

Policy Guidance for Daily Routines in Early Childhood Classrooms

Currently, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene is strongly recommending that NYCDOE schools follow the four tenets when schools reopen in September, specifically physically distancing (maintaining a distance of six feet), wearing face coverings while inside buildings, providing increased opportunities for handwashing or access to hand sanitizer, and staying home when sick. These tenets will affect how classroom routines, including nap/rest time, diapering and learning center times, are implemented.

This guidance is intended to align to and supplement the [Interim Guidance for In-person Instruction at Pre-K to 12 Schools during the COVID-19 public health emergency](#), [Recovering, Rebuilding, and Renewing: The Spirit of New York's Schools](#) and the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Guidance for Child Care Programs that Remain Open](#).

As NYCDOE early childhood classroom staff and administrators begin to navigate how classrooms will function differently in September they must consider the new guidelines as they relate to physical distancing and increased health and safety practices as well as existing expectations without diminishing high quality education and care.

Center-based and small-group learning is a critical component of an early childhood instructional program, and maintaining **a physical distance of six feet in any classroom is important to the health and safety of students and staff. While recognizing that young children learn through social interaction with other children and adults, experiences, and play**, the following behavior changes are intended to reduce the spread of the virus while ensuring that children are at least six (6) feet away from other children and classroom staff. Some of these behavior changes include:

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):

Children

- Mandatory use of face coverings must be enforced for all individuals while in the building. Exceptions to face covering usage are as follows:
 - Students who have trouble breathing or other medical condition as documented by a physician.
- Appropriate and consistent use of face coverings may be challenging for some students including:
 - Younger students, such as those in early childhood and early elementary school.
 - Students with severe asthma or other breathing difficulties.
 - Students with special education or healthcare needs, including intellectual and developmental disabilities, mental health conditions, and sensory concerns or tactile sensitivity.

- Teachers can incorporate a wide variety of strategies to introduce children to this expectation, which may be accomplished over time. The Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE) will support teaching teams and families in introducing and reinforcing this expectation.
- It is important that this expectation not lead to conflict between or among children and teaching staff. Children who refuse to wear a face covering, are crying, or are dysregulated may be experiencing mental distress. In these cases, teaching staff and families should use positive, nurturing strategies to prevent conflicts over face coverings, and encourage the child to consistently use a face covering over time. Staff can also choose to use additional PPE during these times.
- **Early childhood children should not be isolated, suspended or expelled for failure to wear masks. Children who do not respond to a positive intervention plan will be transitioned to remote learning.**
- For safety reasons, face coverings should never be worn during nap/rest or mealtimes.
- Young children should have outdoor play time as often as possible.
 - Teachers can implement a time outdoors for children to remove their masks (with social distancing of a minimum of 6 feet). At the conclusion of the outdoor time children are required to put the mask back on.
- Children should not remove face coverings during vigorous indoor play; these activities should be planned so that children maintain physical spacing during and immediately after any vigorous activity.

Staff

- Staff **must** wear face coverings at all times. Where possible, schools and staff can consider utilizing clear masks but this is not required.
- Staff should wear gloves during health screening, meal times, and when supporting children with toileting, and during any other activities when in close contact with children or any frequently touched surfaces.
- Additional layers of protection can be worn when supporting diapering/toileting, meal time, nap time, student mask breaks, or during regular classroom activities.
- Staff can wear any additional PPE at any time, such as **double masks and/or face shield** with a face covering, an **apron or smock** over clothing, disposable gloves and/or sleeves.
 - Staff are encouraged to wear a smock or oversized button-down shirt while working throughout the day with children, which should be changed after use or any time it becomes contaminated.
 - If any PPE becomes contaminated, staff should remove and dispose of any disposable items in a covered trash receptacle and items that are reusable such as clothing or personal cloth face covering should be placed in a plastic bag, stored with staff's belongings and taken home for proper cleaning, and other reusable items such as face shields should be cleaned before reuse.

