



## POSITIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (PECE) GUIDE

# Managing anxiety in early childhood education settings during COVID-19

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Early childhood educators are likely to be feeling a range of emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic. There may be health concerns as many locations are providing care for children of essential workers, others have closed during periods of physical distancing or quarantine. This can lead to concerns about job security and financial concerns.

Many educators are parents themselves and have had to manage home schooling and the worry of sending their own children back to school in an uncertain environment. Guidelines and regulations keep changing, often quickly, and there are variations in different regions. You may also be anticipating or already dealing with higher anxiety from children, parents, colleagues, and of course concerns for your own health and that of family and friends. These feelings are to be expected. As an educator working in early learning settings, you are already used to challenging circumstances. This guide aims to build on strategies you already have to look after yourself and the children in your care.

Due to the pandemic, the demands on educators have changed and likely increased. You may be

worrying about the effects on children, and uncertain about handling the behaviours children might display. Parents may be leaning on you more to manage their own stress about returning to work, and concerns about leaving their children, particularly with children whose parents are essential workers. There are likely to be many new procedures related to changing COVID-19 regulations which need to be explained to children, such as staggered drop-off and pick-up times, parents not entering the building, screening staff and children for illness, hand sanitising, protective clothing to be changed between contact with each infant, physical distancing and minimum spacing of cots, constant cleaning of toys, and maintaining separation of groups. The following tips are designed to help you manage the challenges of this unsettled time.



## Take care of yourself

When you are working with groups of children, you may have some uncertainty around risks to your own health, and the potential for exposure to COVID-19 and bringing it home. This can be a heightened concern when centres are forced to close due to identified cases. This ongoing stress can impact on your own coping and wellbeing, so it is important to look after yourself, in terms of both your physical and mental health.

This includes eating well and staying active (try to avoid binge watching TV, or using alcohol or snacking as a coping strategy). Aim for 30 minutes of exercise every day, even if it's just a walk around your neighbourhood. It's also important to get a good night's sleep. Try to have time to relax at least half an hour before you go to bed and put away screens during that time. Both the blue light emitted by screens, and also the content if you're scanning the news, can affect your ability to fall asleep.

Try to do something that you enjoy at least once a day – more often is even better. Taking some 'me time', such as a soothing bath, listening to music, or getting lost in a good book, helps you stay calm, so schedule it in. You may like to use relaxation strategies such as breathing, mindfulness and muscle relaxation exercises. There are plenty of useful apps that can guide your practice.



## Have realistic expectations

Have realistic expectations of yourself, and of the children in your care. At challenging and stressful times, it is inevitable that adults and children will occasionally have feelings of frustration, anxiety, irritability or anger. Children and adults all process life events at a different rate and can take some time

to recover, so expect to see different responses emerging over time. You may also see greater effects of families who were already experiencing stressful life events like medical crises, grief, trauma, housing insecurity, financial or child safety concerns.

Recognise your own feelings, accept that they are a natural reaction to the situation, and think about ways that you've found helpful in the past in dealing with emotions like these. Set some priorities for each day. There have been lots of changes that can impact on how much you can get done, so don't expect to get as much done in the day as you might have done before COVID-19.

Be aware that stress and anxiety can be expressed in different ways by children. They may act younger than previously, have trouble regulating their emotions, and appear to test limits and act out. They're not doing it on purpose, they're just responding to their changing world. Acknowledging what may be going on for them can help you be patient and choose calm ways of helping them manage their feelings and get back on track.





## Create a safe, engaging environment

You will already have a safe, engaging environment for children in your care, but consider whether any changes need to be made to keep up with revised health guidelines. For example, you may need to provide extra supervision and reminders for handwashing, like posters with images showing the steps. You could also have more individual sensory activities rather than shared toys, and use other strategies to encourage physical distancing and minimise handling of materials.

You may need to provide extra support for the parents of children in your care. You may be a source of information, a receptive ear if they need to share their concerns, and certainly a place of trust and reassurance that the children are safe and cared for.



## Keep to predictable routines

Children do best when their world is predictable and you can support this by re-establishing and reinforcing the routines you have already set. This will provide a sense of control for you and the children in your care. Keep to your usual rules and expectations – stated positively so they tell children what to do rather than what not to do. Do lots of communicating about routines, changes and what's coming next, to help children know what to expect.

You may be transitioning back to different circumstances, such as different groups of children or different staff or teams. This is confusing for children and can be unsettling for educators too. If the composition of groups of children has changed since you were last together, remember that it may take time for the new group to feel connected with one another.

