, shortness of breath) symptoms.

There has been an absence of outbreaks in ECEC services globally, however there is clear evidence that children are susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 infection. The role that children play in transmission and amplification of COVID-19 remains largely unknown and AHPPC will continue to closely monitor the evidence as it emerges to inform public health policy.

2. Health and Safety

ECEC services are defined as delivering essential services and are exempt from many of the directions of the NT Chief Health Officer, including those regarding mass gatherings (internal and external), and the closure of playgrounds/premises in the facilities. Where the NT Chief Health Officer does issue a direction that applies to an ECEC service, the service will be required to comply. These directions will be communicated to services if they arise.

It is extremely important that unwell children and staff members remain at home.

Fact sheets for enhancing safety and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic for outside school hours care, family day care and other ECEC services are available.

3. Educators and Staff

We value our educators and acknowledge their continued commitment to deliver quality education and care to Northern Territory children.

The safety and wellbeing of our ECEC educators and staff should be supported through a range of practices, including adjustments for vulnerable staff.

Educators and staff must not attend work if they are unwell.

Services must put in place effective hygiene and cleaning practices, as well as physical distancing practices, as much as practicable. This will further support the safety of educators, staff, children and families. AHPPC has released advice on reducing the potential risk of COVID-19 transmission in ECEC services. Details on how these practices can be applied in an early childhood setting are available in the fact sheets. This information will be updated regularly.

4. School Based Early Childhood Education and Care Services and Programs

Preschools, Families as First Teachers programs and child and family centres should continue to operate under the same guidance as their attached school.

In alignment with national directions for ECEC services, long day care, outside school hours care and vacation care services will continue to operate, but should align with school plans and directions as much as possible. Where these services are operated by the school representative body, hygiene, physical distancing and cleaning practices as detailed in the Guidelines for commencement of Term 2, 2020 should be followed.

Under the National Quality Framework, services are required to ensure their policies and procedures, including emergency action plans, are up to date. Where services are co-located on school sites, it is recommended the service's plan aligns with the school's pandemic plan.

5. Assessment and Rating visits

It has been determined by Quality Education and Care NT (QECNT), within the Department of Education, that assessment and rating visits will not be conducted while services are preparing for and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, QECNT authorised officers will contact services if they are scheduled for an assessment and rating visit in the future.

Services with elements that do not require an extensive site visit to obtain observational evidence, can apply for a partial re assessment during this period. Fees will be waived for partial assessment applications during this period. Services should contact QECNT if they wish to discuss eligibility to apply for a partial reassessment.

6. Compliance and monitoring activity

QECNT authorised officers will still be conducting compliance and monitoring activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, physical site visits will be limited and based on risk assessment. Wherever possible, options for virtual remote visits will be implemented.

Alternative measures to conduct routine compliance and monitoring activities will occur through a range of mediums such as self-assessment, one on one phone or Skype conversations/monitoring inspections.

7. Regulations to be maintained

Approved providers and services are required to operate in accordance with the National Quality Framework. This includes all regulatory requirements outlined in the Education and Care Services National Law and Education and Care Services National Regulations.

Services who believe they may require a waiver should contact QECNT to discuss individual circumstances.

8. Waiver Applications and Fees

A service may apply for a temporary waiver (for up to 12 months) for staffing and physical environment issues that have occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A detailed list of requirements which may be waived can be found in the [Guide to National Quality Framework - Waivers](#). To apply for a waiver, log onto the [National Quality Agenda \(NQA\) IT Service portal](#). The department will not charge an application fee for waivers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

9. Notifying of incidents and complaints, including COVID-19 related absences of children or staff

Approved providers and services must ensure QECNT is notified of all incidents and complaints in accordance with the National Quality Framework. In the first instance, services must submit notifications as per usual through the NQA ITS portal or to qualityecnt.det@nt.gov.au should they require assistance from an authorised officer.

In addition to the usual regulatory notifications, services must ensure QECNT is notified of any absences of children or staff who attend the service due to COVID-19 related absences, such as self-isolation or being tested for COVID-19.

