

Ministry of Education

Operational Guidance During COVID-19 Outbreak

EarlyON Re-Opening

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OVERVIEW

The Ministry of Education (the ministry) is releasing guidelines to protect children, families, and educators from COVID-19 as the Government of Ontario permits EarlyON Child and Family Centres (EarlyON Centres) to reopen across the province starting on September 1, 2020.

This guidance document is intended to support the following partners:

- Consolidated Municipal Service Managers and District Social Service Administration Boards (CMSMs and DSSABs);
- EarlyON Child and Family Centre service providers; and,
- District School Boards.

The information found within this guidance document is meant to support partners in reopening EarlyON Centre programs and to provide clarification on operating with enhanced health and safety measures. This guidance document will be modified as applicable when these restrictions can be lifted and/or amended to reflect new advice at that time.

This guidance document has been designed for use in conjunction with the *Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014* (CCEYA) and its regulations, and the *Ontario Child Care and EarlyON Child and Family Centres Service Management and Funding Guideline 2020* (2020 Guideline). In the event of a conflict between this document and the 2020 Guideline, this document will prevail. Advice of the local public health unit must be followed, even in the event it contradicts this guidance document. In addition, EarlyON Centres must adhere to provincial rules regarding limits on gathering/group sizes and physical distancing requirements.

The ministry is requesting school boards, CMSMs/DSSABs and EarlyON Centre program providers, in collaboration with local public health units, work together to ensure EarlyON Child and Family Centres located in schools are able to re-open. These partners should work together to align health and safety protocols and procedures where necessary in order to support the health, safety and well-being of children and families.

You may wish to visit the [provincial COVID-19 website](#) regularly for current information, as well as the [Public Health Ontario public resources page](#) for information to help stop the spread, find sector specific resources, including helpful posters, mental health resources, and other information.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES DURING COVID-19

How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years (HDLH) continues to be a guide about learning through relationships for those working with young children and families during the COVID-19 outbreak. As the cornerstone of EarlyON programs, HDLH remains a key support for children, families and educators as we navigate the challenges of these difficult times together.

Ensuring children's health and physical well-being is important, but we also know that early years programs play a critical role in supporting their learning, development, and emotional well-being. The values, foundations for learning and pedagogical approaches in HDLH can also help to guide discussions on ways to ensure children's emotional well-being and capacity for learning continue to be nurtured.

It is for these reasons that now more than ever, EarlyON Centres must rely on the principles of HDLH in its program delivery. EarlyON Centres should continue providing programs that reflect the view of children, parents, caregivers and educators as competent, capable, curious and rich in potential and experience.

The ministry has developed a new resource entitled *Building on How Does Learning Happen?* that provides pedagogical approaches to re-opening child care and early years settings. This resource shares ideas, reflective questions and lessons learned from emergency child care to help to support child care and early years settings as they work to provide healthy physical, social and emotional spaces for children and their families as they gradually re-open.

The following are some additional reflective questions for EarlyON settings.

How can EarlyON managers and leaders demonstrate how much they value educators as competent, capable, curious and rich in potential?

Involving educators in planning for re-opening right from the beginning values their expertise and ideas and is critical for a successful re-opening. EarlyON managers and leaders can acknowledge and address educator concerns and fears, recognize their expertise in planning, their knowledge of the children and families enrolled, and experience in offering programs that support children's learning, development, health and well-being. Educators who experience being valued contributors will be more able to support children and their families during the re-opening transition.

How can EarlyON managers and leaders demonstrate that they value families as competent, capable, curious and rich in potential?

EarlyON managers and leaders can ensure educators have opportunities to discuss how they can engage with families as co-learners prior to re-opening. In addition to informing parents of the new health and safety protocols, educators can invite parents

to share their ideas, questions, concerns and hopes for their child as they are returning to the program. Offering opportunities for telephone/online discussions with families can support a smoother transition and ease parent fears.

How can educators engage in responsive relationships with children and support their emotional well-being and sense of belonging while also following protocols for physical distancing and toy and equipment usage?

