

Introduction

The ACT Government is taking precautions during this time to limit the spread of COVID-19 and keep the ACT community safe. The ACT Government has approached the pathway out of lockdown for ACT schools with careful planning, drawing on national and local health advice, in response to the current and emerging needs of staff, students and families. These guidelines seek to prioritise the health and safety of staff and young people, while balancing their mental and emotional wellbeing and ensuring continuity of learning.

With COVID Safe plans and procedures in place and health systems ready to quickly identify and respond to cases, schools remain safe places.

The return to school and early childhood education and care (ECEC) services including Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) is consistent with the wider plans to relax restrictions in the ACT and the National Plan. High population vaccination coverage is a critical component of these plans, to protect both staff and students from infection with COVID-19 and minimise ECEC and school-based outbreaks. The epidemiology of the outbreak in the ACT and community restrictions will provide ongoing context for decision making.

The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) encourages schools to remain vigilant and continue to prevent opportunities for transmission in school settings. AHPPC has advised that physical distancing, hand and respiratory hygiene, regular cleaning and disinfection of the environment, and staying home if unwell continue to be critical effective measures for responding to COVID-19. Systems to rapidly respond to cases (which may include temporary school closure), along with the agility to adjust measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in response to community transmission are important. Schools should be ready to return to a full or partial snap lockdown or temporarily close (in response to an exposure) if directed by the ACT Chief Health Officer (CHO) These principles also apply to ECECs.

Health, Safety and Wellbeing

The phased return of children and young people to ECEC and school

The return of children and young people to on campus learning at ECEC and school sites will commence in term 4 if health conditions allow.

To ensure public health measures can be implemented with maximum physical distancing while the ACT progresses to reaching vaccination milestones, the return of children and young people will be staggered by year group, across three phases, considering transition years (Years 12, 10, 6), developmental needs (ECEC, P-Year 2), year groups that share classes (where possible) (Years 11/12 and 9/10), and population vaccination coverage.

Commencing week 1 of term 4 - 5 October:	Year 12
Commencing week 3 of term 4 - 18 October:	Year 11
Commencing week 4 of term 4 – 25 October:	ECEC (including OSHC) ¹ , Preschool, Kindergarten, Years 1 and 2; Year 6; Years 9 and 10
Commencing week 5 of term 4 - 1 November:	Years 3, 4 and 5; Years 7 and 8.

¹ Out of School Hours care to recommence for existing and returning school cohorts above.

Onsite supervision and care can continue for vulnerable children and young people whose parents or carers cannot work from home, and for children whose parents are required to undertake work from home and cannot reasonably provide care whilst working. However, until the end of week 2 of term 4, remote learning should continue, wherever possible, except for Years 11 and 12.

Parents/carers of children and young people with complex medical needs should be encouraged to consult their medical practitioner to determine if reasonable adjustments are required to ensure they can safely return to onsite learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Where reasonable adjustments can be made based on the medical practitioner's advice, schools should put those adjustments in place. Where reasonable adjustments can't be made, students should be supported to learn from home.

If required, based on medical advice, staff with complex medical conditions may also be supported to work from home where possible.

Vaccination

Vaccination coverage is a key component of the return to ECEC and school plan. High levels of vaccination combined with public health social measures are the best protections against COVID. Students and staff are strongly encouraged to have 2 doses of vaccine where eligible.

ECEC and school staff and some students have been prioritised for vaccination; not all will have had the opportunity to receive two doses, and children in ECECs and primary schools will still be ineligible for COVID-19 vaccination at the time of their return. Vaccination of adults around children is the most effective way to protect unvaccinated children from disease. Very high to complete vaccination levels for staff undertaking face to face learning is a critical component of the suite of measures in this plan. This will require employers to conduct site level monitoring of staff vaccination rates.

At this stage, with ACT vaccination rates high and increasing, there appears to be no need for employers to implement a mandatory vaccination policy for ECEC and school staff. However, this may need to be reconsidered.

How should the safety of staff, children and young people be managed in ACT ECECs and Schools?

ECECs and schools should continue to maintain COVID safe practices to prevent the spread of disease through a multi-pronged approach. ECECs and schools should have protocols in place and tested early in term 4.

