

# COVID-19 Transitioning

## Guidelines for Child Care Centres

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## General Information on COVID-19

Coronaviruses are viruses which cause respiratory symptoms ranging from the common cold to more serious illnesses such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). They are a family of viruses which are present both in humans and in animals. They are spread from one person to another through:

1. Coughing and sneezing (via droplets)
2. Hands which have become contaminated with the virus after touching contaminated surfaces or
3. Through direct contact with a person infected with the coronavirus (such as caring for a sick person)

For further information on how the virus is transmitted, the symptoms of the illness and what to do if sick or have symptoms, refer to:

<https://deputyprimeminister.gov.mt/en/health-promotion/covid-19/Pages/symptoms.aspx>

<https://deputyprimeminister.gov.mt/en/health-promotion/covid-19/Pages/resources.aspx>

## General

These guidelines build upon the National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities (2006)<sup>1</sup> which are still applicable for the running of childcare facilities. Each Childcare Centre should have a COVID-19 mitigating plan specific for its needs and layout, based on the National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities (2006) and on these guidelines and should comprise a plan of action indicating how the Childcare Centre intends to implement these Guidelines for Childcare Centres. All necessary safety procedures have to be implemented by the Centre according to the specific setup of the Centre itself and must get further guidance from public health authorities whenever necessary.

**These guidelines are meant to mitigate, as much as possible, against the transmission of COVID-19. Although the risk of infection is reduced, it can never be completely eliminated. Parents/guardians need to understand that a risk of transmission will still exist even if these guidelines are rigorously followed and implemented.**

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<sup>1</sup> [https://education.gov.mt/en/childcareservices/Documents/booklet\\_standard\\_cdc\\_facilities\\_en.pdf](https://education.gov.mt/en/childcareservices/Documents/booklet_standard_cdc_facilities_en.pdf)

## Structure

Proper indoor ventilation is essential. In order to ensure adequate circulation of air, and to reduce the level of pathogens in the air, windows should be remained open throughout the day to allow for cross ventilation.

If air-conditioning is to be used, this should be used in accordance with the guidelines issued by Public Health. Filters should always be cleaned well and maintained properly.

All precautions must be taken to ensure that water systems are safe to prevent the risk of infections derived from water such as Legionnaire's disease. If the water supply is direct from the mains, flushing of the water system by opening all taps for a few minutes should suffice. If the supply of water is through a roof tank, the roof tank should be emptied and cleaned and when the tank is re-filled the entire water system is flushed through for a few minutes. It is important that the water heater temperature is raised to 60°C. In this case, there is no need to take samples and get approval from the Environmental Health Directorate. If the centre forms part of a larger complex or building and the water supply is through the complex or building main water system, please follow the procedure indicated in Annex 1. You may consult with the Directorate of Environmental Health for further information and advice<sup>2</sup>.

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## General hygiene recommendations

- ✓ Staff must wear masks and/or visors at ALL times. Children under 3 years do not need to wear masks.
- ✓ Staff must keep a distance of 2 metres between themselves (between staff) and between clusters/groups and observe the recommended hygiene recommendations:
  - No touching, hugging or shaking hands between staff members
  - Avoid unnecessary physical contact with children
  - Hand hygiene: wash hands with soap and water regularly and carefully for at least 20 seconds,
  - If possible, do not touch the face, especially the mucous membranes, with your hands, i.e. do not touch the mouth, eyes and nose,
  - If possible, do not touch publicly accessible objects such as door handles or elevator buttons with your full hand or fingers,
- ✓ Sneezing/coughing in disposable handkerchiefs, which are then disposed of immediately. If necessary, sneezing/coughing in the crook of your arm (not in the hand)
- ✓ Keep the greatest possible distance when coughing or sneezing, it is best to turn away.
- ✓ Frequent hand washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and sneezing or coughing in sleeves by carers are strongly recommended in order to guide children under their care to get used to these practices even by modelling good practices. Washing of hands and use of sanitisers at the centre shall be rigorously monitored.

