

Department of Education

General Guidance on COVID-19 for schools

In Northern Ireland as in the rest of the country, we all need to do what we can to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

That is why the UK government has given clear guidance on [self-isolation](#), [household isolation](#) and [social distancing](#).

And the most recent scientific advice on how to further limit the spread of COVID-19 is clear. If children can stay safely at home, they should, to limit the chance of the virus spreading.

That is why the Executive has asked parents to keep their children at home, wherever possible, and asked schools to remain open only for those children who absolutely need to attend.

It is important to underline that schools, colleges and other educational establishments remain safe places for children. But the fewer children making the journey to school, and the fewer children in educational settings, the lower the risk that the virus can spread and infect vulnerable individuals in wider society.

Schools are, therefore, being asked to continue to provide supervised education for a limited number of children - children who are vulnerable and children whose parents are critical to the Covid-19 response and cannot be safely cared for at home.

For the purpose of this guidance, the term vulnerable encompasses those children who are in need of protection, or in need, as defined by the Children (NI) Order 1995. Children and young people in need may include those:

- Receiving support from Health & Social Services including family support, child protection and looked after children services
- On the Child Protection Register
- With statements of special education needs
- Accessing EOTAS

- Accessing Education Nurture Units
- With emerging and diagnosed mental health needs
- Who are homeless
- Who are young carers
- Subject to paramilitary threat
- Whose parents have mental health problems
- Whose parents have alcohol and drug addictions
- Affected by domestic violence

Schools and EOTAS Centres should continue to work in partnership with parents and/or legal guardians to ensure that the best interests of children take precedence.

We know that schools will also want to support other children facing social difficulties and we will support head teachers to do so.

Parents whose work is critical to the COVID-19 response include those who work in health and social care and in other key sectors outlined below. Many parents working in these sectors may be able to ensure their child is kept at home. And every child who can be safely cared for at home should be.

Please, therefore, follow these key principles:

1. If it is at all possible for children to be at home, then they should be.
2. If a child is vulnerable or has a parent who is a critical worker, then educational provision will be available for them.
3. Parents should not rely for childcare upon those who are advised to be in the stringent social distancing category such as grandparents, friends, or family members with underlying conditions.
4. Parents should also do everything they can to ensure children are not mixing socially in a way which can continue to spread the virus. They should observe the same social distancing principles as adults.
5. Residential special schools, boarding schools and special settings continue to care for children wherever possible.

If your work is critical to the COVID-19 response, or you work in one of the critical sectors listed below, and you cannot keep your child safe at home then your children will be prioritized for education provision:

Key workers are those who are maintaining essential public services during the Covid-19 response. The definition of key worker will be flexible and dependant on the circumstance and requirements over the course of this critical period. There will be flexibility shown on the definition of key workers to ensure all those who need support receive it. The list is not prescriptive.

However, to give some guidance the following outlines the broad categories of what would be defined as a key worker;

- Health and Social Care. This includes doctors, nurses, midwives, paramedics, social workers, home carers and staff required to maintain our health and social care sector
- Education and childcare. This includes nursery and teaching staff, social workers and those specialist education professionals who will remain active during the Covid-19 response
- Public safety and national security. This includes civilians and officers in the police (including key contractors), Fire and Rescue Service, prison service and other national security roles
- Transport. This will include those keeping air, water, road and rail transport modes operating during the Covid-19 response
- Utilities and Communication. This includes staff needed for oil, gas, electricity and water (including sewage) and primary industry supplies, to continue during the Covid-19 response, as well as key staff in telecommunications, post and delivery, services and waste disposal
- Food and other necessary goods. This includes those involved in food production, processing, distribution and sale, as well as those essential to the provision of other key goods (e.g. hygiene, medical etc.)
- Other workers essential to delivering key public services
- Key national and local government including those administrative occupations essential to the effective delivery of the Covid-19 response

If workers think they fall within the critical categories above they should confirm with their employer that, based on their business continuity arrangements, their specific role is necessary for the continuation of this essential public service.

The aim is to keep the number of pupils coming into schools to a minimum. However, there will need to be some flexibility to ensure our key workers are supported. It is impossible to assess at this stage what the exact demand will be in relation to the number of key worker children who will need to attend school. Therefore we will monitor this closely, working with schools and other providers over the course of next week and to help make further decisions around staffing and other requirements moving forward.

Where schools have any immediate concerns with respect to hand soap and other cleaning supplies to facilitate schools opening on Monday 23rd March, I can advise that, the Education Authority (EA), in support of all schools opening on Monday, can provide emergency supplies to those schools that find themselves short of supplies. EA will be able to provide either a collection or delivery service over the weekend if schools need supplies. Individual schools will need to contact the EA's COVID-19 operations centre which will continue to be operational over the weekend 8am to 8pm. The number is: 028 38368186.

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We are grateful for the work of teachers and workers in educational settings for continuing to provide for the children of their fellow critical workers. It is an essential part of our effort to combat this disease.