10. NT Early Childhood Services Subsidy

The NT Early Childhood Services Subsidy will continue to be paid at the rates at which it was paid in quarter 2, 2019, prior to COVID-19, or at current rates if higher, to support services in managing their cash flows. Payments will be made automatically unless the service notifies the Department of Education of any necessary changes.

Services should write to eccegrantsubsidy.doe@nt.gov.au if they require further information regarding the NT Early Childhood Services Subsidy.

11. Attendance data submission information

As outlined above, the NT Early Childhood Services Subsidy will not be paid on a service's current utilisation but the rates paid prior to COVID-19. However, it is important that services continue to submit attendance data to assist the department to monitor utilisation and attendance trends across the NT.

Data should now be supplied through the online ECEC Daily Data Request service which is available as both an app and a website.

Should services require assistance with using the app in the first instance, they should email eccegrantsubsidy.doe@nt.gov.au or if urgent telephone QECNT on (08) 8999 3561.

12. Parents supplying food and other items such as cleaning products to the service

During the COVID-19 pandemic some ECEC services have had difficulty securing resources and food due to interrupted supplies at wholesalers and supermarkets. Should a service choose to accept food and resources from parents, they must adhere to the following guidelines:

- **Precooked food** must only be accepted or supplied to the child of the parent who has supplied that food. For example, it is acceptable for a parent to supply food in their child's lunch box for their own consumption. However, that precooked food should not be consumed by other children.
- **Unopened packaged goods or whole fruits** are acceptable to share with others, after consideration of all children's allergies to determine who may consume them. However, foods such as home baked goods or opened products must not be accepted or shared with others.
- **Unused cleaning products and resources** that are considered acceptable to be used within an ECEC service may be accepted if donated by parents. This of course depends on the service's policies on accepting donations. The service must ensure all regulatory and quality requirements are adhered to and Material Safety Data Sheets (only known and commonly abbreviated as MSDS) are sourced before use and appropriate storage occurs.

As a registered food business, it is recommended that services work with Environmental Health (within the NT Government Department of Health) to help understand their responsibilities regarding food provision at the service during this time. Contact details for Environmental Health can be located in the key contacts at the end of these guidelines.

13. Signing children in and out of the centre

Where possible, services are encouraged to implement physical distancing, particularly at times of high traffic in the service such as pick up and drop off times. Services may consider implementing systems to limit the time parents physically spend within the service. This could include introducing procedures such as virtual conversations via telephone or video if a conversation with a parent is likely to take more than 15 minutes.

A service may also choose to arrange for staff to accept and deliver children from/to parents and sign the children in and out of the service in accordance with regulation 158 1 (c) (i) (ii) of the Education and Care Services National Regulations.

14. Cleaning of vehicles that transport children

Services that operate or transport children in vehicles must ensure effective cleaning of these vehicles to minimise cross infection. Services must implement enhanced cleaning protocols to ensure that at a minimum they are cleaned daily in the same manner as the "high touch" cleaning advice provided in the ECEC and OSHC Pandemic sub plan. However, should services transport children with additional needs or those who mouth items, they should be cleaned after every use. Further information about cleaning can be found in the Enhancing safety and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic fact sheets.

15. Wellbeing

As the pandemic continues to evolve, it is very important that we all continue to look after our wellbeing. Educators need to support each other and know that it is okay to let somebody know when you need support.

EASA (Employee Assistance Service Australia) and CORP Workplace Solutions are committed to supporting all Territorians during these unprecedented times, and have developed tips on the following topics:

- Calming Coronavirus Concerns
- Managing Stress
- Managing Sleep
- Managing Anxiety.

These resources will be made available on the QECNT website soon and have been emailed to your service contact.

Good resources for maintaining mental health in the pandemic can also be found in the eMHPrac (e-mental health in practice) 'Managing Your Mental Health Online During COVID 19 Fact sheet'. A digital copy of the factsheet can be found at <https://www.emhprac.org.au/resource/managing-your-mental-health-online-during-covid-19/>.

In addition, a list of various NT Mental Health, support and counselling services can be accessed by educators and staff at Attachment A.

16. Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package

On 2 April 2020, the Australian Government announced the new Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package. From Monday 6 April 2020 weekly payments are being made directly to ECEC services in lieu of the Child Care Subsidy and the Additional Child Care Subsidy, to help them keep operating and retain their employees.