## Daily Operations

- ✓ All childcare centres in Malta are regulated by the National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities (July 2006). The COVID-19 transitioning obliges childcare centres to abide by these National Standards and by these additional guidelines.
- ✓ During the opening of childcare centres, parents are to retain the same centre where their children are enrolled. Other arrangements depend on availability due to restrictions and conditions that will be followed under the current extraordinary circumstances.
- ✓ The COVID-19 Maximum Child Capacity per Childcare Centre must be based on 6 square metres per child, instead of the standard 5 square meters per child. This would allow for better social distancing. The number of children allowed to attend shall be subject to available space and the number of available carers that can be physically present at the centre at any one time in line with the carer to child ratio as established in the National Standards.
- ✓ For Childcare centres falling under the Free Childcare Scheme, attendance and capacity monitoring should be done through the existing fobbing and live online systems.
- ✓ It is recommended that staff would be swabbed/tested for COVID-19 at regular intervals, including at the beginning of operations. To be tested, staff should call the Helpline 111 and book a test.
- ✓ Staff and carers are to work in the same childcare centre. They should not work in other establishments or institutions.
- ✓ Parents of children who have been classified as vulnerable should discuss attendance at the childcare centre with their doctor and also with the Management of the Childcare Centre, in order to assess the level of risk for the child to attend the Centre. The decision to attend rests with the parents/guardians of the child.
- ✓ Parents should take the temperature of their children in the morning before visiting the childcare centre. If there are signs of illness, the children should not be taken to

the childcare centre. If parents are also sick or have temperature, they should not send their children to childcare.

- ✓ Staff who feel or are sick are not to go to work.
- ✓ Parents/guardians and children are to have their temperature examined outside the premises during drop-off. If a parent and/or child has temperature of over 37.2° C, or appears sick, the child is not to be admitted to the childcare centre.
- ✓ Hand hygiene stations should be set up at the entrance of the facility, so that children can clean their hands before they enter. If a sink with soap and water is not available, provide hand sanitizer with at least 70% alcohol at reception.
- ✓ Keep hand sanitizer out of the children's reach and supervise appropriate use.
- ✓ Place sign-in stations outside at the reception area and parents bring their own pen. If this is not possible then provide disinfectant wipes to clean the pen after each use.
- ✓ Consider staggering arrival and drop off times and plan to limit direct contact with parents as much as possible.
- ✓ Have childcare providers greet children outside as they arrive or at the reception area of the centre.
- ✓ Infants could be transported in their car seats. The car seat should not to be left at the centre. Pushchairs or any kind of baby carriers will not be allowed in centres. Children with disabilities or special needs who use specifically made carriers or other equipment are to be exempted and are thus allowed in the childcare centre.
- ✓ Unauthorized personnel are not allowed in the centres except children, authorised staff and management. No parents or guardians are to be allowed in the centre at any time (including in reception).
- ✓ Non-essential belongings such as personal toys etc shall also be prohibited apart from toys or educational material which are specifically designed to stimulate children with disabilities or special needs.
- ✓ All food items have to be presented in disposable containers if possible. There will be no return of any unused food and disposable containers. If disposable containers are not possible, then containers are to be cleaned and wiped down before entering the premises.

- ✓ Water dispensers are to be used only by staff.
- ✓ Childcare Centres should focus on offering, as a minimum, basic services to limit the risk of spread of the disease.
- ✓ There should be a designated care system where the carer takes care of the same children over a period of time. Children and carers must remain within the same cluster/group, which composition must remain constant. This applies both for the children and staff. The designated clusters/groups shall only stay in the room/s intended for the care of the children. There should be no more than 6 supervised children per cluster/group.
- ✓ Common functional rooms should be used alternately, not simultaneously by children from different groups. This also applies to dining rooms, nappy-changing areas and other common areas.
- ✓ If common functional rooms are going to be used by different groups of children at different times in the day, the room must be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected including all the toys and furniture between each new group using the room.
- ✓ Limit the mixing of children, such as staggering playground times and keeping groups separate for special activities such as art, music, and exercising.
- ✓ If possible, at nap time, ensure that children's naptime mats are spaced out as much as possible, ideally 2 metres apart. Consider placing children head to toe in order to further reduce the potential for viral spread.
- ✓ Wherever possible, the use of outdoors is encouraged. Staggered play times can prevent too many children using the outdoor area at the same time. Games, including water games should be carried out only within the same cluster/group of children.
- ✓ No outings from the confines of the centre are to be held by centres.
- ✓ No special events such as festivals, holiday events, special performances, Open Days, Moving-On Ceremonies and visits by guests should be held.
- ✓ There will be no written reports on the children's development. Instead electronic reports should be provided.
- ✓ Communication with centre's staff and management for day to day necessities can only be done through online services.

