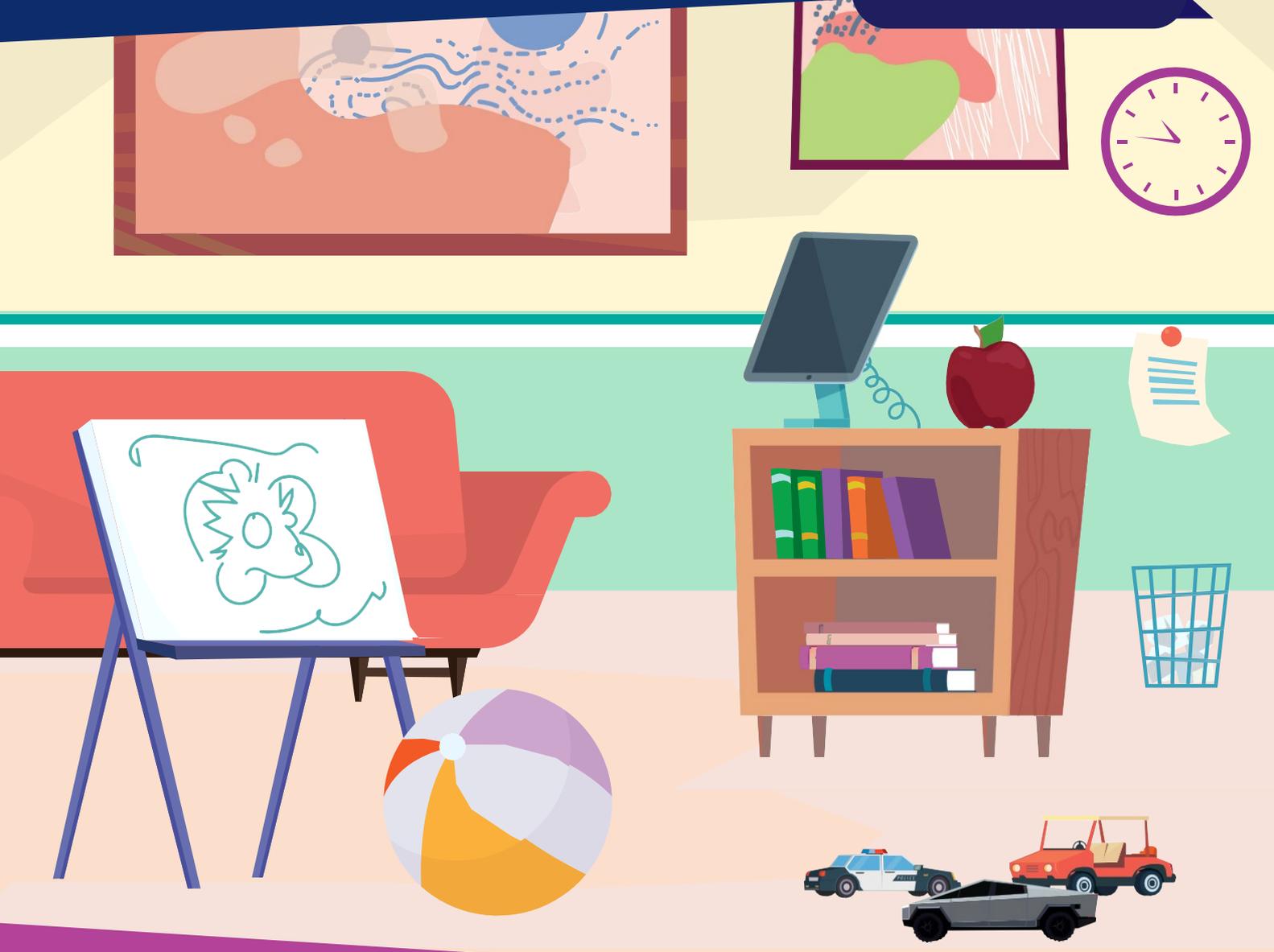


Coronavirus
(COVID-19)



2022

COVID-19 Operating Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care Services

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1.0	February 2021	ECEC Division	First version
2.0	January 2022	ECEC Division	Amendments and updates

