

Childcare in the COVID-19 Era: A Guide for Employers

Interim guidance for employers in
a rapidly changing global situation

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2121 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20433

Internet: www.ifc.org

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Across the world, countries are implementing measures to bring the COVID-19 pandemic under control. To protect families, businesses, and economies, most countries have imposed lockdowns, restricted gatherings and movements, closed schools, kindergartens, nurseries, preschools, and daycares, announced business and office closures, and mandated home-based work (HBW) to curb the spread of COVID-19. As employees try to meet their new work and family obligations in these unprecedented times, the loss of childcare options and school closures presents a parallel crisis.

Working parents and their employers now find themselves in an ever-changing work and care landscape that can be increasingly tricky to navigate. Working mothers, who in many cases assume more care responsibilities than men ([UNICEF, 2020](#)), can be particularly impacted by this crisis as they may have to absorb the day-to-day demands of HBW or be out of work where HBW options are unavailable, while also juggling increased amounts of unpaid care and household work ([CGDEV, 2020](#)). Employers who are urgently addressing the care needs of their employees during this emergency, especially of those in lower income settings, can achieve business sustainability, productivity, and profitability in the long run.

This [brief note](#), a companion to [IFC's Global Guide for Employer-Supported Childcare](#),¹ outlines ways in which employers can support the care and family needs of their employees in the COVID-19 era and fulfill their obligations under the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#).

Questions to consider

1. What are the current directives and guidance from the government that impact childcare?
2. Do current workplace policies provide sufficient support to employees and their families?
3. How can employers support employees under these circumstances?
4. Are there any international or local online resources available to help parents during this crisis?

¹ Stay tuned for *IFC's Interim Advice for IFC Clients on Preventing and Managing Health Risks of COVID-19 in the Workplace* and *IFC's Interim Advice for IFC Clients on Supporting Workers in the context of COVID-19*.

1. Complying with regulations

A variety of government responses to COVID-19 are being implemented around the world. As expected, not all countries have responded at the same pace or in the same way, even lockdowns look different from one state to another. Requirements, including those pertaining to employment and childcare, are being continuously updated to curtail COVID-19's spread and impact.

As an employer, it is crucial to stay abreast and comply with these employment and childcare-related protocols, be it at the national or federal level or at the local, state, provincial, and municipal levels. Depending on the circumstance, directives might stipulate closing care facilities or offering care services to a select group of families, such as those of essential staff.² Keeping open lines of communication with employees at this time is also crucial to ensure they understand the requirements and actions that are being taken and are able to share their concerns and needs as well. Employees should also be guided with respect to seeking medical support, if needed.

Engage actively in shaping the future



Governments across the world are looking for ways to protect economies, including by supporting businesses and instituting employee protections. By engaging in dialogue and advocacy with governments, parents, and employer and business membership organizations, employers can contribute to how states respond, influencing the way policy and programs are shaped ([UNICEF and ILO, 2020](#)).

² For employers operating in sectors that are providing essential services, such as healthcare, medicines, groceries, and food, essential staff include frontline employees, such as doctors, nurses, pharmacists, shopkeepers, cooks, and others. Essential staff may also include staff that employers consider as critical to maintaining business operations. However, if an employee (who is deemed 'essential' by an employer) does not have adequate childcare, then employers should reconsider requiring them to come to work at this time.



Employers can also consider going above and beyond what is strictly required by governments to better protect their employees and their families. Employers might choose to act before recommendations become mandatory and/or take more stringent measures if they feel it is what is required to slow down the spread of the disease or ensure the protection of their employees.

Temporarily closing childcare facilities

In many countries, compliance has meant the mandatory closure of childcare facilities. Closed centers can present a significant challenge to working parents, including frontline workers, and for vulnerable children who depend on such facilities for care, nutrition, and stimulation. However, the benefits of closure are important and may outweigh the challenges in the long term.

