

COVID-19 CHILDCARE FOR KEY WORKERS ADVICE FOR PARENTS

We recognise that this is an incredibly worrying time for parents who want to make the very best choices for their children at a very unsettling and changing time. In following official advice to help stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus, parents have been asked to keep their children at home where this is at all possible. This will not be possible for many key workers at this most critical time. Indeed many parents may be working longer shifts or a greater number of days as a result of the pandemic. We have provided a definition of key worker below.

Parents should not rely for childcare upon those who are advised to be in the stringent social distancing category, and those who are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, such as elderly grandparents, or friends or family members with underlying medical conditions

It is intended to provide childcare to meet the needs of key workers and vulnerable children during the period of the pandemic. The options available to parents during the COVID-19 pandemic are set out below.

MEANING OF KEY WORKER

Key workers are those who are maintaining essential public services during the COVID-19 response. The UK list of key workers includes a wide range of job categories. However, for the purpose of accessing childcare in Northern Ireland for the duration of the pandemic, we are limiting the definition of key workers initially to health and social care staff and other public sector workers. The reason for this is to ensure that childcare can be provided as safely as possible. This means fewer children being cared for in any one place.

Key workers are:

- i. Health and Social Care workers providing clinical care for those who have tested positive for COVID-19);
- ii. Health and Social Care workers social workers supporting life threatening emergency work, as well as critical primary and community care provision; and safeguarding;
- iii. All other Health and Social Care workers, and wider public sector workers providing emergency/critical welfare services (e.g. PSNI/NIFRS/Prison Staff/Social Workers/Teaching, non-teaching and support staff working in schools).

Only one parent is required to be a key worker.

ACCESSING CHILDCARE

If you are a key worker and are struggling to access childcare, please:

1. Check the Family Support NI website:

<https://www.familysupportni.gov.uk/Support/91/covid19-childcare-options-and-associated-guidance>

for information on available spaces; and

2. If you cannot find a suitable option please call **Parentline on 0808 8020 400**.

OTHER SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Parents should continue to check the Family Support NI website <https://www.familysupportni.gov.uk/> for up-to-date information in relation to childcare.

Employers For Childcare Family Benefits Advice Service provide free, confidential and impartial advice setting out your best options for support, and what is the best choice for your family depending on your specific circumstances. The Advisors are available on Freephone 0800 028 3008 Monday to Friday 8am to 5pm, or by emailing hello@employersforchildcare.org.

CHILDCARE OPTIONS IN THE COURSE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Approved Home Childcarers

A bespoke Approved Home Childcarer Scheme has been developed specifically for key workers during the Pandemic. More information on the Scheme can be found at:

<https://www.familysupportni.gov.uk/Content/uploads/userUploads/Bespoke%20AHC%20scheme%20for%20COVID-19.pdf>

If you are a key worker as defined above please contact your current provider, who will be able to link you with a daycare worker. During this period, no parent will have to pay any more for childcare than they currently pay. Government will cover any additional costs.

Registered Childminders

Some registered childminders will continue to provide childcare services to key workers during this period. The Department of Health has asked childminders to confirm if they have the capacity to provide childcare to key workers. A list of available childminders can be found at: <http://www.familysupportni.gov.uk>. Through the site, you will be able to search for available childminders in your area.

Daycare Settings

A number of daycare settings are continuing to provide childcare services across Northern Ireland. We have asked HSC Trusts to work with providers to ensure that provision is in the locations where it is needed most. Trusts will try to do that as quickly as possible. For safety reasons, daycare settings will not be able to offer the number of places they normally do. Also, it is likely that there will be fewer daycare settings open over the pandemic period. We will provide support to them as a result. This is intended to enable them to stay open or, for those that have already closed, to reopen. We will aim to maintain a list of available places in daycare settings on the Family Support NI website (<http://www.familysupportni.gov.uk>). Please consult the site for the most up-to-date information.

Please note that where your usual daycare provider has closed, you may be asked to pay a retainer fee to keep your child's place. Whilst the provider's ability to withdraw the place is subject to your individual contract with them, we expect providers who have closed to be reasonable and balanced in their discussions with parents.

COVID-19 ADVICE

As a parent you will be anxious to know that your child will be safe and it is important to highlight that childcare settings remain safe places for children. But the fewer children making the journey to, and the fewer children in, childcare settings, the lower the risk that the virus can spread.

Childcare providers have been given advice relating to infection control. They have also been advised to regularly check the FSNI website for the most up-to-date information in relation to COVID-19.

Childcare providers must of course know exactly what to do if children become sick in their care including how to protect other children from COVID-19 illness. We have asked childcare providers to develop procedures to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and we expect you to work with providers to implement these.

Children who are in the very high risk group for severe COVID-19 should not attend any childcare setting in line with the [guidance on shielding](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19). See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>.

Children with underlying health conditions which put them at increased but not very high risk of severe COVID-19, can attend a childcare setting if, following an individual risk assessment, it is considered to be in their best interests to do so. Parents must seek advice from the child's GP and, in complex cases, a consultant medical opinion may also be required.

If a child lives in a household with someone who is at very high risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19), they should only attend a childcare setting if stringent social distancing can be adhered to and the child is able to understand and follow those instructions, which may not be the possible for very young children and older children without the capacity to adhere to the instructions on social distancing.

In relation to a child who has underlying health conditions which places them at increased risk (high or otherwise) of severe COVID-19, a decision about whether to use the Bespoke Approved Home Childcarer Scheme will be a matter for the child's parent(s), taking medical advice if necessary.

It is vitally important that your childcare provider is informed if you, your child or any other family member has tested positive for COVID-19.