Payments will be made until the end of the 2019-20 financial year and families will not be charged fees during this time.

It is recommended that services review the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package website, <https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/childcare>.

In addition to this website, services should continue to check the COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions for early childhood education and care providers webpage as these are updated regularly. The FAQs can be found at <https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/childcare/childcare-faq>.

The Exceptional Circumstance Supplementary Relief Payment in the Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package

The Exceptional Circumstance Supplementary Relief Payment (supplementary payment) is available for providers/services that need financial assistance in addition to the Early Childhood Education and Care Package payment the provider/service is already receiving through the Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package.

The supplementary payment is to help make sure the provider/service remains viable. The form is available at dese.gov.au/covid-19/childhood.

Queries

For any queries relating to the Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package or the Exceptional Circumstance Supplementary Relief Payment in the Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package please visit the Department of Education, Skills and Employment website.

Frequently Asked Questions <https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/childcare/childcare-faq>.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) Fact sheets <https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19>.

The Childcare Subsidy (CCS) Helpdesk is available to assist with information for services. Please email the CCS Helpdesk on ccshelpdesk@dese.gov.au, send a query via an [online form](#) or call **1300 667 276** between 9.00 am – 5.00 pm (AEST) Monday to Friday.

Alternatively, contact the Northern Territory office via email ChildcareNT@dese.gov.au.

17. JobKeeper Payment – Information for Employers

The JobKeeper Payment is a payment made to eligible businesses and not-for-profit organisations affected by COVID-19 to support them in retaining employees.

Eligible businesses that elect to participate will receive a payment of \$1500 per fortnight per eligible employee to support the people they employed as at 1 March 2020 who are retained in employment.

To find out if a service is eligible, further information is available at www.treasury.gov.au.

A variety of JobKeeper Payment fact sheets can be downloaded from <https://treasury.gov.au/coronavirus/jobkeeper>. The Northern Territory Government encourages services to apply for Jobkeeper.

Key contacts

NT Department of Education

Regulatory Authority: Quality Education and Care NT

Telephone: (08) 8999 3561

Email: qualityecnt.det@nt.gov.au

NT Early Childhood Services Subsidy

Telephone: (08) 8944 9241

Email: ececgrantsubsidy.doe@nt.gov.au.

NT Department of Health

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Website: <https://coronavirus.nt.gov.au/>

Environmental Health - Email: envirohealth@nt.gov.au or telephone below.

Location	Phone
Darwin	(08) 8922 7377
Katherine	(08) 8973 9061 or (08) 8973 9062
Barkly	(08) 8962 4302
Central Australia	(08) 8955 6122

Department of Trade, Business and Innovation (DTBI)

Telephone: 1800 193 111

Website: <https://nt.gov.au/industry/start-run-and-grow-a-business/grow-your-business/business-growth-program>

Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment

Telephone: 1300 667 276

Email: ccshelpdesk@dese.gov.au or ChildcareNT@dese.gov.au

Website for COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions for early childhood education and care providers: <https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/childcare/childcare-faq>

Australian Government Department of Health

Australian Government Department of Health website: health.gov.au

National advice hotline. A dedicated coronavirus (COVID-19) national hotline, open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. 1800 020 080

Attachment A

NT Mental health and counselling	Phone
Northern Territory Mental Health Line	1800 682 288
Lifeline	13 11 14
Beyond Blue	1300 22 46 36
Mensline Australia	1300 789 978
Catholic Care NT	8944 2000
Darwin Consultant Psychologists (DCP)	1800 289 129 / 08 8941 5369
Employee Assistance Service Australia (EASA)	1800 193 123 (24hrs) / 08 8941 1752
Wisemind Psychology	1800 166 180 / 08 8981 5605
Darwin Psychology Service Pty Ltd	1800 769 205 / 08 8932 8460
Industry Health Solutions	1800 432 303 (24hrs)
Relationships Australia (general counselling services)	1300 364 277
Parenting support	Phone
FACES hotline	1800 999 900
Parentline Queensland and the Northern Territory	1300 301 300

illustrations by motion_party