By closing centers, the rapid spread of COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses can potentially be reduced, thus protecting the health of young children, families, and communities. Young children infected with COVID-19 may spread it, given that they are still learning personal hygiene habits such as covering their coughs, washing their hands, and respecting others' personal space. They can, thus, transmit COVID-19 to at-risk populations in their vicinity, including grandparents and other family or community members.

Evidence from a recent preliminary, small-scale study of COVID-19's impact on Chinese children shows that 90% of children in the study exhibited no symptoms or developed mild to moderate ones, compared to adults. However, the study showed that infants and preschool-aged children were more likely to have severe symptoms, compared to older children: 6% of children in the study under the age of 6 developed life-threatening symptoms, including respiratory, heart, and kidney failure ([Dong et al., 2020](#) referenced in [Jana, 2020](#)).

2. Supporting employees

In the event of childcare center and school closures, employers can be resourceful about how to help employees manage work and childcare. There are several ways in which employers can respond to the needs of their employees and offer innovative family-friendly support in the COVID-19 era. Employers can start by regularly checking in with their employees and asking them about their childcare and family needs, concerns, and possible solutions. For children from vulnerable communities, this includes supporting social protection wherever possible (UNICEF and ILO, 2020).



Provide childcare services to essential workers, such as those in healthcare



Allow home-based work (HBW), where possible



Offer flexible work options (even during HBW)



Allow staff to take (paid) family leave

A. Provide childcare services to essential staff

Employers who offer childcare and have the option of keeping it open in line with government directives can consider restricting usage to only the children of essential employees. This is particularly important for employers operating in sectors providing essential services such as healthcare, medicine, and food. Employers not operating in sectors providing essential services can convert or repurpose their childcare facilities to support essential staff, such as doctors and nurses, following strict health and safety guidelines. Functioning infrastructure is imperative in the COVID-19 era for public health and safety as well as community well-being. Childcare, at this time, can be an important part of this infrastructure and an essential service that underpins parents' ability to work and perform essential, life-saving services.³

³ This may not be an option in countries under lockdown. Staff providing essential services may be permitted to travel to their place of work, but childcare facilities may be shut down. Additionally, childcare may not be categorized as an 'essential service' in some countries. Please check for local updates and directives.

For parents who are essential staff in a time of crisis like nurses, doctors, shopkeepers, pharmacists, caregivers, and employees in the sanitation and food industries, childcare is an essential service. Countries that have opted to keep childcare programs operating or convert schools into childcare spaces for healthcare and other frontline workers have put in place strict protocols to be followed to reduce risks. Compliance with these regulations is critical to the well-being of parents, children, and childcare staff.⁴

For childcare centers catering to children of essential staff, the following steps are necessary



Take daily preventative action. Ensure children with symptoms stay at home and receive urgent medical attention. Limit the number of children in groups. Practice social distancing. Teach children to cover coughs and sneezes with their elbows. Hold regular hand-washing sessions and reinforce this practice after bathroom breaks. Make sure soap, water, and hand sanitizers are available; supervise children as they use hand sanitizers. Sanitize all surfaces regularly. Ensure teachers and children know how to protect themselves and minimize the spread. [Also see CDC's guidance for childcare programs that remain open.](#)

B. Allow home-based work (and provide innovative supports to make it a success)

While home-based work (HBW) has positive spin-offs in terms of containing the spread of COVID-19, managing children while working full-time at home can be demanding and stressful. It can also be isolating and may raise levels of depression, irritability, and stress. Employers can help parents make a smoother transition to HBW in the following ways:

⁴ The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has put together [guidance](#) to help decision-makers. While some topics are pertinent only to U.S. childcare centers (and employers that support childcare for their employees), many are applicable in other contexts as well.

