

Guidance for School-Age Child Care Services in Connecticut During the COVID-19 Pandemic

April 2020

School-Age Child Care Services are a critical source of support to children and families during the COVID-19 public health emergency. Connecticut General Statutes § 19a-77 to 19a-87g authorize the Office for Early Childhood to regulate child day care centers that care for children through age twelve, unless the program is administered by a public school system or municipal agency. For example, a program run by a school district is exempt from licensing, but if a program is run by a private or nonprofit organization, even if it operates within a school building, then it would need to be licensed. Certain Executive Orders issued by Governor Lamont cited below apply to all child caring programs, regardless of who operates the program.

The primary resources guiding the operation of services to care for children during this pandemic are the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>) and the Connecticut Department of Public Health (<https://portal.ct.gov/Coronavirus>).

In addition, guidance provided by the Connecticut Office for Early Childhood (see <https://www.ctoec.org/covid-19/>) and the Connecticut State Department of Education (see <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Press-Room/Press-Releases/2020/Guidance-to-Connecticut-School-Districts-in-Regard-to-COVID-19>), address schools and child care programs.

The following additional recommendations on best practice for programs caring for school-age children will assist with implementation during the COVID-19 public health emergency.

Partnering with schools and community organizations

In light of in-school class cancelations, childcare centers providing care for school-age children are being asked to support the continued educational opportunities and virtual learning objectives of school districts. Centers that are located near an employer will likely serve children attending different schools, and even different school districts, each with their own policies, procedures, and expectations.

Communication with parents around their child's educational needs, and activities is key. Programs should consider having families complete a supplemental post-COVID registration process to gather additional information the program needs, especially about the child's educational needs, and activities during the period of class cancelations. It is essential that staff coordinate with parents in order to be helpful with any continued educational opportunities around expectations, computer/device use, printed materials, passwords and on-line access. It is important that program staff understand which academic activities are required, which are optional, which have specific timing (such as for live-stream content) or equipment needs, and then build daily and weekly schedules to coordinate the students' engagement with on-line learning or printed educational materials.

For those districts implementing on-line learning, it is recommended under public health mandates that students who have access to a laptop or desktop computer at a childcare center do not share that device with children other than siblings. Computers may be brought from home with students or provided by the childcare program or school, or a combination. Whether the device is from home, a school-issued device, or owned by the childcare program, keyboards should be disinfected frequently, at a minimum at the start and end of the day, and before lunch and snack times. Programs will also need to plan for this when serving school-age children and ensure that adequate access to wifi and electrical outlets are available.

Children may have additional special needs that are not typically or easily addressed in a child care center setting, and providers may need to build partnerships with other community providers to meet the particular needs of any specific child. There will need to be flexibility and significant communication on all sides to promote what is best for each student.

Planning Activities

While participating in continued learning opportunities will be an important part of each day for school age students, in most cases children will also require program-directed activities to engage children for the hours they are being cared for in any given day. Program staff will need to establish a schedule for each student each day, meeting any specific timing needs for live-streaming or virtual class meetings, while also having time for shared recreation, enrichment and physical activity throughout the day. Programs can review child care center regulations on the OEC website (<https://www.ctoec.org/licensing/statutes-and-regulations/>) as an additional resource for planning activities, especially Section 19a-79-8a, titled *Educational requirements and 19a-79-11. School age children endorsement*.

It is important that staff consider how to have developmentally appropriate recreation and physical activities while maintaining distance between students and staff, as well as a balance of quiet and active periods and online/distance learning, while also keeping background noise to a minimum while students are on-line or being educated through printed educational materials. It is also essential to limit the sharing of toys and learning materials, as each need to be disinfected between uses by different students. Consideration should be given to activities that support children's mental health and help build social and emotional skills, especially those that address children's fear during this dangerous time.

A separate resource list of activities that can be conducted in small group settings while maintaining physical distance is available on the Connecticut After School Network website <http://www.ctafterschoolnetwork.org>.

Adequate physical space

All programs, including those using their own existing facilities, should use the largest classrooms and gymnasiums available, with one group per space, keeping in mind that a minimum of twelve feet should be kept between students' workspaces that allow six feet on

either side of a staff passing between two students. When outdoors, groups should use the largest outdoor space available such as a large athletic field.

Ratios and Group Size

Group sizes are limited to no more than ten children in one space while still maintaining physical distancing guidelines of staying six feet apart, recognizing that groups sizes may need to be smaller than ten children if the room is too small to maintain physical distancing. In addition to limiting group sizes, the Governor's Executive Order 7Q also requires that any childcare operation seeking to care for more than thirty children in one facility seek approval to do so from the Commissioner of the Office for Early Childhood and demonstrate sufficient separation of groups within the facility (<https://www.ctoec.org/storage/2020/03/Memo-15-Reduced-Group-Size-and-Enhanced-Health-Procedures-for-Child-Care-Programs-During-COVID-19-3-31-20.pdf>)

It is strongly encouraged that children be divided into small cohorts and paired up with the same child care workers each day so as to limit exposure to as small a group as possible. For the same reason, school age students from the same family can be kept in the same room to lower the exposure that separate groups would incur.

Class cohorts should stay together each day and limit interaction with other groups as much as possible. This will help reduce the spread of the virus in the center or program.

Additional Health and Safety Responsibilities

In addition to maintaining physical distance, programs opening during the COVID-19 outbreak are recommended to implement an array of expanded health and safety procedures. The Office of Early Childhood has outlined requirements for licensed programs in its memos (<https://www.ctoec.org/covid-19/memos/>) and these can be used to provide a framework for maintaining health and safety in programs serving school agers. In particular, Memo #6 REVISED provides details regarding health practices for staff and children, including the [Department of Economic Development Safe Workplace Rules for Essential Employees](#).

