

Strategies for Maintaining Health, Safety, and High Quality During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Great Start to Quality recognizes that all programs and providers are different and will need to implement different strategies to best support the children and families they serve. How each program implements child care licensing guidelines to keep children, teachers, providers, and families safe may be different.

The Program Quality Assessment (PQA) tools continue to be utilized during the on-site assessment process. Since some items in the PQA tools may differ from the child care licensing guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic, some temporary scoring changes have been implemented to accommodate changes made in programs following child care licensing guidelines. As such, programs and providers should share with the Assessment Team the changes made in the program related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

While some changes may be made during this time, high quality practices should still be implemented in programs to support children's growth and development. The following ideas, tips, and strategies are meant to support programs and providers as they implement health and safety guidelines while still implementing high quality practices. These items are suggestions and are not required to be followed by programs. We encourage all programs and providers to implement the strategies that best meet the needs of the children and families they serve.

If you have any questions or concerns about the on-site assessment process, please contact the Assessment Team anytime at assessment@ecic4kids.org.

Learning Environment

Toys and Materials

While some materials may need to be removed from the care space because they cannot easily be cleaned, a variety of materials should still be accessible to children.

Children can be provided with individual bins, baskets, or containers of materials that can be cleaned after each use. Individual bins can be filled for children with materials that meet their interests and can be added to by the children. Individual bins can also be empty and children can collect materials they want to use and put them into the bins.

If materials that cannot easily be cleaned, such as playdough or paint, need to be removed from the play space but the provider or teacher can get them out for children upon request, leave a photograph of the materials out for the children so they know it is still a choice to use these materials.

Rather than storing materials in large baskets or bins, divide up the materials from the large basket or bins into smaller amounts using small containers, baskets, or plastic

Strategies for Maintaining Health, Safety, and High Quality During the COVID-19 Pandemic



zipper bags. Children can then take an individual amount of the material to use and multiple children will be able to use the materials at the same time.

If a child needs a soft place to snuggle, the provider or teacher may provide a pillow, blanket, or other soft materials for the child to use. When the child is done with the soft materials, the provider or teacher can remove those items to be cleaned.

Keep shelves and materials labeled. Labels offer choices by letting children know what is available and help support children in self-directed cleanup. If the rotation of materials and increased cleaning makes changing labels a challenge, think about adhering labels with Velcro or a clip so they can be changed out as needed. Or think about temporary labels. Labels do not have to be printed words and pictures. Children can help create labels by writing or drawing the item on a notecard that can be used as a label. Labels can also be real items. For example, on the block bin, you could tape one block to the front of the bin as a label.

A laundry bin or large tub can be added to the play space for materials that have been used and need to be sanitized. Encourage children to put toys they have used into the bin and the provider or teacher can sanitize them before returning them to the play space.

To quickly sanitize materials, consider putting them into a mesh laundry bag that can be dipped in a sanitizing solution and then hang up the bag to let the materials dry.

Interest Areas

While furniture may need to be adjusted to allow space for social distancing and some materials may be removed, a variety of interest areas should still be accessible to children.

If space is limited for interest areas, think about temporarily combining areas or moving some or all interest areas to an open-air or outdoor space.

Get creative with your new or adjusted interest areas. For example, if you had to remove soft materials from your house area, think about moving the area outside and create a mud kitchen area for the children. Children can engage in pretend play and also explore sensory materials.

If interest areas have moved, update area signs so the children know where the new area is located. Have the children help create or decorate the area sign and let them hang it up themselves, this will be one less thing you have to do and will give children a sense of pride and ownership in the play space.

Strategies for Maintaining Health, Safety, and High Quality During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Displays

Children may be adjusting to seeing themselves and others in masks. Add photos throughout the play space of providers, teachers, children, and families wearing masks.

Increase the amount of child-initiated displays throughout the play space. This can include children's art creations, writing samples, photos of children engaging in play, and more. These displays can help children feel connected to one another even though they may be social distancing and limiting their interactions.

Daily Schedule

Arrivals and Departures

Stagger drop off and pick up times or have them take place outside rather than in the classroom.

Give families the ability to call, email, or communicate with the provider or teacher throughout the day if it is not possible to do so at drop off or pick up times.

Allow children to wave goodbye at the window and/or watch their family member drive off before walking to the class. Let children draw a picture or write a letter they can give to their family members.

Keep photos of the children and their families available in the classroom. Have family photos displayed and laminate photos or put them in a photo album so children can move them around the space as needed.

Care Routines

Give children choices when they have to participate in a care routine. For example, let children choose a song to sing while they wash their hands, or let them choose where or how to sit or stand while having their temperature checked.

Try to limit interrupting children's play and then engage in care routines at their own pace. When this is not possible because children need to transition to stay with their consistent small group, let children decide when and how they will return to their work later. For example, ask the children if you can take a picture of their work so they can recreate it the next day or save their creation by putting it on a shelf with their name so they can return to it.