- ✓ Parents failing to abide by centres' policies and procedures in these guidelines may forfeit their right for childcare.

## Sanitisation of premises

- ✓ In general, the infectivity of coronaviruses on inanimate surfaces (such as wood, metal, fabrics and plastic) decreases rapidly depending on the material and environmental conditions such as temperature, humidity and UV radiation. The cleaning of surfaces remains an important measure to ensure hygienic conditions.
  
- ✓ Premises and resources will be sanitised daily using approved products that are suitable for children under 3 years. A combination of cleaning and disinfection will be most effective in removing the COVID-19 virus. Both cleaning and disinfection is most effective, using a combination of household detergents and disinfectants. A detergent is designed to break up oil and grease with the use of water. Anything labelled as a detergent will work. Cleaning should start with the cleanest surface first, progressively moving towards the dirtiest surface. When surfaces are cleaned, they should be left as dry as possible to reduce the risk of slips and falls, as well as spreading of viruses and bacteria through droplets. Disinfecting means using chemicals to kill germs on surfaces. It is important to clean before disinfecting because dirt and grime can reduce the ability of disinfectants to kill germs. Disinfectants containing  $\geq 70\%$  alcohol, ammonium compounds, chlorine bleach or oxygen bleach are suitable for use on hard surfaces (surfaces where liquids pool, and do not soak in). The packaging or manufacturer's instructions will outline the correct way to use disinfectant. Disinfectants require time to be effective at killing viruses. If no time is specified, the disinfectant should be left for ten minutes before removing.
  
- ✓ Toilets and changing areas must be cleaned regularly, at least three times a day. Toilet seats, fittings, washbasins and floors must be cleaned. In case of contamination with faeces, blood or vomit, prophylactic wipe disinfection is required after removal of the contamination with a disposable cloth soaked in disinfectant. Protective gloves and mouth and nose protection must be worn by members of staff.

- ✓ Linen must be changed daily. The use of disposable towelling is encouraged.
- ✓ Use bedding (sheets, pillows, blankets, sleeping bags) that can be washed. Keep each child's bedding separate, and consider storing in individually labelled bins, cubbies, or bags. Cots and mats should be labelled for each child. Bedding that touches a child's skin should be cleaned at least weekly and certainly before use by another child.
- ✓ Common resources used by children have to be sanitised between one use and another and at the beginning and at the end of the day.
- ✓ Personal sanitising products for children are to be supplied by parents/guardians and are to be kept at the centre.
- ✓ Toys and other items need to be cleaned and sanitized regularly and certainly before another cluster/group uses these toys and items. Only toys that could be easily cleaned should be used. Certain smaller toys, soft toys and possibly ball pits should be avoided unless one can be certain that they are adequately cleaned between one group of children and another. Playdough/sand should not be shared between children. It would be ideal if children had their own craft accessories which would not be shared between them.
- ✓ Due to its heavy use as a play and exercise area for children, floor cleaning should be carried out more regularly and frequently throughout the day, and as necessary and as required in the case of spillages. Soft flooring should be wiped down by detergents in between use of different groups and washed properly at the end of each day.
- ✓ The following areas should be cleaned particularly thoroughly and, if possible, several times a day in heavily frequented areas:
  - Door handles and any other handles on drawers, windows, etc.
  - Stairs and handrails,
  - Light switches,

- Tables, phones,
- and all other grip areas.

