



1 March 2022

## Recommendations by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare and the Ministry of Education and Culture to providers of education and early childhood education and care during the COVID-19 epidemic

The recommendation will expire on 30 June 2022, at which time the temporary provisions of the Communicable Diseases Act (measures to prevent the COVID-19 epidemic) will also expire. General hygiene advice and practices can still be applied if desired.

- **These recommendations replace the recommendations issued on 22 December 2021.**

### Legislation and powers

Under section 5 of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018), municipalities must provide early childhood education and care to the scope and in types of activity that meet the needs in the municipalities. Under section 10 of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, the environment of early childhood education and care must be healthy and safe having regard to the children's age, development and other abilities. All premises and equipment must be healthy and safe.

Section 4 of the Basic Education Act (628/1998) obligates every local authority to provide primary and lower secondary education for children of compulsory school age residing in its area, and pre-primary education during the year preceding compulsory education. Under section 29 of the Basic Education Act, those participating in education have the right to a safe learning environment.

Under section 6 of the Communicable Diseases Act (1227/2016), central government authorities and expert agencies as well as municipalities and joint municipal authorities must systematically combat communicable diseases and prepare for healthcare incidents and emergencies. They must take immediate action once they have been informed of an outbreak or risk of an infectious disease that requires prevention measures in their area of operation.

Under section 8 of the Communicable Diseases Act, the regional state administrative agencies coordinate and supervise the prevention of infections in their area. The joint municipal authorities for hospital districts guide and support municipalities as well as healthcare and social welfare units in the prevention of communicable diseases, work regionally to develop the diagnostics and treatment of communicable diseases, and investigate epidemics together with municipalities. The regional state administrative

agencies and the joint municipal authorities for hospital districts within each agency's operating area collaborate in the prevention of communicable diseases. The regional state administrative agencies make the administrative decisions laid down in this Act by making use of the expertise of the joint municipal authority of the hospital district, the specific catchment area, and the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare.

Under section 9 of the Communicable Diseases Act, municipalities are responsible for organising the work to prevent communicable diseases within their area as part of public health work, as laid down in the Primary Health Care Act (66/1972), in the Health Care Act (1326/2010) and in the Communicable Disease Act. The actions to prevent communicable diseases encompass the prevention, early detection and monitoring of communicable diseases, measures needed to investigate or prevent an epidemic, and the examination, treatment and medical rehabilitation of persons who have a communicable disease or are suspected of having one, as well as the prevention of treatment-related infections.

Under section 58, subsection 1 of the Communicable Diseases Act, the municipal body responsible for the prevention of communicable diseases may, within its area of operation, decide to close healthcare and social welfare units, educational institutions, early education centres, dwellings and similar facilities as well as prohibit public gatherings or public events when a generally hazardous widely spreading infectious disease or a disease that is justifiably suspected of being generally hazardous has been detected or is justifiably expected to occur. A further condition is that such measures are necessary to prevent the spread of a generally hazardous infectious disease or a disease that is justifiably suspected of being generally hazardous. The regional state administrative agencies may make similar decisions in their operating area, when the decisions are needed for an area covering several municipalities.

## **Obligations under the Communicable Diseases Act to prevent the coronavirus epidemic from spreading**

The temporary provisions of the Communicable Diseases Act on measures to prevent the COVID-19 epidemic (Act on temporarily amending the Communicable Diseases Act 1221/2021) will remain in force until 30 June 2022.

Section 58c of the Communicable Diseases Act also places obligations on early childhood education and care providers and education providers. Section 58c consists of provisions on the obligations to prevent the spread of coronavirus in different activities. The obligations are directly in force under the Act and do not require a separate decision by the authorities.

Obligations under the section include the obligation to make sure:

- those working in early education centres and schools have opportunities to clean their hands;

- those in early education centres and schools are given instructions on how to keep an adequate distance, hand hygiene and other similar practices to prevent the spread of infections;
- to organise more intensive cleaning of the premises and surfaces in addition to provisions issued elsewhere on cleanliness related to the activities in question; and
- those in early education centres and schools use the premises in a spacious way, taking into account the specific characteristics of the activity in question, and any customer seating is arranged sufficiently far apart.

The guidelines for action for those working in early education centres and schools can be issued in the most expedient way, for example by means of public announcements, written instructions, signposting, signs indicating how to use the premises, or any other effective ways.

