

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 critical 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 20 March 2020, schools in Northern Ireland closed for all but the most vulnerable children and for children of key/critical workers.

Vulnerable children in this context encompasses those children who are in need of protection, or in need, as defined by the Children (NI) Order 1995. Children and young people in need may include those:

- Receiving support from Health & Social Services including family support, child protection and looked after children services;
- On the Child Protection Register;
- With statements of special education needs;
- Accessing Educated Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) Centres;
- Accessing Education Nurture Units;
- With emerging and diagnosed mental health needs;

- Who are homeless;
- Who are young carers;
- Subject to paramilitary threat;
- Whose parents have mental health problems;
- Whose parents have alcohol and drug addictions;
- Affected by domestic violence.

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 UK advice on school and pre-school closures, and vulnerable children (this will be updated in NI FAQs in our next update). 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 pre-school settings?

The Government has made provision for vulnerable children and children of critical 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 puts 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.

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 the 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)

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 critical workers

Critical workers' children who are in the very high risk group for severe 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 severe 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 parents, of any health conditions so that any concerns can be addressed. The number of social interactions in the education or pre-school environment will be reduced as there are fewer children attending, and classroom social distancing is being practised.

Children with a social worker

Children with a social worker who are in the very high risk group for severe 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 severe 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

In circumstances where a parent or carer 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 pre-school setting should explore the reasons for this, directly with the parent or carer, and help to resolve any concerns or difficulties wherever possible. The number of social interactions in the school or pre-school environment will be reduced as there are fewer children attending, and classroom social distancing is being practised. Where barriers to attendance are identified, social workers should work with the education or pre-school setting to address them and enable those children to go to school. This may not require full attendance.

Children and young people with a SEN

Children and young people with SEN Statement often have complex needs that are best supported in an education or pre-school setting. Education and pre-school settings will need to consider the needs of all children and young people with an SEN statement, working closely with their parents, and make a risk assessment for each child or young person. Children and young people with a SEN statement in all health categories may continue to attend education or a pre-school setting as usual if their individual health, school and social services risk assessment has determined that it is in their best interests to do so, taking on board the views of their parents.

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
- try to follow the [social distancing guidelines](#)

Social distancing within education and pre-school 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 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 an SEN statement, 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

The Department will work with schools, pre-school settings and the Education Authority 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.

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**
- 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.