• Provide access to an online pre-school service

This service could be delivered online by childcare staff that the children are already familiar with, thereby ensuring that childcare staff are also supported during the crisis. Service may include songs, daily exercise, stories, and activities delivered using online platforms. See list of resources in Section 3. This approach may help parents to keep their children happy and learning but it cannot be a substitute for parental involvement, especially for younger children. In addition, it may also raise concerns in terms of ensuring children's online safety and limiting their screen-time ([see guidance from Zero to Three on screen sense](#)). Also, access to connectivity and types of devices can vary across income levels. Governments and employers are therefore testing and using different combinations of radio, TV, smartphones, WhatsApp, and online and offline tools to provide these services.

A note on connectivity and access



A variety of websites and applications exist that provide ideas and activities for children of different ages and interests. Some are more educational than others, focusing on learning and development. Some require children to be online while engaging in the activity, others only require a one-time download of the instructions. Employers who want to offer innovative solutions to assist in childcare when facilities are temporarily closed are advised to consider the needs and demographics of their workforce as well as their connectivity at home. Many employees may not have access to computers and the internet at home, some may only be able to connect through their phones while others may not be able to connect at all. One option might be to create simple booklets with activity ideas based on different age groups and then distribute these toolkits to employees. Section 3 includes links to resources, some of which can be adapted for offline use as well.

• Support parenting skills

Employers can support parents through online platforms. This may include establishing parent support groups and offering parenting workshops to enhance interactions between parents and children, involve children in family activities, and improve children's self-sufficiency and discipline. With the right parenting approaches, family bonds can be strengthened, and children's psychological needs can be met, even in emergencies ([Lancet, 2020](#)). Employers may also offer sessions on family planning, given that in several countries parents are being advised to reconsider pregnancy and birth plans because of lack of healthcare system capacity.



- **Support mental health and well-being**

Mental health counselling and support could help employees cope as many may be unprepared to balance work and family needs amidst the panic of the crisis. Helping employees manage potential grief, stress, anxiety, depression, insecurity, isolation, and burn out resulting from the pandemic can contribute toward workforce stability in the long run ([WHO, 2020](#)).

- **Provide financial support to parents**

Childcare allowances or subsidies provided by employers may allow working parents to better manage their scarce resources and meet their childcare and work obligations. Subsidies can help cover costs of meals, supplies, and distance-learning materials, including tablets or tools to access online learning.

- **Offer emergency childcare services**

Employers may have employees who are considered essential workers, such as those who work in healthcare, agriculture, food distribution, or sanitation. In such cases, providing emergency care or contributing to community efforts to care for the children of these essential workers may be necessary. Again, each country may have regulations for the set-up and management of such back-up services to which companies should adhere ([GOV.UK, 2020](#)). Where such care is allowed, every effort should be made to ensure that children, families, and childcare workers are protected from the spread of COVID-19. This includes ensuring that children are in small groups, that strict protection and sanitary protocols are followed, and that workers have adequate training, health support, and supplies ([WSD DOH, 2020](#)).



- **Put in place measures to protect employees and their children**

The spread of COVID-19 and its socio-economic impact has increased anxiety and stress for many families. High stress in home environments is often associated with increased domestic violence and child abuse. It can also lead to increased social stigma and biases against individuals and groups of people, for example, those who have the virus, their families, or those who may be associated with myths relating to its origin. Employers can put in place measures to increase the protection of their employees and families at this time. This may include measures to address, prevent, and act on any harassment related to COVID-19 ([UNICEF and ILO, 2020](#)). Employers can also regularly share reliable information and updates on COVID-19 to curb the spread of misinformation that can potentially lead to negative consequences for individuals, families, and communities.

C. Offer flexible work options (even during HBW)

When possible, allowing all employees, especially working parents, to work flexible hours while working from home may also provide a good solution for some families, allowing one parent to work while the other provides childcare and then swapping over care duties. Employers of choice around the world have started offering a range of flexible work options to their employees. These include options such as working remotely, staggered starting/finishing times, and split shifts. More information on flexible work is available on page 64 of [IFC's Global Guide for Employer-Supported Childcare](#) (2019). Also see [UNICEF and ILO](#) (2020).

