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Guidance

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

Updated 7 April 2020

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Background

- 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

From 20 March 2020, schools, colleges, nurseries, childminders, and other registered childcare settings in England, closed for all but the most vulnerable children (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people>) and for children of critical workers (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>).

Vulnerable children, in this context, include children who have a social worker, and those children and young people with education, health and care (EHC) plans. Those who have a social worker include children who have a child protection plan and those who are looked after by the local authority. A child may also be deemed to be vulnerable if they have been assessed as being in need, or otherwise meet the definition in section 17 of the Children Act 1989.

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 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 2020 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 – if the majority of the country are strictly self-isolating, this allows for some people to gather where that is necessary, whether it be in hospitals, food production facilities, or in schools or childcare settings.

This advice seeks to support staff working in schools, and other education and childcare 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 childcare settings.

It should be read in conjunction with the advice (<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>) on:

- school closures (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-school-closures>)
- vulnerable children (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people>)
- childcare (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-early-years-and-childcare-closures>)

This advice will be updated as the situation evolves, while further guidance relating to special schools will be published as soon as possible.

Which children can continue to attend education and childcare settings?

The government has made provision for vulnerable children (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people>), and children of critical workers

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>), to continue attending education and childcare settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Children of critical workers

Critical workers' children can continue to attend an education or childcare setting unless they are in one of the most vulnerable health groups as set out in the guidance on shielding

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>). This means children can continue to attend if they have mild underlying health conditions, as specified in this guidance. The education or childcare setting should be informed of any health conditions so that any concerns can be addressed.

The number of social interactions in the education or childcare environment will be reduced as there are fewer children attending, and classroom social distancing is being practised.

Children with a social worker

There is an expectation that vulnerable children who have a social worker will continue to attend an education or childcare setting, so long as they do not have underlying health conditions that put them at severe risk. In circumstances where a parent does not want to bring a child who is considered vulnerable to an education setting, and/or where there are concerns regarding physical health conditions, the social worker and education or childcare setting should explore the reasons for this directly with the parent.

The number of social interactions in the school or childcare environment will be reduced as there are fewer children attending, and classroom social distancing is being practised.

Children and young people with an education, health and care (EHC) plan

Many children and young people with EHC plans can safely remain at home. Some children and young people with an EHC plan have complex needs that are best supported in an education or childcare setting. Education and childcare settings and local authorities will need to consider the needs of all children and young people with an EHC plan, working closely with their parents, and make a risk assessment for each child or young person.

Children and young people with an EHC plan in all health categories, including the most vulnerable, may continue to attend education or a childcare setting as usual if their local authority risk assessment has determined this is appropriate, taking on board the views of their parents.

Individuals in vulnerable health groups

We are strongly advising people, including education staff, with serious underlying health conditions which put them at very high risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19), to rigorously follow shielding measures in order to keep themselves safe. Staff in this position must not attend work. More advice on this can be found in the guidance on shielding (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>).

Staff with other conditions that mean they are at increased risk of serious illness as a result of coronavirus (COVID-19) should work from home where possible, and education and childcare settings should endeavour to support this. More advice on this is included in the social distancing guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people/guidance-on-social-distancing-for-everyone-in-the-uk-and-protecting-older-people-and-vulnerable-adults>).

If a child in one of the categories above, or a member of staff, lives with someone in a vulnerable health group, including those who are pregnant, they can attend their education or childcare setting, as the number of social interactions in the education or childcare environment will be reduced, due to there being fewer children attending, and social distancing and good hand hygiene being practised.

If a child in one of the categories outlined above lives in a household with someone who is in the most vulnerable health groups, as set out in the guidance on shielding (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>), they should only attend an education or childcare setting if stringent social distancing can be adhered to, and the child is able to understand and follow those instructions. This 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.

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 childcare settings that remain open should:

- tell children, parents, carers or any visitors, such as suppliers, not to enter the education or childcare setting if they are displaying any symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19)
- consider how children arrive at the education or childcare 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 from gathering at school gates
- try to follow the social distancing guidelines (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people/guidance-on-social-distancing-for-everyone-in-the-uk-and-protecting-older-people-and-vulnerable-adults>)

Social distancing within education and childcare settings with very young children will be harder to maintain. Staff should implement the above measures as far as they are able, whilst ensuring children are kept 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 childcare setting
- make sure anyone who is feeling ill stays at home (for residential special schools and colleges, this means self-isolating as a school or college 'household' if a resident is ill). See the guidance on isolation for residential educational settings (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-isolation-for-residential-educational-settings>)
- ensure all staff and children:
 - wash their hands with soap and water for 20 seconds frequently
 - are encouraged not to touch their faces
 - use a tissue or elbow to cough or sneeze and use bins for tissue waste
- ensure help is available for children and young people who have trouble washing their hands
- inform parents and communities about the measures that you are taking and get their help to implement them, including ensuring they have seen the parent [Q&A](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers>)

- engage parents and children in education resources such as e-bug (<https://www.e-bug.eu/>) and [PHE schools resources](https://campaignresources.phe.gov.uk/schools) (<https://campaignresources.phe.gov.uk/schools>)
- 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 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>)
- for children and young people with an [EHC](#) plan, work with the local authority as well as with parents to decide how best to continue supporting these children and young people to stay healthy

The Department for Education ([DfE](#)) will work with schools, childcare settings, and local authorities, to ensure that adequate supplies of personal and domestic cleaning products are available to schools. We will issue further detailed guidance for settings regarding the supply of personal protective equipment to settings that require it.