While implementation of these new procedures will depend on the size, staffing, and available resources at each site, best practice indicates that programs should consider hiring additional staff whose sole responsibility would be to implement these procedures. For example, in larger programs, it would be best if three individuals were responsible for these three roles, one person to a role, however at smaller sites, these roles could be assigned to existing on-site staff. The three new responsibilities are:

- Health and Safety Oversight

It is recommended that a position be established at each facility to provide oversight of health and safety practices. This position's primary duty is to ensure the safety of all staff and children at the facility. This includes both mental and physical health. The person

responsible for health and safety oversight should have the authority to suspend any operations if doing so would be in the best interest of the health and safety of the staff and/or children. Further, this person should be mindful of the mental health of the staff, and ensure staff are receiving adequate equipment, support and rest.

- Healthcare Support

Having an on-site healthcare provider is preferred. However, during this time of crisis, many healthcare providers have been called to service directly treating COVID-19 patients. Communities are encouraged to reach out to local community resources - such as the local public health department and/or local school district nursing staff to learn what resources may be available. In the absence of an on-site healthcare provider, it is recommended that programs utilize a combination of 1) an on-site staff who is responsible for ensuring an adequate supply of health and first aid materials on hand (including thermometers) and 2) an on-call healthcare provider that they could reach quickly with any questions. Many local health departments have established coronavirus help/information lines, which may be an option. Further, telemedicine options (such as using Facetime or other video conferencing apps) should be explored.

- Infection Control

Having a staff person whose primary responsibility is cleaning, sanitizing and disinfecting facilities and materials is considered best practice. This is above and beyond regular cleaning/janitorial services, and would include any shared spaces such as the entrance lobby, sick room, hallways and restrooms. In addition, to minimize exposure of students to additional people, classroom teachers should be responsible for disinfection within their own classrooms during the day, and provided with adequate supplies to do so. Programs should refer to the Governor's Executive Order 7V (HYPERLINK "<https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/Office-of-the-Governor/Executive-Orders/Lamont-Executive-Orders/Executive-Order-No-7V.pdf?la=en>"<https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/Office-of-the-Governor/Executive-Orders/Lamont-Executive-Orders/Executive-Order-No-7V.pdf?la=en>) and the Department of Economic and Community Development's rules for safe workplaces in essential businesses (<https://portal.ct.gov/DECD/Content/Coronavirus-Business-Recovery/Safe-Workplace-Rules-for-Essential-Employers>).

Program Access

The Centers for Disease Control have issued supplemental guidance for child care programs that includes information about program access can be viewed here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/guidance-for-childcare.html#parent>.

Denial of Entry

To limit the spread of coronavirus, it is recommended that visitors to the program be suspended. Signs should be posted at the entry of the facility that clearly state only essential personnel will be admitted into the program space. Suspend all unnecessary visits and postpone non-essential activities. For a multiple use building, the child care space must be clearly designated and not used by others in the building. For example, a school cafeteria may be utilized to prepare both meals for the child care students and staff, as well as for pick-up or drop-off meals for at-home students, but the meals should then be brought to the child care space and handed off to be eaten in the classrooms.

Pick up and Drop off

All children and staff shall be screened before entrance to any childcare operation for any observable illness, including cough or respiratory distress, and to confirm body temperature below one hundred degrees Fahrenheit (see Governor's Executive Order 7Q and Office for Early Childhood Coronavirus Memo #15 <https://www.ctoec.org/storage/2020/03/Memo-15-Reduced-Group-Size-and-Enhanced-Health-Procedures-for-Child-Care-Programs-During-COVID-19-3-31-20.pdf>) and Memo #6 REVISED (link not available yet).

It is important to remember that licensed facilities must allow parental access per OEC regulations. However, limiting the number of people who enter and exit a facility improves health and safety. Parents should drop off and pick up children outside the building if at all possible. Parents should call the program to let them know of their arrival and the children will be escorted in/out of the building. Use of a vestibule is an acceptable alternative if the space is adequate to maintain physical distances. Sign in and sign out procedures should be handled in a way that minimizes transmission. Common items, such as pens or pencils should not be used. Where possible, have the staff member conduct the sign in and sign out - so that parents are not needlessly touching papers, pens, clipboards, etc. Where tablets are used, again the staff should sign the child in and out on behalf of the parents. If tablets or keyboards are used by multiple staff, they should be disinfected between each use.

Exposure of Parents / Guardians During Their Workday

At this time, many programs are serving individuals working on the front-lines of the coronavirus pandemic, and therefore it is possible that some parents/guardians will be exposed to the coronavirus while at work. Upon enrollment in the program, it is important for parents/guardians to identify at least two back up adults that could pick up children. In the event that a parent is exposed or is suspected to have been exposed, the parent/guardian should not pick up the child from the program. Instead, one of the back up adults should be used.

Transportation of Children

It is recommended that programs temporarily cease transporting children. Children should be transported by their parents or guardians to and from the child serving program.

Communication with Parents

Clear communications are essential to ensure that parents understand these policies. Each program should revise their parent handbook to clearly establish procedures and expectations. Programs should also consider additional ways to communicate with parents while maintaining physical distance, which could include talking with parents at check-in and check-out times, holding virtual meetings with parents, and live-streaming events a few times per week.

Additional information

Child care programs can receive additional technical assistance from the Connecticut After School Network, a state-wide nonprofit that supports programs that serve school-age children by contacting them at TA@ctafterschoolnetwork.org.