## Social distancing in preschool

Social distancing is one of the key measures currently being utilised to contribute to Australia’s ability to severely limit transmission of COVID-19. Preschools have some unique challenges as they deal with the coronavirus outbreak. The purpose of social distancing is to mitigate airborne viruses from reaching another person. What is vital for us is teaching children and educating parents about how a virus spreads in an age appropriate way.

It is difficult for educators to practise social distancing when working with young children. Organise the environment to reduce the number of children playing near each other, reorganise routines and converse with children within the limitations of social distancing. Young children may seek additional comfort during this time and ask questions about the outbreak or want to share what they understand about the changes happening around them. What affects young children is how the adults around them feel and respond.

The current rules on social distancing for schools can be found on the [Australian Department of Health website](https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/03/coronavirus-covid-19-information-on-social-distancing.pdf). For updated information about the NSW Department of Education response to COVID-19, visit the department [department’s website](https://education.nsw.gov.au/public-schools/school-safety/novel-coronavirus.html.).

Be confident in knowing that your preschool already has procedures in place that will help you get through the outbreak, such as your ‘dealing with infectious diseases’ and ‘Incident, injury, trauma and illness’ localised procedures. Review local procedures and identify children with compromised immunity or complex health care needs and work with families to update any medical management, risk-minimisation and communications plans as required.

### Adjusting routines for children

* Talk to children about social distancing and think about creating signs with children about keeping space between each other to identify how many can be in one place at any given time, for example only four children in the sandpit.
* Put marking on the ground as visuals for space requirements particularly in areas where groups of children may come together for a short period of time, for example when waiting for the bathroom.
* Move outside for most of the day where children are less likely to be in contact with each other. Limit group times to a maximum of four children per group and place spots on the floor to spread children apart from each other.
* During transition times refrain from lining up when children are moving from one area to another. Be mindful of supervision, as it may take children longer to move from one place to another. Maintain continuous communication between educators and children and give constant reminders about space and ‘keeping hands to ourselves’.
* Separate play areas and limit resources/chairs at the table. Move tabletop activities outside and utilise indoor/outdoor play when possible with supervision.
* Create a roster for using the sandpit to ensure small groups of children play in there at any given time.
* Introduce staggered meals times to limit the number of children eating at the same time. Remind children of safe hygiene practices at mealtimes and talk openly to the children about why it is not healthy or safe to share food. Consider appropriate workarounds to avoid double handling of children’s lunchboxes where possible.
* Explain to children what social distancing is and why we need to keep our distance from others. The video, Time to Come In, Bear: a children's story about social distancing, may help the conversation/s.
* Consider trips/incursions into the school and modify or refrain from entering the school with preschool children unless necessary.

### Supporting children

Maintain regular routines and rituals where possible. Children may experience more disruptions than usual during the outbreak.  Routines and rituals are important to maintain at this time if possible, as the little things (such as singing the same funny song when washing hands or reading a favourite story at rest time) can create an emotional connection and relieve anxiety. Teach children how to wash their hands and distance themselves, empowering them to teach others which in turn supports their sense of agency and sense of control during this difficult time.

Think about how changes to the set-up of the physical environment may affect children, including those taking a break from preschool.

Give children as much notice as possible about changes to routines and environments, and have realistic expectations of them during this time. More information on transitions and separation anxiety is on the [Be You website](https://beyou.edu.au/).

Nathan Wallis, a neuroscientist specialising in young children’s development, also provides a useful set of videos focusing on [Coronavirus – Home School for Parents](https://youtu.be/l59Vi04u-3E).

Remember, to communicate with children, in a sensitive way, what is happening and why. Use books or videos available to explain coronavirus to children. The Wiggles have also released a fun and catchy song, [Social distancing](https://youtu.be/jUmSiLXesKI), to help explain this concept to children.

Children who may be feeling overwhelmed by stress or anxiety could be tired, withdrawn, irritable, fearful, unmotivated, moody, lose their appetite, need more comfort, have trouble concentrating and feel physically unwell.

Consult with colleagues, leaders and families if you’re unsure whether you’re witnessing a change in behaviour. If you think a child in your preschool needs extra support, consult with the Principal (educational leader) at your preschool.

For more information on supporting children through this time, visit the [Be You website](https://beyou.edu.au/).

### Working with families

Alter the routine so that parents are not gathering at the same time in the afternoon with staggered pick up times, encourage families to sanitise their hands prior to entering the preschool and bring their own pen to sign in/out. Request that only one family member enter the service to collect their child, preventing extra people entering the preschool. Remind families why we’re doing this and reinforce the new procedures we have in place,

Display and send out through social media visuals of correct handwashing procedures at the entrance and near sign on to remind parents, along with information about how we are managing COVID-19.