Oral care routines help keep children healthy but can be adjusted or temporarily stopped if it is not safe to do so. Instead, remind children to do this at home or ask children to tell stories about when and how they do this at home.

Strategies for Maintaining Health, Safety, and High Quality During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Meal Times

While it may not be safe for children to serve themselves out of a shared bowl using the same utensils, children should still be allowed to do things for themselves at meal times. For example, children may open their milk, take items out of lunch boxes, feed themselves, throw away their trash, wipe up spills, and put their dishes in the sink.

Children should also be able to make choices at meal times. While children may be served food, they can still choose where to sit, what to eat, or how much to eat.

Meal times are still a learning time. While providers and teachers and the children may sit further apart, they can still engage in conversation while eating together. Find creative ways to engage in meal times. For example, rather than serving children food on a plate, pretend you are at camp and serve children their meals in individual lunch sacks. Continue the camp theme and support keeping things clean by giving them a magnifying glass or clean up gloves in their lunch sacks so they can make sure there is no trace of a mess left when they are done.

Choice Times

Allow children to move around the room and get out materials to use and play with as they desire. Let children move themselves and materials to and from different interest areas. Make sure all interest areas are available to children during choice time.

Use strategies for planning that let children get individual materials to use for choice times such as giving children individual baskets or bins to go and get their materials for choice time and bring them to their individual space to play.

Consider placing a blanket, tablecloth, carpet square, individual bins, or other resources to designate an individual or separate work space for the children. Providers and teachers should still use the materials themselves alongside the children.

Group Times

Group times should still be a part of the daily schedule but the number of children participating or the length of time can be adjusted.

Allow children to choose how to communicate, what to sing, and how to use materials in their own manner during large group activities.

Providers and teachers can suggest modifications of children's unsafe ideas or ask the child how the idea can help children remain safe. For example, if a child suggests the children hold hands as they dance, the provider or teacher may remind children of social distancing and ask the child how they could dance safely such as waving or giving air high fives.

Strategies for Maintaining Health, Safety, and High Quality During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Use your space. Remember that large group does not have to stay in the group area. It can be conducted throughout the classroom or even outside.

Try using carpet squares, pillows, stickers, color labels, hula hoops, or other items to indicate social distancing. Children can still choose where to sit or stand within the designated area or distance allowed. For example, a child can choose where to put their carpet square or hula hoop or which chair marked with a sticker to sit at.

Have materials ready and divided into individual containers for children to explore at small group times. For example, have a small group cart or bin so every material needed for small groups can be rolled or moved into another area of the room and sanitized before being used again.

Interactions

Warm and Caring

Facial expressions and physical interaction are a big part of how children are used to connecting with others. Think about new ways to build connections and relationships. For example, use thumbs-ups, air fives, fist pumps, elbow bumps, claps, air hugs, air hearts, finger hearts, and other gestures with children throughout the day.

Encourage children to wear masks, when possible, explaining why it is important to keep others safe. When children are not wearing masks offer a gentle reminder about wearing them. Make wearing masks fun by having children decorate or create their own masks or pretending to be superheroes when they are wearing them.

Create photo badges or name tags for providers and teachers and even the children. Use a photo where the individual is smiling and not wearing a mask. This will remind children of what everyone looks like while masks are being worn.

Social and Emotional

If a child seems interested in what another child is doing with a toy, a provider or teacher may help that child find a similar toy to play with or encourage the children to talk and interact even if they are separated in their own space.

Providers and teachers should observe children and can inform children when other children may want to play with or near them. Even when social distancing, children may play together with the same materials on the floor or at the table while still staying socially distanced from one another.

Strategies for Maintaining Health, Safety, and High Quality During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Even though social distancing is encouraged, providers and teachers should still focus their time and attention on the children. They should move around the room, check-in regularly, and show interest in what children are doing.

Children have big feelings, and these may be present even more during the pandemic. It is important to make time for children to share and discuss their feelings. Offer children strategies for self-soothing, such as deep breathing, self-hugs, the ability to go to a quiet area, and the option to have a comfort item or access to a photo of a family member.

Encourage children to help one another and take responsibility for the play space. Find tasks that don't require personal contact, such as sweeping the floor, putting away nap mats, or watering the plants.

Language and Communication

Wearing masks and social distancing may make it feel more difficult to engage in conversations with children. Providers and teachers can still promote children's language development by encouraging peer conversations and talking with children as they move around the play space.

Providers and teachers should ask open-ended questions, acknowledge children's comments, repeat and extend children's words, and use words to describe what is happening.

When children's comments are hard to hear, ask the child for clarification or ask them to repeat what they said. Providers and teachers should engage children to use these same skills to engage in conversations with their peers.