Acronyms	Full form
ACECQA	Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority
AHPPC	Australian Health Protection Principal Committee
CCS	Child Care Subsidy
CHO	Chief Health Officer
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DESE	Department of Education, Skills and Employment
The department	Department of Education
ECEC	Early childhood education and care
HVAC	Heating, Ventilation and Air-conditioning
MSDS	Material Safety Data Sheets
National Law	Education and Care Services National Law
National Regulations	Education and Care Services National Regulations
NQA ITS	National Quality Agenda IT System
NT	Northern Territory
OSHC	Outside school hours care
QECNT	Quality Education and Care NT
QR Code	Quick Response Code

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1. Introduction

These guidelines aim to provide advice to support NT ECEC services in:

- complying with legislative directions from the CHO, including having a COVID management plan; and
- implementing best practice hygiene measures to ensure ECEC services operate in a safe manner during 'COVID normal' circumstances.

The COVID-19 pandemic will continue to evolve with ongoing outbreaks and clusters requiring additional levels of response and advice provided may change as the event progresses.

ECEC services operating on a school or shared site should communicate with the school principal or other person in charge and coordinate activities and responses in accordance with the school's plan and these ECEC guidelines.

The department will work to support ECEC services by coordinating and responding to health advice; providing additional resources and materials; establishing systematic responses where needed; and supporting service autonomy and decision-making.

This guidance is meant to supplement, not replace, any CHO Directions. The regulatory requirements of the National Law and National Regulations continue to apply.

2. National Framework for Managing COVID-19 in Schools and Early Childhood Education and Care

In January 2022, National Cabinet agreed to the [National Framework for Managing COVID-19 in Schools and Early Childhood Education and Care](#).

The NT supports the national framework with schools and ECEC services considered an essential service and should remain open wherever possible.

The objectives of this framework are to:

- protect vulnerable children and staff at higher risk of severe disease within schools, including those with disability or severe chronic health conditions
- minimise disruption to face-to-face learning from COVID-19 transmission in schools, because of the mental and physical health, and social development advantages from school participation
- minimise broader community transmission and contain it within the capacity of the health system
- minimise the broader workforce disruptions for parents and carers.

The principles in this framework recognise that different education settings are affected differently by COVID-19.

Principle 1 – ECEC services and schools are essential and should be the first to open and last to close wherever possible in outbreak situations, with face-to-face learning prioritised

Principle 2 - Baseline public health measures continue to apply

Principle 3 - No vulnerable child or child of an essential worker is turned away

Principle 4 - Responses to be proportionate and health risk-based

Principle 5 – Equip ECEC services and schools to respond on the basis of public health advice and with support from public health authorities where required

Principle 6 - Wellbeing of children and education staff to be supported

The department is using this framework as well as guidance from the [Australian Health Protection Principal Committee \(AHPPC\)](#) to prepare for continued operation of NT schools through the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Australian Health Protection Principal Committee

The AHPPC's position is that schools and education and care settings are essential services and should open and remain open whenever possible. Families are encouraged to continue sending their children to ECEC services as per CHO Directions. Alternative care arrangements should be considered for children who are highly vulnerable to adverse outcomes if infected with COVID-19. The AHPPC recommends parents seek medical advice for these children as a precaution.

The goal for ECEC services is to reduce transmission for the entire service community, protect the unimmunised children and maintain the ability for the service to remain open. The AHPPC's latest statement identifies 3 specific principles that apply to minimise disease in ECEC settings:

1. reducing opportunities for introduction of the virus to schools
2. reducing transmission of the virus if it is introduced
3. early use of containment measures if spread occurs.

For more information on these principles go to the [AHPPC statement on COVID-19, schools and early childhood education and care | Australian Government Department of Health](#).

4. COVID-19 Safety Plans

All NT businesses must develop and have an approved COVID-19 Safety Plan in place in line with the CHO's Direction (No.35) 2021. This guidance is designed to assist ECEC services to develop the safe hygiene practices within their plan given the high risk associated with ECEC settings.

Services and providers must ensure they are up to date with all NT CHO Directions and are implementing these practices through their nominated COVID-19 safety supervisor and approved COVID-19 management plan.

For more information on preparing a COVID-19 management plan, go to [How to lodge COVID-19 Safety Plan](#).

5. Operating in a COVID-Safe environment

5.1. Vaccination requirements

It is mandatory in the NT that all adults working at an ECEC service must be vaccinated in accordance with CHO requirements or have a valid medical exemption, and their vaccination status sighted and recorded on a log. This includes:

- all staff working on site
- all volunteers working on site
- all contractors, maintenance staff, cleaners and all other workers who are on site.