Positive, responsive relationships between educators and children are critical for emotional well-being for all children. With the new operational guidance protocols related to physical distancing and other public health measures, some educators may be concerned about spending all of their time ensuring health and safety requirements, rather than connecting through meaningful interactions. The new requirements for entry to the program can provide an opportunity to connect with families and children on a social level as well. Having a brief chat with each family as they enter the program may help educators to learn more about the unique characteristics and experiences of each child and family – children’s latest interests and discoveries, what brings them joy; their relationships with others and the environment around them. This type of check-in can help put children and families at ease and foster a sense of belonging in the program. In addition, educators may be able to learn more about each child and family to integrate into daily experiences for them.

How can EarlyON educators and managers ensure the environment, experiences and pedagogical approaches value children as competent, capable, curious and rich in potential? How can educators be co-learners with children?

When children initiate experiences, generate ideas, plan, problem-solve, make meaningful choices, and act spontaneously through play, they are more likely to be happy and get along well with others, to have lower levels of stress, and to be attentive and motivated to learn. When children are fully engaged, they develop dispositions and skills for lifelong learning that are important for success in school and beyond. (HDLH p. 35).

Mental Health Supports for Children and Families

This is a challenging time for children and their families. EarlyON Centres can play an important role in helping children understand the current situation in a way that is honest, accurate and minimizes anxiety or fear. The following resources may help to support EarlyON Centre staff with talking to children and families about COVID-19.

Additional Resources

- [School Mental Health Ontario – Resources for Educators, Parents and Students Related to COVID-19, 12 Easy and Fun Mental Health Practices To Try With Your Children At Home](#)
- [Centre for Addiction and Mental Health – How Do I Talk To My Children About](#)

COVID-19 and Its Impact?

- Mind Your Mind – Staying on Top of Your Game During A Pandemic
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - Talking with children about Coronavirus Disease 2019: Messages for parents, school staff, and others working with children

TRACKING RE-OPENING OF SITES

CMSMs/DSSABs should keep up-to-date records of EarlyON Centre sites and their re-opening status. The ministry will collect information on the re-opening of sites across the province from CMSMs/DSSABs. More information will be shared with service system managers once it becomes available.

MEETING MANDATORY CORE SERVICES

CMSMs/DSSABs and providers are required to continue delivering mandatory core services including:

- supporting early learning and development,
- engaging parents and caregivers, and
- making connections for families.

Recognizing that service delivery methods may have shifted as a result of COVID-19, EarlyON Centres can continue to deliver high quality programs and services that support early learning and development, engage parents and caregivers and make connections for families through a variety of methods that support the health, safety and well-being of children and families.

SERVICE DELIVERY

EarlyON Child and Family Centres are now permitted to re-open with in person programming.

Providers are required to develop policies and processes that require families to reserve and/or register in advance of participating in programs and services. Where possible, providers should collect contact information, provide screening forms, and distribute health and safety policies and procedures, including information regarding program operations as part of the reservation/registration process. Providers must follow their reservation/registration policies and processes for all children and families entering the EarlyON Centre and/or participating in programs and services. This means families who have not signed-up to attend a program or receive services ahead of time cannot enter an EarlyON Centre or participate in programs and/or services on a drop-in basis.

Programs and services must be offered with physical distancing measures in place.

The ministry recognizes that not all EarlyON Centres and programs may not be able to resume immediately for public health reasons and/or due to other community related considerations. CMSMs/DSSABs may take a phased or gradual approach to re-opening EarlyON Centres.

During this phase of re-opening, the ministry requires that EarlyON Centres continue offering virtual services, where possible, so that children and families can access programs and services without having to attend an EarlyON Centre in person.

Mobile Programming

Where programming is being offered in a shared setting (e.g., a community centre), providers should work in collaboration with the local public health unit and those sharing the space to follow public health advice.

Outdoor Programming

Outdoor programming is strongly encouraged as a program delivery model as it can easily allow for safe, physically distanced activities for children and families. Where programming is being offered in a shared setting (e.g., park), providers should work in collaboration with the local public health unit to follow public health advice.

Outdoor times can be used as opportunities to provide children with breaks from wearing masks within their groups.