Under the Communicable Diseases Act, each regional state administrative agency and municipality monitors compliance with the obligations and restrictions under section 58c and relevant decisions in their respective areas. The regional state administrative agencies and municipalities may inspect the activities of the operators they supervise and the premises used in their operations and stipulate measures to remedy shortcomings and drawbacks.

In the case of activities organised by providers of early education and care as well as education providers, those responsible for managing the premises are also responsible for giving guidance and opportunities for hand washing for those using the premises in the evenings and at the weekend. Guidance should be given on keeping safe distances, hand cleaning practices and other practices to prevent the spread of infections. If the activities are ones of an external operator organising activities under a lease agreement with the service provider, the provider and the lessee can agree between themselves how to implement the obligations governed by section 58c of the Communicable Diseases Act. The operator of the actual activities is responsible for ensuring that the obligations are properly implemented.

## **Purpose of the recommendations**

The purpose of these recommendations is to support schools and early childhood education and care units in ensuring that it is possible for both children and staff to attend school and early childhood education and care during the COVID-19 epidemic. By complying with the recommendations, it is possible to control the risk of infection, i.e. to reduce infections and to minimise the number of people exposed in potential exposure situations. When planning activities, it is important to reconcile the best interests and rights of children with the principles of preventing infectious diseases.

# Recommendations for safe school attendance and participation in early childhood education and care

## 1. You should not attend school or early childhood education and care if you have symptoms of illness

Coronavirus causes a respiratory infection. The symptoms may include a cough, sore throat, fever, shortness of breath (dyspnoea), muscle pain (myalgia), abdominal symptoms and headache. You should not attend school or participate in early childhood education and care if you have any symptoms indicative of illness.

If a child becomes ill during the day in school or early childhood education and care, the symptomatic child is transferred to a separate space accompanied by an adult to wait for the arrival of the parent or other guardian.

When a parent or other guardian observes that their child has symptoms of infection, the child should not go to school or participate in early childhood education and care. In such cases, make sure to follow the guidelines of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. The latest guidelines are available on the Institute's website: [Children and coronavirus](#)

[Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare: Symptoms and treatment of coronavirus](#)

## 2. Risk groups

Cases of severe COVID-19 are rare in children and the risk of severe cases has not increased among healthy children and adolescents or the majority of those who have a chronic health condition. The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare has specified which groups are most at risk of contracting a severe form of COVID-19. It is important for parents and guardians to ensure that children aged 5 and over who belong to a risk group are protected by vaccination in accordance with national guidelines. A doctor's assessment can be used in decision-making on case-by-case arrangements for schools and early childhood education and care.

For those working in schools and early childhood education and care, the measures are based on a risk assessment carried out by the employer. Occupational healthcare supports employers in the risk assessment.

[Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare: Risk groups ages 5 to 11](#)

[Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare: Risk groups for severe coronavirus disease \(over the age of 12\)](#)

### **3. Transmission of coronavirus**

Coronavirus is primarily transmitted as a droplet and contact infection when a person speaks, coughs or sneezes, for example. The coronavirus can also spread through the air in the form of small aerosols in indoor spaces that have poor ventilation. Coronaviruses do not survive for long periods on surfaces of varying temperatures. It is possible that the virus is also transmitted through physical contact. No cases of transmission of the infection through goods have been detected.

[Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare: Transmission of the coronavirus and protection against it](#)

### **4. Avoiding unnecessary physical contact**

Early education centres and schools must comply with the provisions on maintaining physical distances laid down in the Communicable Diseases Act (section 58c). Providers of early childhood education and care and education providers as well as the municipal units responsible for communicable diseases can provide further guidance on practical measures, if necessary. Each municipality establishes practices that suit their own situation the best and advises families to act accordingly. The spaciousness referred to in section 58c of the Communicable Diseases Act could be implemented by the following measures determined regionally and locally, for example:

- Attention will be paid to spaciousness and hygiene and, where necessary, efforts will be made to stagger teaching in schools as far as possible and to keep early childhood education and care groups as well as teaching groups separate. Staff members in early childhood education and care should also work with one and the same group of children as much as possible.
- By organising activities in groups and in a staggered way and by using outdoor spaces, it is possible to ensure that there are as few people in the same space as possible.
- The lunchroom can be used in turns. Hygiene is ensured as required by section 58c of the Communicable Diseases Act whenever preparing, distributing and eating food.
- When organising large joint events, attention should be paid to factors related to hygiene and physical distancing. According to the regional state administrative agencies, festive events and graduation ceremonies organised by early education centres and schools become public events if, besides staff, children or students, the events include participants such as parents and other guardians. Local and regional regulations must be followed in public events. In principle, the general restrictions on gatherings

do not apply to teaching in early education centres and schools and other statutory activities of educational institutions.

