



**Australian Government**

**Department of Health**

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## **Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) advice on reducing the potential risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools**

Advice from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) for school leaders engaging with children, parents, teachers and support staff to reduce even further the relatively low risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools.

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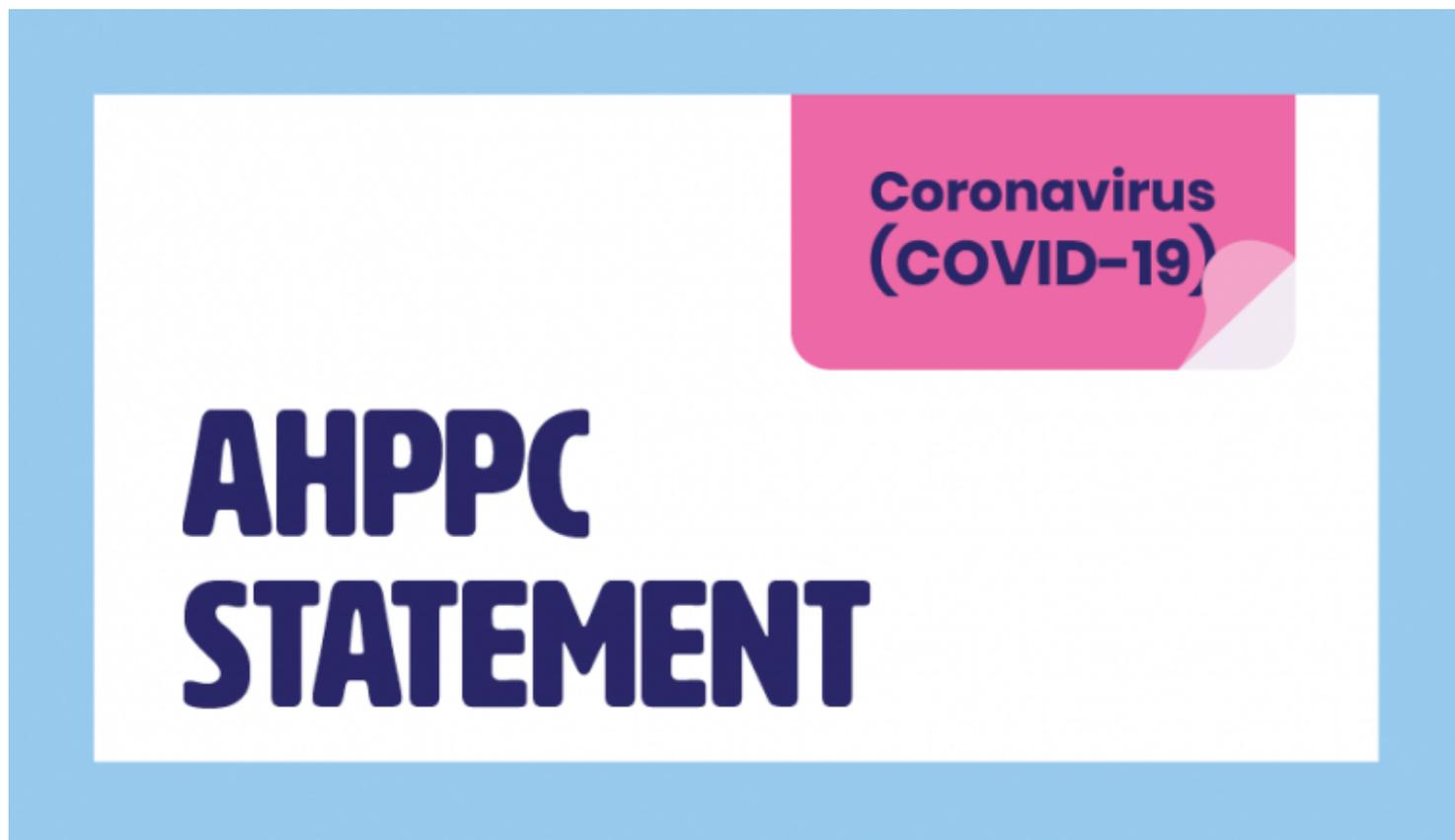
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**Intended audience:**

General public



### **Purpose**

This practical guidance and advice has been prepared for school leaders engaging with children, parents, teachers and support staff to reduce even further the relatively low risk of Coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This document is broad, and decisions about how to apply its guidance should be made by each jurisdiction with consideration of their local epidemiology and context.

## Background

### What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness caused by a new virus. Symptoms include fever, coughing, a sore throat and shortness of breath.

The virus can spread from person to person, but good hygiene and physical distancing can prevent infection. For most people, COVID-19 is experienced as a mild disease. The focus on reducing transmission is to ease the burden on our health system, rather than eliminate the spread.