The following people may request evidence of vaccination status:

- the worker's employer
- the occupier of the worker's place of work
- a police officer
- an authorised person (under the NT *Public Health Act 2011*)

Medical contraindication:

- An exemption is available for staff who are unable to be vaccinated due to a medical contraindication to the COVID-19 vaccine. A medical contraindication prevents people from receiving a vaccine, as it may increase their chances of a serious adverse event.
- CHO Directions specify an Australian Government issued certificate is the only acceptable evidence that certifies that a worker has permanent contraindication to all approved vaccines.
- Services should update their Dealing with Infectious Diseases policy and procedures to include how they will respond to staff with medical contraindications. This may include conducting a risk assessment to ensure the health and safety of the staff member concerned and others on site.

From the beginning of 2022 all children aged 5 and over are permitted to be vaccinated. It is not a mandate for children to be vaccinated however it is encouraged.

Services can access the most up-to-date advice on vaccinations from the following links on the Coronavirus (COVID-19) website: [Mandatory vaccinations | Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) \(nt.gov.au\)](#) and [Frequently asked questions | Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#).

5.2. Minimising Potential Close Contact

During periods of COVID-19 community transmission, services should consider their programming and, wherever possible, ensure that staff and children do not spend 4 continuous hours or more in close contact indoors with each other. Maintaining regular access to outdoor spaces should reduce indoor time to less than 4 continuous hours.

5.2.1. Strategies for physical distancing

The risk of transmission of COVID-19 can be reduced through physical distancing among staff members, children and visitors to service premises. The AHPPC advises adults to practice physical distancing when interacting with other adults in areas such as staff rooms and when picking up or dropping off children.

The below measures should be carried out to support physical distancing within services and reduce the risk of transmission:

- Ensure physical distancing between adults of 1.5m, wherever possible.
- Adults who have an exemption for wearing a face mask and not directly involved in educating and caring for children, should practice physical distancing wherever possible.
- Children do not need to practice physical distancing, however, where feasible, distancing strategies should be implemented. These could include:
 - maximising the distance between groups of children and establishing groups of children into 'bubbles', and/or grouping siblings where appropriate (this will also assist educators and other adults to maintain their distance from each other)

- sleeping children at least 1.5 metres apart or head to toe
- avoiding any non-essential activities that involve close personal contact
- moving lessons and activities outdoors and encouraging appropriate outdoor programs to support distancing while considering sun safe practices.
- Prioritising contact, where possible, to limit the number of staff who come in contact with each other, such as keeping people together in groups and having each group stay together throughout an entire day.

Further information can be found here: [Physical distancing | Safe Work Australia \(swa.gov.au\)](#).

5.2.2. Drop-offs and pick-ups protocols

Delivery and collection periods should be arranged in a way that minimises the need for direct contact with others. Reducing direct contact will help minimise the risk of COVID-19 transmission. This may be managed in many ways, including:

- implementing systems to limit the time parents physically spend within the service, such as having conversations via telephone or video if a conversation with a parent is likely to take more than 15 minutes
- arranging for an educator to collect children from parents from outside the service and sign the children in and out of the service in accordance with regulation 158(1)(c)(i)(ii) of the National Regulations.

Individual services should evaluate what is most appropriate for their children and families. Whatever strategies are put in place, services are encouraged to ensure collaborative partnerships with families are maintained while ensuring that access is provided to the service as required by regulation 157.

5.2.3. Visitors protocols

Services may wish to consider the following as strategies to minimise infection risks:

- Exclude non-essential visitors from attending service premises.
- Exclude parents, carers, children and visitors with symptoms of COVID-19 from entering service premises.
- Workers supporting the infrastructure development and maintenance of services must be vaccinated. This may include contractors, general assistants, and other support staff.

Note: Authorised Officers are permitted to enter service premises at any time when exercising any powers under the National Law and National Regulations. It is a requirement of the Northern Territory Government that Authorised Officers be up to date with COVID-19 vaccinations.

5.3. Personal hygiene practices.

5.3.1. Handwashing

Hand hygiene is crucial in reducing transmission of infections and the regularity of this practice is encouraged.