All ACT ECECs and schools, including OSHC programs will be required to adhere to the AHPPC's updated advice on minimising the potential risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools¹. In the ACT context this includes:

Use of the CBR Check in app

At a minimum, all visitors must check into the site each time they arrive using the CBR check-in app. Schools may wish to consider implementing their own policy to require all adults and staff who attend school sites to also check in using the app.

¹ Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) updated statement on minimising the potential risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools | Australian Government Department of Health

Staying home when sick

Staff members, children and young people who are unwell must not attend an ACT ECEC or school and should stay home and get tested. If they attend while unwell, they must be sent home. In circumstances where staff, children or young people have other medical reasons for recurrent symptoms, a letter from the GP is sufficient to allow return to ECEC or school without a negative test.

Hygiene

Good hand and respiratory hygiene practices are vital to prevent the spread of COVID-19. ECECs and schools should display signage and proactively implement good hygiene routines and practices. All staff, visitors, children and young people must:

- wash their hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand-sanitiser on arrival and regularly throughout the day
- cough into their elbows or a tissue, place used tissues straight into the bin and do hand hygiene afterwards
- avoid touching eyes, noses, or mouths
- not share food or drink

Masks

The use of masks is one of a suite of measures to reduce COVID-19 transmission. Staff, visitors, and students in years 7-12 should wear masks in the classroom and outside when in close contact with others, except when eating.

The wearing of masks for primary students is at the discretion of the student and their parents/carer but is not recommended for children in ECECs, or P – year 2 children. This is because masks are unlikely to be correctly worn by very young children and may represent a choking hazard. Masks may not be appropriate for children with a disability.

Masks need to be worn correctly to cover the nose and mouth. The use of masks, including exceptions to their use and when they can be removed, should align with current Public Health Directions.

Masks should be changed during lunch breaks or every four hours.

Physical distancing

While it is acknowledged that physical distancing between children and young people is not always possible, particularly in single classrooms in the ECEC and school environments, it is important for limiting transmission of COVID-19. Unnecessary physical interaction in ECECs, school classrooms and on school grounds should be minimised.

All adults on ECEC and school sites must maintain physical distancing between themselves and other adults. Density quotients of one person per four square metres apply in non-student areas. Children and young people should physically distance from each other and from staff where possible.

Where possible, separate cohorts should be maintained, and cohorts who do not normally learn together should not mix; adults should stay within their cohort as far as possible. This does not include siblings. It is acknowledged some staff are required to provide essential services or course specific teaching to students across year groups, but this should be minimised where possible. Signage must be displayed to ensure physical distancing requirements are clear.

Optimising physical distancing will require:

- limiting gathering in, and staggering of the use of, common social spaces and indoor communal areas such as corridors, entry and exit points, canteens, school library and staff and common rooms.
 - entry to and exit from class at the start and end of the day, and breaks, should be staggered
- increasing in-class distancing to the extent this is possible
- adapting activities that minimises the mixing of classes and years; or where these occur, they should be held outdoors
- only allowing high risk behaviours for generation of aerosols, such as singing and playing wind instruments to occur outdoors
- assigning bathrooms and common rooms to staff and student cohorts where feasible
- cancelling close contact activities such as indoor and contact sports, camps, and excursions
- restricting OSHC to students attending the school where it is conducted
- cancelling extracurricular activities that would bring together children and young people from multiple year groups or classes, or other ECECs/schools, including sport, assemblies, performances and after school and inter-school activities. This does not apply to OSHC for children who attend school at the site where the OSHC program is delivered.
- encouraging children and young people to remain seated during classes
- scheduling the use of outdoor spaces and utilising outdoor learning spaces, where possible
- limit on site visitors
 - parents or carers must not enter school sites or come onto school grounds to drop off or collect children except in the case of an emergency or to provide necessary supports for a child or young person with additional needs which should be negotiated with the principal in advance. This does not apply to parents dropping off or collecting children from OSHC which requires a sign in/out procedure
 - parents or carers dropping off or collecting children from ECECs should limit the amount of time spent onsite as much as possible
 - access of tradespeople to the school grounds should be restricted during school hours, where possible. This does not include approved construction work that is required to continue throughout the day.
 - in all circumstances visitors must comply with the public health measures in place at the site, including wearing of masks and use of the CBR Check in app.
- stopping community organisations' access to school facilities during school hours

Environmental cleaning

Site specific cleaning plans must be in place to ensure regular cleaning of high touch surfaces (such as handrails and desks), frequently used objects (such as staff desk top computers), common areas, toilets and play equipment.