Communication with Families

Communication with families regarding enhanced health and safety measures in EarlyON Centres is important to promote transparency and to ensure children and families are safely interacting in EarlyON Centres. Health and safety policies and procedures, and information regarding program operation should be shared with families prior to attending a centre. Providers should also remind attendees of health and safety measures, including requirements and exceptions related to masks, and related centre policies and procedures when they arrive at a centre for programming and/or services.

EarlyON Centres in Schools

School boards play a critical role in the child care and early years sector. Schools provide an environment where services can be co-located and integrated for the purpose of reducing transitions, building cohesion and alignment across early years pedagogy and stronger connections between children, families, and early years and school professionals and educators. Now more than ever, school board leadership is vital to supporting comprehensive and continuous education.

The ministry is requesting school boards, CMSMs/DSSABs and EarlyON Centre program providers, in collaboration with local public health units, work together to ensure EarlyON Centres located in schools are able to re-open and continue to have access to their spaces within schools.

CHILD MINDING AND RESPITE CHILD CARE

Child minding and respite child care as outlined in the *Ontario Child Care and EarlyON Child and Family Centres Service Management and Funding Guideline 2020* in accordance with the requirements under the CCEYA, may not be offered at this time. Partners will be notified when this restriction has been lifted.

HEALTH AND SAFETY REQUIREMENTS

Working with Local Public Health Unit

While the ministry is providing guidance on how to operate EarlyON Centres during the COVID-19 outbreak, EarlyON Centres and providers must follow the advice of the local public health unit when establishing health and safety protocols, including how to implement any provincial direction on health and safety guidance.

The ministry recognizes that this may result in local and regional differences in these protocols given the varying impact of COVID-19 in different communities across Ontario. It is therefore important to follow the advice of the local public health unit to keep children and families safe your respective communities.

You can find information on your local public health unit [here](#).

Health and Safety Protocols

Every EarlyON Centre provider must ensure that there are written policies and procedures outlining their health and safety protocols for EarlyON Centres, including mobile and outdoor offerings. These policies and procedures must be consistent with any direction from the local medical officer of health and include information on how the EarlyON Centre will operate including:

- cleaning and disinfecting of the space, toys, and equipment;
- how to report illness;
- how physical distancing will be encouraged;
- requirements on the use of personal protective equipment (PPE)
- how shifts will be scheduled, where applicable;
- scheduling of advance reservation or registered programs;
- screening for COVID-19 symptoms;
- parent and child sign-in;

- mobile programs (if offered); and
- outdoor programs (if offered).

EarlyON Centre staff are also encouraged to perform and promote frequent, proper hand hygiene (including supervising or assisting participants with hand hygiene). Hand washing using soap and water is recommended over alcohol-based hand rub for children. Refer to Public Health Ontario's [How to Wash Your Hands fact sheet](#).

Cleaning of EarlyON Centres

Frequently touched surfaces should be cleaned and disinfected at least twice a day as they are most likely to become contaminated (for example, doorknobs, water fountain knobs, light switches, toilet and faucet handles, electronic devices, and tabletops).

Frequently touched surfaces, including any used toys and materials, should be cleaned and disinfected in between program sessions. The ministry understands that in an EarlyON setting, equipment and toys may be required to deliver programs or services, however, providers are encouraged to limit usage of equipment and toys, particularly the sharing of toys, where possible. Ensure that only toys made of material that can be cleaned and disinfected are used (e.g. avoid plush toys, playdough) or are single use and are disposed of at the end of the day (e.g. craft supplies).

Please refer to [Public Health Ontario's Environmental Cleaning fact sheet](#) and the Public Services Health and Safety Association's [Child Care Centre Employer Guideline](#) for information on cleaning.

Information from Public Health Ontario provides best practices for cleaning and disinfecting, including:

- which products to use;
- how to clean and disinfect different materials;
- checking expiry dates of cleaning and disinfectant products and following the manufacturer's instructions;
- clean, disinfect, log, and demonstrate cleaning schedules; and
- ensuring washroom facilities are cleaned between each use.