While these measures have worked in many instances, not all work can be done from home. This is especially true for essential service employees. Employers would need to assess their situation in tandem with their employees to come up with viable solutions that work for all.

D. Allow staff to take (paid) family and emergency leave

Providing (paid) leave to allow employees to take care of family responsibilities without stress may be a good, short-term solution, especially for employees in jobs that cannot be performed from home. Being out of work and the resulting income insecurity can threaten the welfare and well-being of young children and families and their ability to be productive in the long run. Retaining employees during this crisis will ensure experienced workers are available when the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. Employers can help ensure that employees, especially those suffering from COVID-19 and/or taking care of ill family members, have access to medical and financial support during this difficult time.⁵

A note on offering kindness, compassion, communication, and understanding



During crises, it is important to remember that not everything will go as planned. Often, overworked and stressed out parents appreciate clear, daily communication with their employers as well as kindness and understanding as they juggle childcare and work obligations. Being flexible and setting realistic goals and expectations in terms of deliverables can go a long way and complement other efforts such as online resources and HBW, as many employees with full-time childcare responsibilities and limited childcare options may not be able to deliver the same amount of work delivered under normal circumstances. In cases where employees are unable to work, employers can provide guidance on what to do or offer paid family/emergency leave. In any case, cultivating a sense of security and sharing empathy and understanding can help employers and their employees.

⁵ In El Salvador, private companies (except those in the food, medical, and other essential sectors) that decide to send all of their workers home on paid leave will be eligible for further government support. In Japan, a planned subsidy will reimburse two-thirds of the leave allowance for a small/medium employer or half for a large enterprise. The subsidy is capped at JPY8,335 a day per employee on leave, as of late February 2020. ([Social Protection and Job Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures](#))

3. List of resources for employers and parents to enable HBW, childcare, and distance learning

Offered here are resources that may be helpful to employers as they plan their response to and support for their employee's childcare needs. The resources are divided into five key areas:

I. The impact of COVID-19 on businesses and the world of work

II. How to deal with COVID-19 in the childcare environment

III. Parenting and caring for young children in the COVID-19 era

IV. Resources to support playful learning at home for children between 0 and 6 years old

V. Resources for young children who may have just started school (from 6 to 8 years old)

VI. International resources for children of all ages

I. The impact of COVID-19 on businesses and the world of work

- [Coronavirus: 5 ways to work from home with your kids \(and stay sane\)](#), World Economic Forum (WEF) (March 2020)
- [COVID-19 brings up working parents' worst insecurities — Here are 5 ways leaders can support them](#), Fairy God Boss (March 2020)
- [COVID-19: How companies can support society](#), WEF (March 2020)
- [COVID-19: Implications for business](#), McKinsey & Company (March 2020)
- [Family-friendly policies and other food workplace practices in the context of COVID-19: Key steps employers can take](#), UNICEF, ILO & UN Women (March 2020)
- [Future of work: Ways of working in uncertain times](#), Deloitte (March 2020)
- [How the Coronavirus is already rewriting the future of business](#), Harvard Business School (March 2020)
- [How will COVID-19 affect women and girls in low- and middle-income countries?](#), Center for Global Development (March 2019)
- [How working parents can prepare for coronavirus closures](#), Harvard Business Review (March 2020)
- [Interim guidance for businesses and employers: Plan, prepare and respond to Coronavirus disease 2019](#), U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (February 2020)

II. How to deal with COVID-19 in the childcare environment

- [Confronting the Coronavirus outbreak](#), Harvard Graduate School of Education (March 2020)
- [Considerations for childcare closure due to COVID-19](#), CDC Guidelines (March 2020)
- [Coronavirus: News & resources for child care professionals, families and policymakers](#), Child Care Aware of America (March 2020)
- [Key messages and actions for COVID-19 prevention and control in schools](#), UNICEF and WHO (March 2020)
- [Supplemental guidance for childcare programs that remain open](#), CDC (April, 2020)
- [Supporting young children isolated due to Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) (March 2020)