Services are to ensure that all hand washing stations are well stocked with hand soap and paper towels or hand dryers, and hand sanitiser is provided at key points such as entry and exit points.

For more information go to [Protect yourself and others from COVID-19 | Australian Government Department of Health](https://www.health.gov.au/protect-yourself-and-others-from-covid-19).

5.3.2. Masks and face coverings

Mask wearing and face coverings when in place, must follow the CHO Directions. The provision of masks is a personal responsibility.

When in place, the CHO Directions exempt certain people from wearing face masks in certain circumstances. These exemptions may include:

- children under 12 years of age
- a teacher, educator or childcare worker in a school or childcare facility who is undertaking teaching or child care activities unless;
 - they are a close contact who has however returned a negative rapid antigen test result. As an essential worker they can attend their suitable place of work as per CHO Directions
- when eating or drinking.

Although it is not mandatory for small children to wear a mask, a child over the age of 2 years may choose to wear one. Children under the age of 2 years should not wear a mask.

5.3.3. Visitors

Services should consider ways to minimise the number of visitors to their premises, to ensure hygiene practices can continue to be successfully applied.

Other measures which should be implemented by services include ensuring that visitors:

- do not attend a service if they are unwell
- wash or sanitise hands on entry, after contact with high-touch surfaces, after coughing or sneezing and after using the bathroom
- cough or sneeze into a tissue or the inside of their elbow
- avoid the use of any water bubblers except to fill up their own personal water bottle (BYO water bottles should be encouraged)
- follow measures to maintain a physical distance of 1.5m, as far as is reasonably practicable.

5.4. Cleaning and disinfection protocols

5.4.1. Cleaning

COVID-safe routine cleaning involves continuous and daily end-of-day cleaning, with a focus on cleaning high-touch surfaces.

The frequency of cleaning of all functional areas and elements is increased to daily, including but not limited to:

- mopping of hard floors
- vacuuming of soft floors

- detailed clean and disinfection of all high touch surfaces including bathrooms, eating areas, play gyms, tables, doorknobs, tables and chairs.

Additionally, it is recommended that services ensure that all high-touch services are regularly cleaned throughout the day

5.4.2. Disinfection

A disinfection process uses a chemical that kills or inactivates virtually all germs to a level that the spread of disease from one person to another is unlikely.

Services can access additional information about disinfectant use from the following the National Health and Medical Research Council – Staying Healthy guidelines [ch55-staying-healthy.pdf \(nhmrc.gov.au\)](https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/ch55-staying-healthy.pdf)

5.4.3. Cleaning vehicles that transport children

Services that operate or transport children in vehicles must ensure effective cleaning of these vehicles to minimise cross-infection. Services must implement enhanced cleaning protocols to ensure that, at minimum, vehicles are cleaned daily, in the same manner as the service cleans its high-touch services on its premises.

5.5. Ventilation

Regulation 110 of the National Regulations requires indoor spaces of ECEC services to be well ventilated. Adequate ventilation is a strategy for managing the risk of COVID-19 transmission in services

Increasing air ventilation and using outdoor spaces where possible is an important strategy in reducing the risk of aerosol transmission by increasing circulation of outdoor air.

Strategies to improve ventilation and reduce the risk of transmission in indoor areas include:

- reducing the number of people in an indoor space at any one time by separating children into groups and encouraging them to use different areas of the service premises
- the introduction of air purification which may assist in reducing risk in areas with poor ventilation
- reducing the length of time that children spend indoors all together
- using outdoor settings wherever possible when providing education and care, ensuring that all sun safe practices are adhered to
- scheduling group times (including group singing or chanting) to occur in outdoor spaces or in a well-ventilated, indoor area
- ventilating indoor space by keeping doors and windows open while considering the risk of vector-borne disease and air pollution
- aiming a fan towards the ceiling while windows and doors are open to circulate fresh air
- avoiding directing fans towards children's faces, aim them continuously towards the ceiling or floor.
- ensuring exhaust fans are operational, if fitted
- supporting staff to take breaks and eat lunch outside if possible
- switching air handling units with central recirculation to 100% outdoor air.

