



## Statement of Public Health Objectives in Early Learning during COVID-19

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*If you are to apply the CPF effectively in your centre and in the context of your community, then you need to understand the current health advice in relation to COVID-19 for young children under 5. The ECC has worked with leading epidemiologists who have been providing expert advice for the Government's COVID-19 response to develop this ECC Statement of Public Health Objectives in Early Learning during COVID-19.*

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### Introduction

In December 2021, the Government's policy shifted from elimination to suppression of COVID-19 with the introduction of a new **COVID-19 Protection Framework (CPF)**. The new framework is a departure from the more prescriptive approach of the previous **Four Level COVID-19 Alert System (Alert System)**.

The CPF is more flexible in nature, empowering early learning services to make local decisions to keep children and other people in their centre safe. **It's imperative that responsible people in early learning services understand the public health objectives relating to the children in their care**, because you may only open if you can operate safely within public health measures and other controls under the CPF.<sup>1</sup>

### Key differences

The Alert System prescribed additional regulations on top of other regulatory and funding requirements making it administratively burdensome. For example, the Alert System included guidance for early learning services to use bubbles of 10, then 20 children with indoor space restrictions of 3 metres per child.

The CPF is designed for a highly vaccinated population, with mandatory vaccination and testing requirements for education workers, allowing providers more autonomy in risk assessment and decision making.

- **Mandatory vaccination** means that the adults working or volunteering in your centre will be vaccinated
- While vaccinated people spread COVID-19 less than unvaccinated, they can still become infected
- **Testing applies where staff are not yet fully vaccinated.** Recent changes have allowed for weekly saliva screening testing to be used
- People **showing cold/flu symptoms are required to stay home and get tested.** You already have the power to send any sick people away from your centre, so they are not on site

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<sup>1</sup> Early learning services are responsible for health and safety systems in the early learning centre in accordance with the Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008 and the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015.

## Public health advice – key messages

- **International evidence<sup>2</sup> shows that while children under five years old cannot be vaccinated, they are at less risk if there are high community vaccination rates and you closely follow the CPF Public Health Measures<sup>3</sup> and any additional mitigations<sup>4</sup>**
- Your mitigation measures like natural ventilation and maximising outdoor activities can contribute significantly to keeping risk to children low
- Early learning services need to **be prepared for more cases of children becoming infected with COVID-19**
- Remember – children **can and will continue to be infected with COVID-19** because it will spread in the community. Get yourself familiar with [what to do](#) when you have a suspected case
- While young children are less at risk of acute health problems compared to older age groups, **if they become infected, young children can effectively transmit the virus to household members**. Early learning services therefore play a key role in protecting your communities and the families whose children attend early learning
- Over time the ECC will encourage the Government to consider supporting early learning services that operate in accommodation with less-than-optimal ventilation, to be equipped with CO<sub>2</sub> monitors and air purifiers.
- Do not delay developing strong COVID-19 transmission prevention practice in your centre. It's currently unlikely that a COVID-19 vaccine will be developed and approved for young children under five

## ECE's role in the pandemic

Early childhood education and care is a holistic public service, which includes parents and whānau. For some families, early learning services provide the only community support structure they have to fall back on.

The pandemic has proved parents cannot go to work or take time out in times of stress if they can't access early learning. We think this is one of the important reasons why the Government has provided assistance to early learning services to ensure funding continued during lockdowns through initiatives like the Wage Subsidy and Resurgence Support Payment.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, where COVID-19 delta was in the community in San Francisco, USA, and there was near to 90% vaccination rates – the impact on young children was mild.

<sup>3</sup> As at 2 December 2021, the Public Health Measures included: vaccination, stay home if sick, basic hygiene, physical distancing, face coverings and ventilation. Testing remains mandatory in some areas.

<sup>4</sup> ***It is reassuring that the acute health risks of COVID-19 to young children remain very mild - this is what paediatricians at Starship (designated COVID-19 hospital for Auckland) and also Australian paediatricians are reporting as at November 2021 - that is, the acute health impacts are similar to other seasonal respiratory viruses for this age group, and COVID-19 appears milder in terms of the risk of acute health impacts (e.g. need for admission to hospital) than respiratory syncytial virus (RSV). Currently, hospitalisations for under 5s are often precautionary (for observation only, with no specific treatment needed before discharge), or brief (median 2 days), or for social reasons (sick caregivers). Under 5 year olds are at lower risk of severe rare complications such as multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) compared to the primary school age group. Very few under 5 year olds need to go to ICU. As at 5 December 2021, there have been no deaths in the ECE age group in Australia.***

There are further significant risks to young children from not being able to access early learning due to household stress, complex social situations at home, domestic violence, or from lack of stimulating home resources. Some children rely on early learning to be properly fed and cared for. The potential for children to dis-engage from education due to patterns of behaviour instilled through lock-down type restrictions, can have lasting negative impacts on educational outcomes. In all these circumstances, lack of access to quality early learning has harmful impacts.

Effective mitigation strategies set out by the public health measures and localised, centre-specific policies to further mitigate localised risks (e.g. specific community health factors or low vaccination rates) are reliable tools for early learning services to use. Children will need encouragement to return to on-site education provision.

### **Acting responsibly with your parents and community**

While you are responsible for creating the safe environment, parents will decide if they send their children to your centre only if they feel safe. The best thing you can do is embrace the Public Health Measures **openly** and vigilantly, making sure you understand and adhere to them appropriately.

Be open and transparent with parents about what you're managing the risks of the pandemic, and respect their decisions. Parent behaviours will change over time – for example, if some parents send their children back and it's proved safe, more will follow. Being pushy will not help.

Similarly, reset your expectations about when and how many people re-engage in early learning. Everyone returning immediately is not a realistic assumption during a pandemic with so many risks, and where some families have more options than others.

### **What you can do to help make early learning safer**

**Be especially vigilant about COVID-19 cases in your centre or community.** Any person with symptoms should be sent home **immediately**.

For potential COVID-19 cases the Ministry has appointed a Single Point of Contact (SPOC) for early learning.

You can practice using the toolkit (saved under Resources on the [MoE website](#)) before you have to use it in real life, which will build your confidence in this new process, and make it less stressful should a case occur.

### **What can the ECC do to help with COVID-19 cases**

The Ministry should support you to deal with any COVID-19 cases that arise. However, you can contact the ECC if you're not getting the help you require. Contact: [ceo@ecc.org.nz](mailto:ceo@ecc.org.nz).

### **Reviewing this paper**

We will review this statement regularly to meet the fast-changing nature of this pandemic. We expect new information to become available and as the virus and response measures change in the future.

## References

Public Health Objectives. Retrieved from Ministry of Education on 01/12/2021:

- <https://www.education.govt.nz/covid-19/advice-for-early-learning-services/public-health-measures-and-vaccination-requirements/>
- <https://www.mcri.edu.au/sites/default/files/media/documents/covid-19-and-child-and-adolescent-health-140921.pdf>

<b>Authorised:</b>	Simon Laube, Chief Executive Officer, ECC
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