Ventilation

Indoor air quality can be associated with transmission of COVID-19. Ventilation should be optimised in the learning environment to minimise transmission. Outdoor learning should be encouraged and assisted where possible (balanced against sun safety and temperature considerations). ACT ECECs and schools are required to assess their current ventilation capacity and maximise fresh air as much as possible. This should include:

- adjusting systems where possible to increase the fresh (external) air being supplied to learning spaces and classrooms and reduce air recirculation (balanced against temperature considerations).
- using mechanical controls, such as opening windows and doors

The routine use of portable HEPA filters and carbon dioxide (CO₂) monitors in ACT schools is not supported at this time, as the evidence for the additional public health benefit of these units over maximising fresh air is currently limited. ACT Health will continue to be guided by AHPPC advice and the evolving evidence on the specific benefit of these devices in addition to other public health measures in a school setting.

Managing suspected or confirmed cases to prevent further transmission

ECECs and schools should have specific plans for managing children, young people, staff and visitors who display symptoms of COVID-19 and for managing a COVID-19 diagnosis in a child, young person, staff member or visitor to the school.

- **Staff, children, young people or visitors with COVID-19 symptoms** – Children and young people at ECECs or schools experiencing symptoms compatible with COVID-19 (e.g. fever, cough, sore throat, shortness of breath) must be isolated in an appropriate space with suitable supervision and collected by a parent/carer as soon as possible. Staff and visitors should be advised to travel directly home. The symptomatic person should wear a mask while waiting to be picked up or waiting to return home. If a child can't tolerate wearing a mask, then staff caring for a child who becomes sick whilst at an ECEC or school should wear a mask², carry out frequent hand hygiene and practise physical distancing. There is no need for the staff member to then isolate unless they themselves become unwell or the child is confirmed to have COVID-19.
- **Confirmed cases** – If a staff member, child, young person, or family member is diagnosed with COVID-19, ACT Health will provide direction on further management, which may result in full or partial ECEC or school closure while site cleaning and contact tracing is undertaken.

The ACT Government has procedures in place to respond to a confirmed or suspected case in an ACT ECEC or school. This includes working with the ACT CHO to determine risks and may include full or partial closure of an individual ECEC or school. Quarantine and testing requirements will be communicated directly to ECEC or school communities via the ECEC service provider or school. Schools will be responsible for supporting continuity of learning for children and young people during a period of quarantine.

² If available, the staff member should also wear eye protection

Routine testing for COVID-19

At the current time, ACT Health is not recommending routine COVID-19 testing of children, young people and/or staff using rapid antigen testing. Home testing might be a future consideration, depending on the level of community transmission, noting that home testing kits are not currently registered for use in Australia at this time.

ACT Health will continue to monitor and review the national advice on routine testing for COVID-19.

School canteens

The decision to open school canteens is at the discretion of the school, considering their school community and the need to avoid decreasing access to food for vulnerable children and young people. School canteens can be made safer if treated as take away venues, with pre-ordering and 'click and collect' for high schools/colleges and contactless delivery to classrooms in primary schools. These guidelines apply to all canteen workers, including the wearing of masks.

Wellbeing supports

Children, young people, families and staff will all experience the impacts of COVID-19 in their own way. For some, this may include feelings of distress, anxiety, or confusion. A range of wellbeing supports and resources specifically for children, young people and families are available on the [ACT Health website](#). ECECs and schools should identify specific wellbeing supports for children, young people and staff.

Will schools be able to celebrate end of year events like graduations and formals?

The ACT Government acknowledges the significance of end of year events, including graduations and formals, in celebrating a student's achievements and key life transitions. The health and safety of children, young people, their families, and staff remain the primary consideration in determining what end of year events can go ahead.

The hosting of end of year events will therefore depend on the broader community context, and public health restrictions in place at the time. Advice on end of year events, together with guidance, will be provided as early as possible in term 4.

What will happen if community infections increase in the ACT?

A cautious approach is being taken to return to ECECs and school to minimise the need for future restriction.