For services that cannot modify the ventilation or choose an outdoor location:

- regularly inspect, maintain, and clean HVAC equipment
- avoid using only recirculated air in HVAC equipment and increase the outside air intake where possible
- where relevant, disable ventilation controls with automated settings that reduce air supply based on temperature or occupancy

OSHC services located on school sites should discuss the school's ventilation plan with the principal. Currently, all fixed plant school air-conditioning systems in NT Government schools meet or exceed relevant Australian Standards for fresh air intake and circulation. As an additional measure, air conditioning contractors have been employed to adjust existing fixed plant school air-conditioning systems to enable maximised air flow.

If the service needs to be relocated within the school site, the OSHC service must make a notification to QECNT via NQA ITS (see Regulatory requirements section below).

5.6. Meals and food supplies

To help reduce the risk of transmission during mealtimes, services should serve food in a well-ventilated area and spread out seating so that children have adequate spacing at tables. Educators are encouraged to sit with children and supervise to ensure children do not share food.

Should a service choose to accept food and resources from parents, they should adhere to the following guidelines:

Precooked food may only be supplied to the child of the parent who has supplied that food. For example, it is acceptable for a parent to supply precooked food in their child's lunch box for their own child's consumption. Services may however wish to adopt their own rules regarding the supply of precooked foods for celebratory events like birthdays.

As registered food businesses, it is recommended that services work with Environmental Health (within the NT Government Department of Health) to ensure they understand their responsibilities regarding food provision at the service during this time. Contact details for Environmental Health are located in the key contacts section at the end of these guidelines.

6. Managing ECEC activities during COVID-19

6.1. Excursions

Current NT Government health advice allows for excursions where enhanced risk assessments are completed for all proposed excursions.

COVID-19 considerations are to form part of the excursion risk assessment and mitigation strategies put in place, for example, taking children in smaller groups and/or spending less time in one location. The excursion should not proceed if identified risks cannot be appropriately mitigated.

Check in with the proposed locations prior to the excursion and examine their COVID-19 management plans. Adhere to any additional requirements of the venues in addition to regulatory requirements.

6.2. Orientation for new families

Services will need to ensure that they follow current CHO Directions relating to external visitors when planning their orientation approach. A service's policies and procedures should also be updated to reflect COVID-19 considerations.

For orientation visits to take place within a service, the following requirements should be considered:

- having adequate contact details for any child or family member in attendance at the visit
- sign in external visitor book
- follow current CHO Directions in regard to wearing a mask and maintain physical distancing
- undertaking a risk assessment for any child with additional learning, support or health care needs in discussion with their parent or carer
- confirming that all attendees including parents and carers, children and staff are well and free of any COVID-19 symptoms
- promoting good hand hygiene practices and making sure that all hand washing stations are well stocked with hand soap and paper towels or hand dryers, and have hand sanitiser at key points around the service such as entry and exit points
- implementing cleaning protocols for any shared items or high-touch surfaces used during the orientation.

When orientation visits are unable to take place within the service such as during periods of high community transmission or during an outbreak, the service may consider:

- providing information or orientation sessions as a combined online and face to face approach or online using available technology
- rescheduling the visit, or providing an option to meet in the outdoor environment or outside of regular service hours to minimise risk to educators, children and families.

6.3. Celebrations or in-house events

Celebrations and in-house events may proceed where COVID-safe measures are in place such as:

- only utilising outdoor spaces
- limiting the number of participants to ensure physical distancing is possible
- promoting hygiene practices to every visitor, including hand washing and mask wearing if required
- enhancing cleaning measures after visitors leave the service (refer to cleaning and disinfection section).

It is recommended that services check the [Coronavirus Guidelines for Events and Gatherings](#) website for current requirements prior to your event.

7. Regulatory Responsibilities

Approved providers and services are required to continue to operate in accordance with the National Quality Framework. This includes all regulatory requirements contained in the National Law and National Regulations.

7.1. Reporting requirements

All approved providers and services must continue to notify QECNT of all incidents and complaints in accordance with the National Quality Framework.

In the first instance, services must submit notifications through the [National Quality Agenda \(NQA\) IT Service portal](#), or contact QECNT on (08) 8999 3561 if assistance from an Authorised Officer is required.

For technical assistance, contact the NQA ITS Helpdesk at nqaits@acecqa.gov.au or on 1300 667 319.

In addition to the usual matters which services are required to notify QECNT, services are encouraged to provide notification of any COVID-19 related absences that affect the service's ability to maintain service provision.