- The national recommendation on the use of masks of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare does not apply to early childhood education and care and school education. This means that regional and local authorities can, taking into account the epidemiological situation, issue their own recommendations supplementing the national recommendation. For this reason, more specific recommendations on the use of masks may vary by region.
- Apart from children and staff members, outsiders may spend time in or around schools and early education centres and their surrounding areas taking into account hygiene requirements under the Communicable Diseases Act. Similarly, opportunities will be provided for children and their families to become acquainted with the activities of the schools or early childhood education and care.
- Staff meetings can be arranged and staff can move from one location to another, taking into account the epidemiological situation and hygiene requirements under the Communicable Diseases Act. Remote connections can still be used in meetings.
- Regardless of more effective hygiene and respecting distancing, it is important to make sure that children receive the affection, security and interaction they need.
- The regulations on group sizes and staffing sizes are in force as specified in the legislation on early childhood education and care and on basic education.

[Guidelines for workers to prevent coronavirus infection](#)

## **5. Good hand, respiratory and cough hygiene prevents infections**

Proper hand hygiene and respiratory and cough practices prevent infections.

- It is recommended that you wash your hands whenever you come in to early childhood education and care or school, before eating, after you have been out, and always after sneezing or coughing, or if your hands are visibly dirty. Dry your hands thoroughly using a clean, dry towel. This may be either a disposable paper towel or a roller hand towel in which the clean and dirty parts are not in contact with each other.
- If you cannot wash your hands, use an alcohol-based sanitiser. Hand sanitisers should be readily available. Adults always supervise children's use of hand sanitisers.

- When sneezing or coughing, place a disposable handkerchief to cover your mouth and dispose of it in a bin immediately after use. If you do not have a handkerchief, cover your mouth with your upper arm near your inner elbow. Then wash your hands.

[Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare: Hand washing and coughing](#)

## 6. Cleaning and ventilation

Under section 58c of the Communicable Diseases Act, more intensive cleaning of premises and surfaces must be ensured in addition to provisions issued elsewhere on cleanliness related to the activities in question. Use a slightly alkaline all-purpose cleaner in cleaning. You can use disinfectant to step up cleaning in sanitary facilities. When cleaning, it is important to comply with the guidelines on cleaning issued by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health.

Separate guidelines on ventilation issued by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare should be taken into account when using the premises in early education and care and in schools.

In his decision of 3 February 2022 on the observance and monitoring of health safety guidelines from the perspective of the rights of the child (OKV 2733/70/2021), the Chancellor of Justice took the view that, in order to avoid the risk of infection, education providers should cooperate extensively with experts in different fields, especially in arrangements related to ventilation and indoor air quality, but also in regard to arranging spaces in a spacious way and organising transport. Essentially this means that in arrangements related to ventilation and indoor air quality technical experts should be involved and, in the case of school transport, those providing the transport should take part in the arrangements. In arranging spaces in a spacious way, education providers should also cooperate with all operators using the premises.

- Contact surfaces such as door handles, armrests, desks and tables, light switches and taps should be wiped at least once a day, preferably twice a day.
- Cleaning shared work equipment, such as keyboards, tablets or handcraft accessories (scissors, etc.) between users is recommended. It is also recommended that toys be cleaned on a regular basis.

[Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare: Separate guidelines on ventilation](#)

[Finnish Institute of Occupational Health: Cleaning guidelines](#)

[Chancellor of Justice: Health safety guidelines for schools during the COVID-19 epidemic \(in Finnish\)](#)

## **7. If an exposure to COVID-19 is identified in school or early childhood education and care**

According to the national strategy, contact tracing focuses on situations where the risk of the virus spreading is the greatest, and if there is a considerable backlog in contact tracing, tracing cases of exposure where there is a high risk of infection take priority. Exposures in early childhood education and care or schools are typically not high-risk situations.

Local or regional guidelines are primarily followed when carrying out testing and tracing.

[Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare: Instructions for coronavirus exposure situations in early childhood education and care, schools and educational institutions \(in Finnish and Swedish\)](#)