Hand Hygiene

- Handwashing is the most effective mechanism to properly clean hands, avoid getting sick and spreading germs to those around you. Handwashing should be done before eating food, after using the bathroom, after blowing nose, coughing, or sneezing, after touching garbage, and when hands are visibly soiled. Hand sanitizer is allowed as an alternative if a handwashing station is not readily available.
- Hand cleaning must take place for at least 20 seconds for all children and staff:
 - Upon arrival to the classroom
 - Between all activities (i.e. from small group activity to learning centers)
 - Between all learning centers (i.e. from block area to dramatic play)
 - After using the bathroom (staff and children) or after supporting a child with toileting (staff)
 - Before and after eating
 - Before leaving the classroom
 - Any time after touching the eyes, nose, or mouth, or any time a bodily fluid may be on the hands
 - Any time after touching a frequently touched/shared surface (i.e. door handle, faucet, book shelf)
- The use of hand sanitizer should be supervised at all times.
 - Parents can inform the school that they do not want their child to use alcohol-based hand sanitizers by sending a written notice to the school. Schools must provide accommodations for students who cannot use hand sanitizer. If schools need support in figuring this out for 3-K or pre-K students, they can reach out to earlychildhoodpolicy@schools.nyc.gov.

Diapering/Toileting

- It is not practical to maintain physical distancing at times when a child needs support to use the bathroom.
- When supporting diapering/toileting, staff members should wash their hands and the child's hands beforehand, and staff should wash their hands again afterwards once they have finished disinfecting the diapering area.
- Staff should wear **disposable gloves and aprons/smocks** when supporting diapering/toileting. Staff can also decide to wear additional PPE such as **double masks**, face shields and disposable sleeves for added protection during this routine. When used, disposable items should be changed:
 - If coming into contact with another person (e.g. when supporting a child during toileting), change gloves in between contacts with another child.
 - Before transitioning to the next activity (e.g. after wiping down changing tables).
- Whenever a child's clothing becomes dirty with bodily fluids (including drool), change the child's clothing, and as necessary, clean the child (e.g. wash hands or arms).

- Children should have multiple changes of clothes on hand at the program. Schools should make efforts to have spare changes of clothes for children who either do not have extra clothes or have used their extra clothes, as practicable.
- Schools should properly store any child’s soiled clothing for family or guardian retrieval at the end of the day.

Naptime

- During naptime, children must be spaced a minimum of six feet apart. Children must be placed head-to-toe.
 - Children should be expected to remove face coverings during this time.
 - Staff may choose to wear additional PPE at this time, such as **double masks**, face shields and gloves for additional protection.
- A separate cot or mat must be provided and labelled for the exclusive use of each child, and must be cleaned and sanitized daily.
 - Ideally, the nap or cot should be assigned to one child for the entire year.
- Each child should have two clean sheets or blankets. Bedding must not be shared and one child’s bedding should not come in contact with another child’s bedding. Sheets and blankets must be kept in the school in non-porous containers (e.g. covered container or plastic bag) labelled with the child’s name in the child’s cubby when not in use. Sheets and blankets should be washed at least weekly or when necessary.
- To avoid any cross contamination, teaching staff should not store children’s shoes in a community “shoe bin” during nap/rest time.

Meal Service

- Food must be served in individual portions (staff should prepare separate plates and individual utensils disposable and age appropriate or labelled with the child’s name); family-style meal practices (e.g. children serving themselves using a shared set of serving utensils) must be suspended. Labelled utensils that are reusable should be stored in a secure place to be returned to the family or guardian to be cleaned and returned the following school day.
- To the greatest extent possible, meals should be served to children within their classrooms. If it is not possible to serve meals in the classroom, precautions must be taken when using a cafeteria to ensure that stable groups of children do not come into contact with each other. To the greatest extent possible, children should be spaced out at tables during meals. This could mean an open seat between each child. Tables used for meal service must be at least 6 feet apart from each other and children must be spaced at least six feet apart.
 - Children should not wear face coverings during this time.

- Staff may choose to wear additional PPE at this time, such as **double masks**, face shields, aprons and gloves for additional protection.