If an outbreak is rapidly escalating in the ACT and there is the potential for the health system to be significantly strained, ECEC and school closures may be required in line with other community restrictions, to enable control of disease in the community. ECECs and schools must be ready to respond to a community wide lockdown or temporarily close (in response to an exposure) if directed by the ACT CHO or by the Children's Education and Care Assurance (CECA) on the advice of the ACT CHO.

The benefits and risks of ECEC and school closures will be carefully weighed. This includes the impact on educational, social, health and wellbeing outcomes, especially for vulnerable children and young people.

Additional Guidelines for Supporting Students with Disability including Personal Care Needs

AHPPC recognises some students have greater risk of severe disease because of personal vulnerabilities. The same principles of preventing incursion of the virus and preventing spread through personal, environmental, and organisational actions can reduce the likelihood of severe disease for these students. These measures may be more challenging to implement for some students with disability. The need for staff vaccination is of critical importance in these circumstances.

Vaccination

Vaccination coverage is a key component of the return to school plan. High levels of vaccination combined with public health social measures are the best protections against COVID. This is particularly so for some students with disability where some public health measures may be more difficult to implement e.g., physical distancing, mask wearing for students. Students and staff are strongly encouraged to have two doses of vaccine, where eligible.

Masks

The wearing of masks may not be appropriate for children with a disability and is at the discretion of the student and their parents/carer. Masks are not recommended for children in P – year 2 children. This is because masks are unlikely to be correctly worn by very young children and may represent a choking hazard.

What additional PPE requirements may be required in schools, over and above masks?

Gloves and aprons should not be used routinely in schools. If providing care that involves specific risk of exposure to blood or body fluids (oral fluids, faeces, urine) use of gloves and a disposable plastic apron is appropriate. These must be removed and disposed of safely and hand hygiene performed after caring for each individual. Note with respect to faeces and urine, the risk of infection is related to other infectious organisms rather than COVID-19. Hand hygiene should be performed before putting on and after removing gloves.

If providing care that involves a risk of splashing of body fluids a visor is required to protect the eyes from splashing even if already wearing a surgical mask. Used PPE can generally be discarded directly into domestic waste. PPE used when attending to a person with suspected COVID-19 while waiting for collection can be placed in a separate plastic bag, which is then placed in domestic waste.

Are there any procedures that are considered too high a risk for staff to undertake? For example, suction?

Shallow suctioning of oral secretions for the purposes of mouth care is not considered to be an aerosol generating procedure. Procedures referred to as ‘aerosol generating procedures’ carry a higher risk of generating aerosols with particles potentially containing the virus that may transmit COVID-19. These procedures would usually be conducted in a clinical environment and include procedures such as insertion or removal of an endotracheal tube, surgical procedures on the respiratory tract and procedures to induce a person to cough.

When performing shallow oral suctioning, a surgical mask should be worn, and if there is a risk of a student coughing, or splashing of respiratory fluids, gloves, gown, and visor should also be worn.

What is recommended for cleaning chews?

Chews should be cleaned every day. If available, a sterilising solution with both disinfection and food safety properties used for cleaning baby feeding bottles and accessories, can be used according to the manufacturer’s instructions. If a suitable sterilising solution is not available, chews should be washed

thoroughly with dishwashing detergent and hot water, and then should be rinsed and dried with paper towel. Chews should not be shared between children. Staff should perform hand hygiene after touching a chew.

Some of our families don't have options to transport their child. Can a school bus be used to transport a student home with staff members assisting?

Wherever possible, if a person is symptomatic, a personal mode of transport is preferable, such as a private car, to minimise exposure to others. If this is not possible and a student and/or staff members needs to use rideshare or a taxi, they should avoid direct contact with the driver (i.e., sit at the back of the care) and follow good respiratory and hand hygiene to best of their ability. If a mask is tolerated, it should be used if the student is in Year 3 or above.

Can specialist schools utilise onsite hydrotherapy pools to support the health and behaviour management plans of students?

Yes. Schools have been identified as essential services. For those specialist schools who use hydrotherapy pools to support their usual operations, the restrictions on pools do not apply. There is no requirement to apply for an exemption for those schools. Physical distancing for adults and good hygiene should continue to be practised in and around school pools.

Will therapists be allowed to visit students on site once we return to face-to-face learning? Are there any additional requirements they need to meet?

Whilst visitors such as therapists are permitted to attend on site at schools, they must ensure they adhere to measures in these guidelines. They must report through the front office on arrival.