III. Parenting and caring for young children in the COVID-19 era

- [Caring for pre-schoolers at home](#), Harvard Graduate School of Education (March 2020)
- [End violence against children](#): Regularly-updated resources to protect children and adults, especially during COVID-19.
- [How to explain coronavirus to kids](#): Nanogirl and PM Jacinda Arden video (March 2020)
- [How to talk to your child about COVID-19](#), UNICEF (March 2020)
- [Parenting for lifelong health](#): A series of open-access resources available in multiple languages on managing children positively during extraordinary circumstances.
- [Parenting through uncertainty](#) (live Q&A), Bright Horizons (March 2020)
- [Preparing for emergencies](#): Tips for families with young children – Birth to 5 years, Child Care Aware of America and Vroom (March 2020)
- [Staying healthy](#): How to wash your hands video, Sesame Street
- [Stuck at home with young kids due to the coronavirus? Here's what to do—and not to do](#), The Hechinger Report (March 2020)
- [Talking to children about COVID-19](#), Bright Horizons (March 2020)
- [Talking with children about Coronavirus disease 2019](#), CDC (March 2020)
- [Tips for parenting during the COVID-19 outbreak](#), UNICEF (March 2020)
- [What parents should know about COVID-19](#), UNICEF (March 2020)

IV. Resources to help parents keep children engaged in playful learning at home (birth to 6 years old)

- [Audible](#): Audio stories for children (free while schools are closed for all ages).
- Bright Horizons: [Family resources for life at home](#), [world at home](#), and [resources for families](#), including apps, websites, videos, books, and activities for different age groups (for example, yoga and mindfulness, STEM learning, language, story time, cooking).
- [Busy toddler](#): list of indoor, offline activities for toddlers requiring simple materials.
- [Khan Academy](#) and [Khan Academy Kids](#): Remote learning for children of all ages.
- [Kinedu](#): A baby development app that helps parents with creative and age-appropriate activities that support baby's development from pregnancy to 4 years old.
- [NAEYC](#): 10 things every parent should know about playful learning and why it's important.
- [Sesame Street](#): Resources to support children and parents with playful activities and videos.
- [Vroom](#): Free, science-based tips and tools to help parents and caregivers.
- [Zero to Three](#): A decision-making tree for selecting content to ensure it is engaging, promotes active involvement, and is meaningful and social.

V. Resources to help parents and young children in the early grades (from 6 to 8 years old)

- [All Kids Network](#): Ideas and printable activities for children.
- [Games to Learn English](#): Simple online games for learners of different levels.
- [Harvard Graduate School of Education \(HGSE\) database of resources](#) put together by HGSE students and sorted by age group to help families and children learn from home.
- [Learn with Homer](#): Expert-designed learning products for children ages 2 to 8 years.
- [PBS Kids games](#): Educational games featuring PBS characters.
- [Spelling City](#) and [Spelling Training](#): Spelling games and activities for children.



VI. International resources for children of all ages

- [African Storybook](#): Free picture storybooks in the languages of Africa as well as tools for the translation, adaptation, and creation of picture storybooks for children ages 2 to 10 years. African Storybook has two apps for mobile devices that give parents and children access to the storybooks even when they are offline.
- [GoNoodle](#): Music and movement activities for children, including movement, yoga, mindfulness, curricular activities, and recommended off-screen home activities.
- [Hands on International](#): A book for children “A curious guide for courageous kids” in multiple languages, including English, Italian, French, and Turkish.
- [Storyline Online](#): Videos featuring celebrated actors reading children’s books alongside creatively-produced illustrations.
- [StoryWeaver from Pratham Books](#): More than 19,000 richly-illustrated children’s stories in 230 languages plus a platform of tools to create, adapt, and translate new stories for children.
- [UNICEF MENA](#) launched an album featuring 11 popular children’s songs from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The popular songs are focused on promoting social cohesion. They are sung by children from Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey.



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