We know that education and childcare settings may face additional costs as a result of coronavirus (COVID-19). We will put in place a new process that allows us to reimburse schools for exceptional costs that they face as a result.

What parents can do:

- talk to their children about coronavirus (COVID-19), social distancing and handwashing
- follow guidance for households with possible coronavirus infection (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>)
- do not gather at entrances or in playgrounds, and model social distancing so that their children learn good practice

Separate guidance is being produced for settings supporting children and young people with complex needs.

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
- avoiding unnecessary staff gatherings

Social distancing measures should also be in place when providing meals, or food for collection, from families of free school meal pupils not in school.

This approach also applies to further education settings, including for learners who may be taking part in practical learning. 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 early years settings where children are very young?

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

Staff should pay particular attention to handwashing before and after supporting children who need help with nappy changing, 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. 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.

Q: How should social distancing be implemented in settings such as special schools where care needs can be complex and some children will find it harder to adhere to instructions on social distancing?

We will shortly publish additional advice for settings caring for children and young people with complex needs.

Q: What does social distancing look like in Alternative Provision (AP)?

For AP settings – including pupil referral units, AP free schools and AP academies - our ask is the same as that for all schools: that AP providers work with local authorities, and the mainstream schools at which many AP pupils are registered, to consider the best way to support those vulnerable children, and those of critical workers who cannot remain safely at home. This should include keeping AP settings open where it is safe and feasible to do so.

As much as possible, social distancing should be adhered to and class or group sizes should be small to make this easier. Staff should use simple language to explain social distancing, and reiterate and reinforce key messages. Safe routines for access to toilets, hand-washing and break and lunch times should be put in place. Teaching resources can be used to aid understanding.

A risk assessment may need to be undertaken, if it is deemed that a child may not be able to follow social distancing instructions, to determine what mitigations need to be put in place and whether, in rare circumstances, they should stay at home. For those children with a social worker, our expectation is that they should be in school unless a risk assessment concludes they will be safer at home.

Protection and cleanliness in schools and childcare settings**Q: Do schools, colleges 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. Asymptomatic people (people with the virus but not displaying symptoms) have a reduced viral load and so risk of transmission is considerably reduced.

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 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people/guidance-on-social-distancing-for-everyone-in-the-uk-and-protecting-older-people-and-vulnerable-adults>), and cleaning (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>) 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.

We will shortly publish additional advice for settings caring for children and young people with complex needs.

Childcare practitioners do not need PPE. They should care for children as normal, although increasing the frequency of handwashing (and always doing so before and after, for example, feeding children or changing nappies) and cleaning of surfaces and toys. Soft toys should not be shared between children. 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. Staff should clean as normal after this.

Q: Will educational settings have enough cleaning equipment?

DfE has been working with public sector buying organisations, and with Crown Commercial Service, to understand and address supply chain issues relating to hygiene and cleaning products for state-funded provision. At this time, the supply chain has flagged that for some products there are reduced volume deliveries, and less frequent deliveries, which means some items may be rationed. They are seeking to find alternatives to any products which are out of stock. Should schools be short of cleaning product supplies, they should email DfE-CovidEnquiries.COMMERCIAL@education.gov.uk, providing details of the supplies they are short of, and where they have been trying to buy their supplies (for example, which supplier).

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

We recommend that all educational settings follow the Public Health England (PHE) guidance on cleaning for non-healthcare settings (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>).

Where healthcare, and certain personal care support, is delivered within settings (particularly special schools), then additional measures may apply: see PHE guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-list-of-guidance>).

Settings should clean and disinfect equipment, toys and surfaces more regularly. This includes keyboards, mouse, tables, chairs, door handles, light switches and bannisters.

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 (for example, 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 or 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 practise these habits through 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 (COVID-19) symptoms, what do I do?

Government has issued advice on what to do in education settings if someone becomes unwell (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19>).

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 staying at home guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-people-with-confirmed-or-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>).

Parents/carers and schools do not need to take children's temperatures 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)?

PHE, together with NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), has agreed to prioritise testing for those most at risk of severe illness from the virus. Those in hospital care for pneumonia or acute respiratory illness will be the priority.

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 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-people-with-confirmed-or-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>).

Wider testing is being rolled out, and priority lists will be set for this. If critical workers, including education and childcare staff, are tested, this will not be for all staff, but rather for staff with symptoms, in order to enable them to go back to work if they test negative.

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. 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 well as possible), handwashing and other hygiene measures (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people/guidance-on-social-distancing-for-everyone-in-the-uk-and-protecting-older-people-and-vulnerable-adults>) including cleaning (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>) of surfaces.

Pupil numbers

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?

We are asking all educational and childcare settings to care for vulnerable children, so long as they do not have health conditions that put them at severe risk, for safeguarding purposes, and where their health and care needs cannot be met safely at home. This is in addition to the children of critical workers, to enable their parents/carers to go to work and support our critical services at this time. Fewer children attending will mean social mixing is reduced and the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) is less likely.

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.

Further guidance relating to special schools will be published as soon as possible.

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 childcare settings.

If you think you have more pupils 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 your local authority (or trust, if appropriate) about how this might be managed.