## Health Procedures

Procedures in accordance with health authorities have to be implemented if:

- ✓ *Case A: Any member of staff, parents/ guardians and children are found to have fever or other symptoms when trying to attend centre.*
  - In this case the staff member, parent and child would be refused entry to the premises and advised to return home. If symptoms are suggestive of COVID-19, then they are strongly advised to call 111 to get tested.
- ✓ *Case B: Any member of staff or children result in having fever or other symptoms during care.*
  - The person who develops any symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 would need to isolate him/herself and leave the premises as quickly as possible. Staff are to call 111 to get tested. Parents/guardians of children who have symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 are strongly advised to call 111 to get their child tested.
- ✓ In any circumstance, staff and parents of children are to provide a doctor's certificate attesting that the staff member or child are no longer sick, before returning to the childcare centre.
- ✓ The Childcare centre is to hold accurate and timely records (time-in and time-out) of attendances and composition of groups and staff attending all times. Staff and parents/guardians are to sign a consent form allowing the Childcare Centre to provide, on request, the Public Health Authorities with any information related to the operations of the Centre, including personal details of the staff, parents/guardians and children attending the Centre.
- ✓ In the case of a potential COVID-19 infection, the Centre is to inform the Public Health authorities.

## Plan if someone is or becomes sick.

- ✓ Plan to have an isolation room (such as office) or area (such as a cot in a corner of the classroom) that can be used to isolate a sick child.
- ✓ Disinfect the rooms where the adult and/or child were sick
- ✓ If a sick child has been isolated in your facility, clean and disinfect surfaces in your isolation room or area after the sick child has gone home.
- ✓ If COVID-19 is confirmed in a child or staff member, the Centre will be contacted by Public Health and direction will be provided:
  - Close off areas used by the person who is sick.
  - Open outside doors and windows to increase air circulation in the areas.
  - Clean and disinfect all areas used by the person who is sick, such as offices, bathrooms, and common areas using protective personal equipment

## Annex 1

*Note: This annex applies only to those childcare centres which are an integral part of a larger complex or building which larger complex or building has not been in use for more than 4 weeks. Consult with Directorate of Environmental Health<sup>3</sup> for further information and advice.*

The following are the legal requirements to be carried out on the water systems prior re-opening of the premises:

1. Carry out a full system disinfection of the cold-water system, flushing through to all outlets to achieve 50 mg/l free chlorine for at least an hour checking that this level is achieved at the furthest outlets. This may be also achieved by making uses e.g. 5 mg/l for 10 hours (this all depends on the water piping system condition). It is important to top up when required throughout this process;
2. Flush out and refill the system to achieve maximum normal operating target levels of disinfection (equivalent to at least 0.2 mg/l free chlorine);
3. Refill and carry out a thermal shock by raising the temperature of the whole of the contents of the hot water storage heater from 70°C to 80°C then circulating this water throughout the system for up to three days. To be effective, the capacity and temperature of the hot water storage heater should be sufficient to ensure that the temperatures at the taps and appliances do not fall below 65°C. Each tap and appliance should be run sequentially for at least five minutes at the full temperature, taking appropriate precautions to minimise the risk of scalding;
4. Monitor temperatures and biocide levels where applicable, adjust where necessary, for at least 48-72 hours and then take Legionella samples

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from sentinel outlets (microbiological samples taken before 48 hours following disinfection may give false negative results);

5. Ensure you keep all documentation for inspection by the Competent Authority, including the review and update of the risk assessment manual including monitoring data, etc., with evidence of who carried out the monitoring, add time, date and signature;

6. Laboratory results for Legionella analysis which have to be carried out at an accredited laboratory, together with all the necessary documentation referred to in point 5 above and a declaration from the private water consultant under whom this water system treatment has been carried out are to be sent to the Water Regulatory and Auditing Unit within the Environmental Health Directorate prior reopening of the establishment;

7. Once it is found that your systems of the hot and cold water are under control then the establishment can reopen.