If you or your child are sick, and think you have symptoms of COVID-19, seek medical advice. If you want to talk to someone about your symptoms or are seeking information, call the National Coronavirus Helpline for advice on 1800 020 080. The line operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

## Principles for schools

1. Help stop the spread and stay healthy
2. Stay informed and supported

## Things to consider

- Physical distancing
- Risks to vulnerable populations in schools
- Hygiene
- Environmental cleaning
- Psychological wellbeing
- Spread the word, not the disease

## Help stop the spread and stay healthy

### Physical distancing

One way to slow the spread of viruses, such as coronavirus, is physical distancing (also called social distancing).

The more space between people, the harder it is for the virus to spread. There is a range of measures schools can take to support physical distancing and reduce transmission within the practical limitations of a school environment.

**Message for parents:** if your child is sick, they must not go to school. You must keep them at home and away from others. Remember to maintain physical distancing from other parents and teachers when attending school, including when dropping off and picking up your children.

**Message for children:** tell your parent, guardian or teacher if you are feeling sick.

**Message for teachers:** do not come to work if you are sick or in a vulnerable person category.

**Message for all adults:** the greatest risk of transmission in the school environment is between adults. It is of utmost importance that teachers and parents alike maintain physical distancing between themselves and each other at school.

Schools are already engaging in creative and innovative ways to engage their students online and in-person, while practising physical distancing and minimising risk. These include:

- adapting activities that lead to mixing between classes and years, including reduced use of common areas and reduced after-school and inter-school activities
- where possible, adding flexibility to the work day by staggering start and finish times, recesses, lunch breaks and other key transition times, when mixing may occur between classes and year-levels
- where possible, avoiding close-proximity queuing and encouraging increased space between students, for example, by placing markings on the floor
- encouraging students to maintain 1.5m distance when entering or leaving a classroom
- cancelling school excursions, assemblies, sporting activities and other large gatherings
- where possible, conducting lessons outdoors or in environments with enhanced ventilation
- where possible, arranging classroom furniture to leave as much space as possible between students
- maintaining smaller classes
- suspending group work if the activity cannot be modified to avoid close physical proximity (1.5m)
- ceasing public access to playgrounds and high touch play equipment
- teachers monitoring students during non-class times to ensure they are maintaining 1.5m physical distance
- teachers maintaining 1.5m physical distance from other adults in staff rooms
- providing a mix of home- and campus-based education
- student work being submitted electronically, where feasible
- student work being handed to a teacher for feedback rather than feedback being provided immediately by the teacher in close proximity to the student
- encouraging non-contact greetings

Swimming pools should not operate. Use of play equipment by children in a school setting is unlikely to appreciably increase the risk of exposure to the virus when compared with other activities undertaken in schools. Schools that continue to allow access to play equipment should consider the following sensible precautions:

- separating groups at play; for example, by staggering play times and avoiding overcrowding;
- cleaning play equipment between use by different groups (or at least daily);
- ensuring children wash their hands (or apply alcohol-based hand rubs) before and after using play equipment; and
- excluding unwell children and staff.

Physical education may continue, but should take place outdoors or in large gymnasiums or covered areas where physical distancing can be maintained.

## **Risks to vulnerable populations in schools**

Parents and carers of children and young people with complex medical needs are encouraged to seek medical advice from their health practitioner to support informed risk assessment and decision-making regarding the suitability of on-site education for their child.

Protecting vulnerable people within school workforces is critical to making schools a safe environment. People aged 70 years and over, people aged 65 years and over with chronic medical conditions, all people with compromised immune systems, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over the age of 50 with chronic medical conditions, are at greater risk of more serious illness if they are infected with COVID-19.

There is limited evidence at this time regarding the risk in pregnant women. Teachers and staff who are vulnerable should take additional care to protect themselves and, where possible, arrange to work from home. This is also the case for those with caring responsibilities for vulnerable people.

## Hygiene

Everyone must practise good hygiene to protect against infection and prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Good hygiene practises include:

- washing hands with soap and water for 20 seconds (see video), or using hand sanitiser, when entering school, and at regular intervals throughout the day
  - particularly before and after eating, and after going to the toilet
  - for younger students, this may include having a regular handwashing schedule (a game could be developed for younger students to come up with a 20 second hand-washing song)
- covering coughs and sneezes with ones elbow or a tissue
- placing used tissues straight into the bin
- avoiding touching one's eyes, nose and mouth
- not sharing food or drink, or
- close all communal water fountains/bubblers
- where relevant, promoting strictest hygiene amongst food preparation (canteen) staff and their close contacts (see Food Standards Australia and New Zealand for further information)

Mobile phones are regularly touched and breathed on. Use of mobile phones at school should be discouraged and if possible, restricted. Where mobile phones must be used, they should be cleaned regularly.

## Routine care

Standard precautions are advised when it is necessary to come into physical contact with someone for the purpose of providing routine care and/or assistance (for example, the use of gloves for nappy changing, toileting, feeding for those with a disability or complex needs).