Take a coordinated approach with families to supporting social distancing and emotional wellbeing during the outbreak. Share your knowledge, including the information in this resource on how to support children. Some resources for families include:

* The World Health Organisation - [Helping children cope with stress during the 2019-nCoV outbreak](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/helping-children-cope-with-stress-print.pdf?sfvrsn=f3a063ff_2%20parents)
* [Raising Children website](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/coronavirus-and-children-in-australia)
* Maggie Dent and Vanessa Lapointe interview - [How to explain to kids what is happening.](https://www.facebook.com/Sunrise/videos/3593812360660326/)
* Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne:
  1. [Supporting children and young people to cope with the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic](https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Supporting_children_and_young_people_to_cope_with_the_coronavirus_COVID-19_pandemic/)
  2. [Talking to your child about COVID-19 (video)](https://www.rch.org.au/rch/Coronavirus_(COVID-19)/)

### Stay connected

If families are keeping children at home, think about how they can remain connected to preschool for a smoother transition back to preschool. For example, ask families to continue sharing news, information and photos from the preschool with their child. Encourage families to send photos to share with friends and educators at the preschool. Work with families to decide what will work best. If an app is already being used within the service to connect with families continue to use this app. Some families may ask for resources to support their child’s learning at home and using a familiar app, may be an efficient way to share ideas.

### Looking after yourself

What affects young children is how the adults around them feel and respond. This resource provides information to help you look after children’s, and your own mental health during the outbreak. During this time of change, it’s important to look after yourself so you’re in a better position to look after the children in your care. For more information on educator wellbeing and looking after yourself, visit the [Be You website](https://beyou.edu.au/)

Think about where you get your information, as it can impact on your mental health. Consider limiting your news and social media consumption if it’s impacting on your mental health.

Use trusted sources such as:

* Australian Government’s Coronavirus (COVID-19) health alert and Health Direct websites World Health Organization
* NSW Health
* NSW Early Childhood Education Directorate
* Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)
* Early Childhood Australia (ECA)
* Community Early Learning Australia (CELA).

### References and further reading

* [Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority 2020, Coronavirus (COVID-19) information from the Australian Government, viewed 28 March 2020](https://www.acecqa.gov.au/latest-news/coronavirus-covid-19-information-australian-government)
* [Australian Government Department of Health 2020, Coronavirus disease COVID-19, viewed 26 March 2020](https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/03/coronavirus-covid-19-%20information-on-social-distancing.pdf)
* [Australia Government Department of Health 2020, Coronavirus (COVID-19) health alert, viewed 26 March 2020](https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert)
* [Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, 2020, Corona-virus explained to children, viewed 30 March 2020](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKS_WMwis9k)
* [Beyond Blue 2020, Looking after your mental health during the corona virus, viewed 26 March 2020](https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/looking-after-your-mental-health-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak)
* [Be You 2020, viewed 26 March 2020](http://www.beyou.edu.au)
* [Community Early Learning Australia 2020, ECEC approaches to social distancing, viewed 26 March 2020](https://www.cela.org.au/2020/03/24/social-distancing/)
* [Dent, M & Lapointe, V 2020, Corona virus and children how to explain to kids what’s happening, viewed 30 March 2020](https://www.facebook.com/Sunrise/videos/3593812360660326/)
* [Early Childhood Australia 2020, ECA response: COVIS – 19, viewed 26 March 2020](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/media/eca-covid-19-response/?utm_source=ECA%20Homepage&utm_medium=Banner&utm_campaign=COVID-19&utm_content=260320)
* [Health Direct 2020, Coronavirus (COVIS-19), viewed 26 March 2020](https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/coronavirus)
* [Lawrence, K 2000, Time to Come In, Bear: A Children's Story About Social Distancing, viewed 30 March 2020](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DA_SsZFYw0w)
* [Molina, M 2020, Hello, I’m a virus like the Flu and Common Cold, viewed 30 March 2020](https://660919d3-b85b-43c3-a3ad-3de6a9d37099.filesusr.com/ugd/64c685_319c5acf38d34604b537ac9fae37fc80.pdf)
* [NSW Department of Education 2020, COVID-19 (novel coronavirus), viewed 26 March 2020](https://education.nsw.gov.au/public-schools/school-safety/novel-coronavirus.html)
* [NSW Health 2020, COVID-19 (Coronavirus), viewed 26 March 2020](https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/diseases/Pages/coronavirus.aspx)
* [NSW Department of Education Early Childhood Education 2020, COVIS-19 (novel coronavirus), viewed 26 March 2020](https://education.nsw.gov.au/early-childhood-education/coronavirus)
* [Raising Children Network (Australia) 2020, Coronavirus (COVIS-19) and children in Australia, viewed 26 March 2020](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/coronavirus-and-children-in-australia)
* [Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne 2020, Supporting children and young people to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, viewed 26 March 2020](https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Supporting_children_and_young_people_to_cope_wit,%20h_the_coronavirus_COVID-19_pandemic/)
* [Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne 2020, Talking to your child about COVID-19 (video), viewed 26 March 2020](https://www.rch.org.au/rch/Coronavirus_(COVID-19)/)
* [The Wiggles 2020, The Wiggles: Social Distancing (song), viewed 1 April 2020](https://youtu.be/jUmSiLXesKI)
* [Wallis, N 2020, What to focus on during these early days, viewed 27 March 2020](https://youtu.be/l59Vi04u-3E)
* [World Health Organisation 2019, Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) Pandemic, viewed 26 March 2020](https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/coronavirus)
* [World Health Organisation 2020, Helping children cope with stress during the 2019-nCoV outbreak fact sheet, viewed 26 March 2020](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/helping-children-cope-with-stress-print.pdf?sfvrsn=f3a063ff_2%20parents)