7.2. Regulatory Authority activity (QECNT)

QECNT will continue to monitor the advice from the Australian Government and the NT Health regarding COVID-19.

Assessment and rating visits will continue to be conducted ensuring QECNT officers adhere to any health advice and departmental COVID-19 management responsibilities. Authorised Officers will contact services if they are scheduled for an assessment and rating visit in accordance with standard practice.

QECNT will continue with compliance and monitoring activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Alternative options for compliance and monitoring activities may be pursued during periods of high community transmission, outbreaks or when there are restrictions on travel, particularly to remote communities.

8. Wellbeing

8.1. Children and young people

Navigating changing routines and interactions with family, friends and school can cause children increased anxiety. It is therefore important to ensure that children's wellbeing is nurtured and their concerns addressed. Children might be experiencing:

- anxiety, worry, upset or anger
- difficulty getting to sleep
- headaches and sore tummies
- a stronger need for connection and want more reassurance and cuddles.

The approach that children need, and have a right, to be kept informed provides opportunities for them to participate in decisions that affect their lives. When doing this, ensure to communicate at their appropriate level considering each child's unique situation.

For more information go to:

- Early Childhood Australia: [COVID-19 resources for early childhood services and families - Early Childhood Australia](#)
- Centre for Community Child Health: [Centre for Community Child Health : COVID-19 and Kids Resource Hub \(rch.org.au\)](#)

- Child Trends: [Resources for Supporting Children's Emotional Well-being during the COVID-19 Pandemic - Child Trends](#)
- Raising Children Network: [COVID-19: family guide | Raising Children Network](#)

8.2. Educators and staff wellbeing

Services should promote the safety and wellbeing of ECEC educators and staff by adopting a range of practices, including adjustments for vulnerable staff. Below are a few resources that services may wish to explore to assist their staff.

- ACECQA information sheet - [Supporting Educator Wellbeing Infosheet.pdf \(acecqa.gov.au\)](#)
- eMHPrac (e-mental health in practice) fact sheet - [Managing Your Mental Health Online During COVID-19 | eMHprac | E-Mental Health in Practice](#)
- Be you website – Growing a mentally healthy generation - [Home - Be You](#)

9. Government Support and Information

9.1. Australian Government, Department of Education, Skills and Employment COVID-19 Information

DESE implemented measures throughout 2020 and 2021 to help the ECEC sector manage the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is recommended that services review the [DESE](#) website (<https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/childcare>) in relation to the most up to date information for services.

The CCS Helpdesk is available to assist with information for services. Please email the CCS Helpdesk on ccshelpdesk@dese.gov.au, send a query via an online form or call 1300 667 276 between 9.00 am and 5.00 pm (AEST) Monday to Friday.

9.2. Department of Education

The department will facilitate ECEC sector online engagement sessions as required to help connect the sector with support services and providing up to date information. QECNT will notify ECEC services of the times and frequency of these sessions.

The NT Early Childhood Services Subsidy for approved long day care and family day care services will continue in 2021-22 on the same basis as in previous years. For further information, please email ececgrantsubsidy.doe@nt.gov.au.

10. Key contacts

NT Regulatory Authority: Quality Education and Care NT

- Telephone: (08) 8999 3561
- Email: qualityecnt.det@nt.gov.au

NT Early Childhood Services Subsidy

- Telephone: (08) 8901 1359
- Email: ececgrantsubsidy.doe@nt.gov.au

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NT Department of Health Coronavirus (COVID-19)

- COVID-19 Hotline on 1800 490 484
- Website: <https://coronavirus.nt.gov.au/>
- Environmental Health : envirohealth@nt.gov.au
- Environmental Health: COVID-19 Compliance 1800 095 646

NT Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade

- For business support and advice
- Telephone: 1800 193 111
- Website: [Homepage - Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade](#)

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)

- Telephone: 1300 422 327
- Email: info@acecqa.gov.au
- Website: <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/>

Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment

- Telephone: 1300 667 276
- Email: ccshelpdesk@dese.gov.au or ChildcareNT@dese.gov.au
- Website for COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions for early childhood education and care providers: <https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/childcare/childcare-faq>

Australian Government Department of Health

- Australian Government Department of Health website: <http://www.health.gov.au>
- National advice hotline. A dedicated coronavirus (COVID-19) national hotline, open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. 1800 020 080