

Caring for Children in Group Settings including Children with Disabilities or Other Special Needs

The State is mindful that child care is a critical emergency service that is necessary and that child care providers have questions and are on the receiving end of questions from families and the public. It should be noted that children are safest at home, but if there is a need for child care, the following information may be helpful.

- How do I, as a child care provider, prevent COVID-19 from impacting the children in my care?
- What should I do if COVID-19 shows up in my community or child care facility?
- What can I do to keep from getting sick?
- Do I need to think about things differently for children with disabilities or other special needs in my care?

BACKGROUND

While there is currently no vaccine to prevent COVID-19 infection, child care providers caring for children in group settings are already taking many important steps to prevent the spread of infection based on their daily practice.

ILLINOIS' POLICY FOR CHILDREN CARED FOR IN GROUP SETTINGS

Effective (date) and throughout the period of the public health emergency, the only child care settings that are allowed to provide child care will be:

- Home child care providers serving six or fewer children (or all relatives or children from a single family). These homes will be legally license-exempt and do not need to register with the state to operate.
- Child care centers that have obtained an Emergency Child Care License. These emergency child care sites will be the only child care centers legally allowed to operate during the COVID-19 State of Emergency. Emergency child care centers may be located in schools; community-based organizations such as churches and social service organizations; or health care facilities or other workplaces for essential workers.
- The application for an Emergency Child Care License is available at:
<https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/OECD/Documents/CFS%20597%20Application%20for%20Child%20Care%20Facility%20License.doc>

Effective immediately, all child care providers must restrict those who have access to their home or center only to the following (see below). All individuals entering the facility should be screened; this includes staff as well as family members.

- Program staff
- Children who are enrolled
- Parents or legal guardians who have children enrolled
- Persons with legal authority to enter
- Professionals providing services to children

To the extent practicable, parents should be encouraged to pick up and drop off their children outside the facilities. Anyone who enters will have to be screened, and denied entrance if they have any symptoms of illness.

NOTE—People will not be able to enter if they meet the following:

- A temperature of 100.4°F or above
- Signs or symptoms of a respiratory infection, such as a cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, and low-grade fever
- In the previous 14 days has had contact with someone with a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19; is under investigation for COVID-19; or is ill with a respiratory illness
- In the previous 14 days has traveled internationally to countries with widespread, sustained community transmission

Child care facilities should review their emergency operations plans. See the Chicago Department of Public Health [COVID-19 Guidance for Child Care Programs](#) as well as the information below.

CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES OR OTHER SPECIAL NEEDS

Child care providers can successfully include children with disabilities or other special needs in the program while promoting belonging for all children. Major modifications to the program or facility will not likely be needed in order to include children with disabilities or other special needs.

All children have unique needs during a pandemic, but care for children with special healthcare needs is often more complex because of their various health conditions and extra care requirements. They may have a hard time moving from one place to another, urgent or constant medical needs, difficulty communicating, or have trouble with transitioning to different situations. A pandemic can present all these difficulties at once. Knowing what to do can help maintain calm and keep children and staff safe.

- ✓ **Planning is key.** It is important to have an [emergency care plan](#) in place. If there is a child with disabilities or other special needs in your program or child care center, you and your staff can prepare by developing a written emergency care plan and practicing your plan.
- ✓ **Appropriate response.** In order to lessen children's worries and anxieties, talk to them about what is happening in a way that they can understand. Keep it simple and consider the child's age and type of disability. For example, it may be hard to know how much information a child with autism is learning through television and conversations. Adults may have to look for clues that provide information on the feelings and fears of these children.
- ✓ **Emergency Kit Checklist.** Use a [checklist](#) to help prepare for a pandemic or other emergency. Children with special needs may need special support services, including medicine and medical equipment, which typically are not available in traditional child care settings. In addition, children requiring medical services are not legally able to provide consent for treatment. The American College of Emergency Physicians and the American Academy of Pediatrics developed an [Emergency Information Form](#) to help your staff, emergency care professionals, and healthcare providers give appropriate care for children with special healthcare needs during a pandemic.

- ✓ **After the Pandemic.** A pandemic can have long-term effects on the mental and emotional health of all children. Coping with a pandemic can be particularly difficult for children with disabilities. Children who have serious emotional and behavioral problems are at high risk for severe stress after a pandemic or traumatic event. In many cases, it may help to maintain as much of a normal routine and environment as possible. It is important that parents, caregivers, and healthcare providers know how to help children cope after a pandemic to support their health and well-being.