Space Set-Up and Physical Distancing

EarlyON programs and services must be offered in a way that maintains physical distancing. EarlyON Centres must implement a physical distancing policy of at least two metres amongst all individuals, at all times. In the event physical distancing cannot be maintained, the mandatory usage of a medical mask and eye protection as an additional protective measure in addition to observing proper hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, and avoiding touching of the face.

EarlyON Centres must also develop policies and procedures for pre-registered in person sign-in including establishing how physical distancing can be maintained. Suggestions to promote safe in person sign-ins include:

- Encourage hand hygiene by providing hand sanitizer containing 60%- 90% alcohol content at the entrance;
- Conduct enhanced cleaning and disinfection of high-touch surfaces after each use;
- Consider using signage/markings on the ground to direct families through the entry and where to wait; and
- If storage for personal items is required (e.g., strollers, diaper bags, etc.), it is recommended that policies be developed to promote physical distancing when accessing the space as well as regular cleaning.

EarlyON providers should continue to maintain a welcoming and caring environment for children and families. The ministry recognizes that physical distancing between children in an EarlyON Centre may be difficult. Suggestions to promote physical distancing in an environment with children include:

- planning activities that do not involve shared objects or toys;
- outdoor programs to allow for more space; and
- avoiding singing activities indoors.

Equipment and Usage of Toys

EarlyON Centres are encouraged to limit usage of equipment and toys, particularly the sharing of toys, where possible. The ministry understands that in an EarlyON setting this will not always be possible and that equipment and toys may be required to deliver programs or services. The following requirements should be followed regarding the use of toys and equipment:

- EarlyON Centres should remove and not use any toys made of porous materials (e.g., plush toys) as they cannot be effectively cleaned and disinfected.
- Toys and equipment should be cleaned and disinfected between users.
- If sensory materials (e.g., playdough, water, sand, etc.) are offered, they should be provided for single use.
- Blankets or sheets should be laundered in-between uses.
- Items that cannot be easily cleaned and disinfected (e.g. books) should be removed and stored in a sealed container for a minimum of 7 days.

Guidance on the Use of Masks, Personal Protective Equipment and Handwashing

All EarlyON staff are required to wear medical masks and eye protection (i.e., face shield) while inside the EarlyON premises.

All other adults (i.e. parents/guardians, and visitors) are required to wear a face covering or non-medical mask while inside the premises (see information about the use of face coverings on the provincial [COVID-19 website](#)).

Masks are not recommended for young children under the age of two. School-aged children in grade 4 and higher are required to wear non-medical or cloth masks indoors. The wearing of non-medical or cloth masks is encouraged for younger school-aged children, particularly in common spaces.

The use of masks is not required outdoors for adults or children if physical distancing of a least 2-metres can be maintained between individuals.

Reasonable exceptions to the requirement to wear masks are expected to be put in place by EarlyON Centres. Exceptions to wearing masks indoors could include circumstances where a physical distance of at least 2 metres can be maintained between individuals, situations where a child cannot tolerate wearing a mask, reasonable expectations for medical conditions, etc.

EarlyON Centres should document their requirements and exceptions related to masks.

EarlyON Centres should secure and sustain an amount of PPE and cleaning supplies that can support their current and ongoing operations. The Ontario Together Portal has a [Workplace PPE Supplier Directory](#) that lists Ontario businesses that provide PPE.

When wearing a medical mask, you should wash your hands before putting on a mask and before and after removing the mask. Refer to [Public Health Ontario resources](#) for how to properly wear and take off medical masks and eye protection (i.e., face shield).

Perform and promote frequent, proper hand hygiene (including supervising or assisting participants with hand hygiene). Hand washing using soap and water is recommended over alcohol-based hand run for children. Refer to Public Health Ontario's [How to Wash Your Hands](#) fact sheet.

Screening for COVID-19 Symptoms

All individuals including children, staff, parents/guardians, and visitors must be screened each day before entering an EarlyON Centre. Please follow advice from your local public health unit regarding precautions to have in place. For more information, please see the symptoms outlined in the '[COVID-19 Reference Document for Symptoms](#)' on the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 website.