Talk with your colleagues and parents to establish consistent expectations of children, and of each other (e.g. how you will respond honestly to questions about COVID-19). Remember, you are all part of a team in supporting children to stay safe and thrive at this challenging time for everyone.



## Take notice of behaviour you like

As always, give lots of positive attention and practise for the behaviours you'd like to encourage, and share those "good news" stories with parents. There will be many opportunities to teach children important life skills right now (e.g. being patient, caring, helpful, cooperative, getting on well with others, taking turns). Give children positive attention and let them know you are pleased by telling them what they have just done well, such as *That was very kind making a drawing for your friend when she was upset* or *Thank you for playing quietly and waiting while I was talking to the parents before they go to work.*



## Support children when they are distressed

Sometimes children communicate that they are experiencing stress by behaving in ways that may be challenging for educators (and parents). Remember that all behaviour is driven by feelings. Understanding what the feeling is can help in managing the behaviour. Children's distress can show itself in many different ways. Common signs of distress include:

- behaving younger than expected (e.g. regression in toilet training)
- clinginess and difficulty separating
- disturbed sleep
- increased irritability and anger



- withdrawal
- increased sense of danger and watchfulness
- sadness
- difficulty concentrating and paying attention

Allow children to express their distress. If you can show understanding, that often diffuses the intensity of the feeling. Communicate your expectations and be clear about the rule or limit. Suggest alternatives so children can choose what to do. A good personal mantra is that all feelings are accepted but not all behaviours can be.

The most suitable strategy for supporting children when they are distressed will depend on the nature of their distress. For example, a child who is experiencing separation anxiety may like to bring something comforting from home as a security item that can be set in an accessible place for the child to go and “visit” it, as needed. Others may need a quiet place to go to so they can settle themselves. Focus on helping children regulate their emotions and actions so they are kind to themselves and others.



### Be available to talk and answer questions

Make sure you use lots of open communication. Use open ended questions and listen to what children say and watch their non-verbal cues. Follow with

a statement to show you heard and understood. Accept and help children name their feelings. You may need to do this more than before. Be supportive and remind them that they are cared for and they are safe. Be very aware of your non-verbal communication as children are likely watching more and may be especially sensitive to your facial expression and voice tone.

Try to limit the time spent discussing fears and worries. You (and their parents) cannot control their anxiety or make it go away, but you can prompt children to use their coping skills. Distract children onto other activities – ask them what they would like to do and give them choices of activities if necessary.

If children ask questions, be truthful. First, find out what they know about the issue. Keep your answers simple and appropriate to the child’s developmental level. Get your information from trusted sources like official government websites (e.g. when movie theatres will open up). If you don’t know the answer, offer to try to find it out for them if they like. Don’t make promises you can’t keep (e.g. *Everything will be back to normal soon*).



## Have regular communication with families

It's important to have good communication with parents and talk to them each day. This can mean better consistency of care and smooth transitions between home and child care. At drop off time, invite parents to share any concerns and make sure you are aware of any instructions they have given for the day. At pick up time, discuss the child's day and anything unusual that happened – good or bad. It may be helpful to use monitoring forms to support tracking and observation of children's behaviour so that you can share this with parents and develop plans together as needed. Consider new ways of sharing information with parents, like daily text or email updates. Include positive stories and photos (with permissions) so parents can share in their child's experiences.



## Support your co-workers

Looking after children is easier when we feel supported, so share your ideas and make sure you and your co-workers support each other. It can help to talk to your co-workers to get help with problem solving, for emotional support, and to help you celebrate successes. Working as a team by planning and debriefing together will promote consistency in practice moving forward.



## Reach out and seek help

If you feel you are not coping well and this is impacting your sleep, your family relationships or your work, be prepared to seek professional help. Call a help line or speak to your doctor about getting a referral to a mental health practitioner.

If you are a parent yourself or would like to support parents in your network, you may like to look at the parenting tips in these Triple P – Positive Parenting Program resources:

- Triple P Guide: Parenting during COVID-19
- Top parenting tips for parents and carers during COVID-19
- Triple P Guide: Supporting healthy relationships and managing disagreements during COVID-19
- Stepping Stones Triple P Guide: Parenting children with a disability during COVID-19
- Top parenting tips during COVID-19 for parents and carers of children with a disability
- Triple P Online
- [www.triplep-parenting.net](http://www.triplep-parenting.net)

**If you're new to PECE, check out the website for more: [www.peceprogram.net](http://www.peceprogram.net)**



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