Non-Congregated Routines

- Classroom staff should avoid congregating entire classes (for example, for a morning meeting), unless there can be adequate space, a minimum of six feet, allotted to limit physical closeness.
 - Consider having smaller meeting times in separate parts of the classroom occurring simultaneously and allow for adequate spacing, a minimum of six feet, between children.
 - Where there is a need for an entire class gathering, consider placing a poly spot or large X with tape indicating the spaces where children can and cannot sit.
 - Carpets and rugs should be cleaned regularly, according to the manufacturer's instructions and frequency of use. If these items are heavily soiled or difficult to clean they should be removed.
- Classroom staff should have management strategies in place that avoid all children using a single chart to select their learning centers, or jobs. Teaching teams should take care to limit the groups of children congregating when taking attendance, or when children are at their cubbies. Ideas to limit congregating include:
 - Locating Center Signs at the center
 - Sending children off by twos to self-select their center choice
 - Having the teacher rotate throughout the classroom to take attendance (instead of having all children sit in one space while attendance is taken).
 - Asking children to volunteer for jobs throughout the day, or sending children off by twos to select their jobs. Alternating cubbies according to a child's in-person schedule, so that no child's cubby is next to another child's cubby that is present the same day.
- Also consider how to avoid creating long lines of children waiting to wash hands before a meal or to use the bathroom. For example:
 - Have children involved in another activity and transition children either one at a time or in small groups to complete such routines.
 - Place markers (such as stickers, X in masking tape) of physical distancing requirements where each child should wait, and keep them engaged by having them do a specific task while standing on a specific marker.
- Children should be expected to maintain a safe distance of six feet between one another if they must walk as a group outside of their classroom but should not be expected to hold hands.

Center-Based Learning

- During center-based learning, an abundance of activities and play areas should be open and there should be a limited number of children that can use each space at any one time, in order to reduce physical closeness.

- For example, in the dramatic play center, have a maximum of two children in the space, a minimum of six feet apart. Divide the space with a piece of furniture such as the kitchen table and chairs, and teach the children that they must stay on their side of the table.
- Consider putting duplicates out of the same utensils, food, or accessories, so that children are less likely to want to cross into another child's play space. Teaching staff should set up water/sand tables, and sensory tables for individual use only and these materials should not be shared between children
- Sand and water tables are an integral part of the early childhood classroom experience and principals should encourage regular access, but both do not have to be made available to individual children every day (i.e. classrooms can offer sand one day, and water another day).
- In order to reduce the spread of germs schools are encouraged to offer water play more frequently than sand play, as this allows for easier maintenance since water can be discarded between uses. However, sand play should still be made available to children regularly.
- Additionally, teaching staff could choose to use smaller tubs for individual use, making it easier to set up and clean up water and sand stations.
- Programs should consider establishing a protocol that allows for rotation of centers for children, while also considering how to inspect, clean, and sanitize any materials or areas between uses.

Learning Materials

- Schools should put new practices into place to limit the amount of shared materials in the class. For example, an individual set of art materials may be purchased for each child, and labelled and stored separately.
 - When this is not feasible, find ways to ensure that children are not sharing materials, or that materials are sanitized after use.
- Art materials that have been used should be placed in a separate container for cleaning and sanitizing. Materials should not be returned to the container they were taken from.
- To maintain appropriate health and safety expectations, toys must be cleaned and sanitized after use. Consider having the right amount of available toys in use for centers/free choice and to avoid competition, but allow staff to replenish materials that have been removed for cleaning.
- Soft toys and materials that cannot be sanitized in between uses should be removed from classrooms. This may include soft dolls, dress-up clothes, puppets, etc.
- Children's belongings must be labelled and stored individually, and may not be shared with other children. Children may bring a transitional object from home, but this should not be shared with other children.
- Schools should also limit sharing of outdoor play or gross motor materials/equipment between groups (e.g., balls, tricycles, hula hoops), and if any is used clean any shared equipment between uses.

Cubby Usage

- Children should have their own individual spaces to store their belongings. Cubbies should not be shared, and schools should consider distancing cubbies when possible (e.g., have an empty cubby separating children's belongings).

Implementation Support

The DECE communicates policy expectations to early childhood leaders and staff through its [3-K for All & Pre-K for All Handbook](#). Additionally, the Division shares supplemental early childhood-specific policy guidance through *Principals Digest*. Our DECE Instructional Coordinators and Social Workers are assigned to schools and Pre-K Centers to provide practice-based coaching and mental health consultation to 3-K and pre-K leaders and teachers. All early childhood leaders and staff are encouraged to consult the DECE Policy Team at earlychildhoodpolicy@schools.nyc.gov with policy questions or requests for clarification.