The following strategies should be taken into consideration when working with children with disabilities or other special needs in group settings:

- ✓ **Make small changes in your child care environment.** Slight adjustments in your child care environment may make the time that a child with special needs spends with you easier and more enjoyable for everyone. A quiet, private space for play may help an overactive child. A child with poor vision may benefit from an extra lamp in the play area. Removing a rug that slips will help a child who has trouble walking.
- ✓ **Use different styles of communication.** Provide children who struggle with communication with alternate ways to express themselves. This could involve pointing or using pictures.
- ✓ **Model play.** Children are sometimes timid about playing with others. You might play a game with the child or pretend to go shopping together. As the child becomes more comfortable, you can invite other children to join your play activity.
- ✓ **Have high expectations for all children, regardless of their ability.** Children with disabilities, just like children who are typically developing, have special interests and strengths. Avoid becoming too focused on a child's disability. Treat each child as a whole person. Provide activities that will support a child's strong points. Every child needs to feel successful and capable.
- ✓ **Be consistent.** Just like with any child, consistency is key to effectively working with children with special needs. Setting up a simple daily routine/schedule allows children to know what to expect.
- ✓ **Partner with families.** Families can provide specific information and suggestions for working with a child who has a disability. Do not be afraid to ask questions. Families sometimes take it for granted that caregivers will know what to do.

CDC GUIDANCE FOR BUSINESSES AND EMPLOYERS

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has special advice for businesses and employers, some of which will look familiar to—and be relevant for—child care providers.

- **Emphasize staying home when sick, respiratory etiquette, and hand hygiene by all employees.** You already know the importance of children and program staff washing their hands on a day-to-day basis. Keep this up! You can provide alcohol-based sanitizer (containing at least 60-95% alcohol) when soap and water is not available, but using soap and water to wash for at least 20 seconds is best. Also make sure children and adults are using proper coughing and sneezing techniques.
- **Actively encourage sick employees to stay home.** It is well known that it is difficult to find substitute caregivers in a program, but it is important to make sure that employees with symptoms are staying home and not coming to work and making others sick.

- **Environmental cleaning.** This is second nature to child care providers and done regularly, so it is highly likely that you are already doing this. Making sure you are cleaning frequently touched surfaces is key! Child care providers are most likely already a step ahead of other businesses and workplaces in their cleaning and disinfecting practices, but are advised to be extra vigilant about regular cleaning and disinfection. The normal disinfection and cleaning products your program uses are appropriate (including bleach solution); there is no need to use special products.
- **Preparedness and planning are important.** If you do not already have a workplace emergency plan in place, now is the time to develop and implement one; *include how an outbreak of this level may impact your ability to provide care to children with medical issues.* We want to make sure you and your staff are prepared for any type of emergency. There are some great considerations for business continuity and readiness, as well as how to create that plan available for Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) agencies and for child care providers.
- **Meals (including snacks).** Children should be provided individual meals and snacks, not group meals.

INFECTION CONTROL BASICS

As a reminder, all staff/providers should follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for infection control basics, including hand hygiene.

- [Infection Control Basics](#)
- [Hand Hygiene in Health Care Settings](#)
- [Handwashing: Clean Hands Save Lives](#)

The best way to prevent illness is to avoid exposure. Implementing these strategies will help keep you and the families you serve healthy, and can also help prevent the spread of respiratory diseases:

- Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after you have been in a public place, or after blowing nose, coughing, or sneezing.
- Ensure that children and families wash their hands immediately upon arrival, and right before leaving the group setting for the day. Wash hands after each child's arrival and departure, too.
- Avoid touching eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- If soap and water are not readily available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. All hand surfaces should be covered; hands should be rubbed together until they feel dry.
- Cover mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing or use the inside of the elbow.
- Increase normal cleaning and disinfecting routine for toys, tables, and other things that children frequently touch. Normal household cleaning and disinfecting products are effective.
- Strictly enforce policies about excluding children who are ill.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces daily. This includes tables, doorknobs, light switches, countertops, handles, desks, phones, keyboards, toilets, faucets, and sinks.

The Illinois Department of Public Health has a statewide COVID-19 hotline and website to answer any questions from the public or to report a suspected case: call 1-800-889-3931 or visit [IDPH.illinois.gov](https://idph.illinois.gov).

RESOURCES

[Child Care Aware® of America \(CCAoA\)](#)

[Caring for Our Children Basics Health and Safety Foundations for Early Care and Education](#)

[CDC Interim Guidance for Administrators of U.S. Child Care Programs and K-12 Schools](#)

[State of Illinois Coronavirus Response](#)

[The Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development \(GOECD\) COVID-19 Resource Page](#)