Where possible, it is recommended that daily screening be done electronically (e.g., via online form, survey, or e-mail) prior to arrival at the EarlyON setting. Alcohol-based hand sanitizer containing 60%-90% alcohol content should be placed at all in person screening stations and made available for staff throughout the centre. Dispensers should not be within reach of young children.

Parents and guardians should be reminded of the screening requirement when reserving or registering for programs online or by phone where possible, as well as through visible signage at the entrance areas.

All EarlyON Centres must maintain daily records of screening results. Electronic and hard copy records are to be kept on the premises.

You may wish to consult the [provincial COVID-19 website](#) for information and resources on COVID-19 symptoms, protections, and seeking health care.

Attendance Records

All EarlyON Centres are responsible for maintaining daily records of anyone entering the space and the approximate length of their stay. This includes cleaners, maintenance workers etc.

Where possible, contact information should be obtained electronically (e.g., via online form, survey, or e-mail) or by phone prior to arrival at the EarlyON Centre.

Electronic and hard copy records are to be kept on the premises. Records (e.g. name, contact information, time of arrival/departure, screening completion/result, etc.) must be kept up-to-date and available to facilitate contact tracing in the event of a confirmed COVID-19 case or outbreak.

Protocols on Testing and Confirmed Cases

Symptomatic children, staff or parents should be referred for testing. Those who test negative for COVID-19 must be excluded from EarlyON programs and services until 24 hours after symptom resolution and the local public health unit does not have to be notified. If an EarlyON Centre program participant (e.g., child and/or caregiver) or staff tests positive for COVID-19, the local public health unit should be notified, and their advice should be followed. Those who test positive for COVID-19 must be excluded from EarlyON programs and services for 14 days after the onset of symptoms and/or clearance has been received from the local public health unit or their health care provider. Testing of asymptomatic persons should only be performed as per provincial testing guidance.

Symptoms to look for include but are not limited to: fever, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, runny nose, nasal congestion, headache, and a general feeling of being unwell.

A list of symptoms, including atypical signs and symptoms, can be found in the [COVID-19 Reference Document](#) for Symptoms on the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 website.

A single, symptomatic, laboratory confirmed case of COVID-19 in a staff member, child or parent/guardian who was in the facility for an extended period of time must be considered a confirmed COVID-19 outbreak, in consultation with the local public health unit. Outbreaks should be declared in collaboration between the EarlyON Centre and the local public health unit to ensure an outbreak number is provided. If the EarlyON Centre is located in a shared setting (e.g. in a school), follow public health advice on notifying others using the space.

Where a child, staff or parent is suspected of having or has a confirmed case of COVID-19, CMSMs/DSSABs must report this to the ministry as a serious occurrence as per the process in the 2020 Guideline.

Reporting Confirmed Cases to the Ministry

CMSMs/DSSABs have a duty to report suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 under the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*. Providers should contact their local public health unit to report a child suspected to have COVID-19. The local public health unit will provide specific advice on what control measures should be implemented to prevent the potential spread and how to monitor for other possible infected staff members and children.

Where a child, parent/guardian, or staff is suspected (i.e. has symptoms and has been tested) of having or has a confirmed case of COVID-19, EarlyON Centre providers must report this to their CMSM/DSSAB.

CMSMs/DSSABs must report a confirmed case of COVID-19 to the ministry through the serious occurrence process and copy their Early Years Advisor. In the event that a room, centre, or premises closes due to COVID-19, CMSMs/DSSABs must also report this to the ministry through the serious occurrence process and copy their Early Years Advisor.

OTHER OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Staff Training

CMSMs/DSSABs must ensure that all EarlyON Centre program staff receiving training on the health, safety and other operational measures outlined in this document plus any additional local requirements in place. CMSMs/DSSABs are not required to develop or

deliver the training directly but must ensure that it is provided to all EarlyON program staff.

Liability and Insurance

EarlyON providers may wish to consult with their legal counsel or insurance advisor about any other considerations for operating and providing EarlyON Centre programs and service during this period.

REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

CMSMs/DSSABs may continue collecting information on the data elements outlined in the 2020 Guideline, where possible; however, the ministry understands that this may be difficult to do during this time. The ministry will provide further information on the collection of data elements for 2020 at a later time.