Staff must always wash hands with soap and water, or use a hand sanitiser before and after performing routine care and other close interactions with students in the classroom environment, and ensure environmental cleaning where relevant. Schools should make hand sanitiser available at school entrances and in every classroom.

It is not recommended non-medical face coverings be used as a mitigation strategy against transmission of COVID-19 or other similar communicable diseases, as the use of these masks has the potential to create more harm than good.

Additional Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), for example medical face masks, is not required to provide regular care for children or young people who are well, unless such precautions are usually adopted in the routine care of an individual child or young person. Good hygiene practices and environmental cleaning are more important for reducing risk.

Schools should not conduct wide-scale temperature checking of students as there is limited evidence to demonstrate the value of such checks.

### **First aid**

Standard precautions should be adopted when providing first aid, for example gloves and an apron to use when dealing with blood or body fluids/substances.

Always wash hands with soap and water or use a hand sanitiser before and after providing first aid.

### **Management of suspected and confirmed cases**

Where there is a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 in a school environment, schools should contact the National Coronavirus Helpline (1800 020 080) which operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for further advice.

If a student or staff member is unwell, they should not attend school or should leave to go home. If they are a suspected COVID-19 case, they should self-isolate and seek testing in accordance with state or territory guidelines. Schools should not conduct COVID-19 testing themselves.

Staff, children or young people at school experiencing symptoms compatible with COVID-19 (fever, cough or sore throat) should be isolated in an appropriate space with suitable supervision, and collected by a parent/carer as soon as possible.

In this situation, where staff, children or a young person are experiencing symptoms compatible with COVID-19, such persons should continue to practise hand hygiene and physical distancing.

All children and young people with a health care plan should ensure this is up-to-date and that, if required, it provides additional advice on monitoring and identification of the unwell child in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is important that schools also follow situationally appropriate environmental cleaning. For example, if a child spreads droplets (by sneezing or coughing), clean surfaces with disinfectant wipes immediately.

Schools and their communities will continue to be supported by state public health units in the event of an outbreak in their immediate or nearby areas. This will include detailed information and specific advice on additional measures to take beyond this guidance.

For further information about the advice in this section, please refer to the [Australian Health Protection Principal Committee website](#).

### **Environmental cleaning**

Coronaviruses, including COVID-19, can survive on surfaces for many hours but are readily inactivated by cleaning and disinfection.

To reduce the spread of viruses or germs in schools through environmental cleaning:

- clean and disinfect frequently used high-touch surfaces such as benchtops, desks, doorknobs, taps, and hand rails at regular intervals throughout the day with a detergent solution or detergent/disinfectant wipes
- clean and disinfect frequently used objects such as computers, photocopiers and sports equipment with detergent solution or detergent/disinfectant wipes

- in those jurisdictions where students are allowed to have mobile phones, schools should restrict access to mobile phones during the school day. Schools and jurisdictions can have the flexibility to make their own procedures around how to do this
- clean and disinfect any play equipment that has not been closed at the end of each recess and the end of the day.
- increase the amount of fresh air available indoors by opening windows or adjusting air conditioning
- provide bins in every classroom for used tissues, and empty them regularly throughout the day
- clean toilets after each recess and at the end of the day.

Further information from the Department of Health about the frequency and nature of routine environmental cleaning and disinfection in the community can be found [here](#).

## Stay informed and supported

### Psychological and physical well-being for everyone

Maintaining good habits, including healthy eating, exercise and sleep, continue to be important for all people at this time.

### Children

Children are seeing and hearing an abundance of information about COVID-19 on the television, radio and social media, as well as from other people. Their weekdays, weekends, and school holidays will be different to any they have experienced before. It is important that children be supported through what could be a stressful period for them, including reassuring them that being worried and anxious is normal.

[Head to Health](#) provides online resources on mental health and COVID-19, including information for parents, which by extension, may also be applied by teachers.

Talking with children about COVID-19 can help them understand and cope with the current situation. The following steps can be used as a tool to have an open discussion with a child about their feelings surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic (for more detailed information, access the [Head to Health](#) resource):

- Make time to talk
- Find out what the child knows and address any misconceptions
- Explain COVID-19 in a way the child can understand
- Tune in to the child's feelings, validate their concerns and don't forget to highlight the positives and things that are going well (e.g. how well children are adapting).

In addition to children's psychological safety, it is also important to consider other safety concerns that children may be confronted by, including:

- eSafety – children will be online more than ever this year. Parents and school leaders are strongly encouraged to go to [eSafety.gov.au](https://www.esafety.gov.au) for specific advice regarding COVID-19 including:
  - [an online safety kit for parents and carers](#)
  - [an online safety booklet for parents and carers](#)
  - [advice for school leaders keeping schools and learning safe online](#)

- Domestic violence – with social distancing requiring more Australians to stay at home, it is important to recognise that home is not always a safe environment. Evidence shows heightened rates of domestic violence associated with significant social disruption. It is important that schools continue to apply existing measures to protect students who are at risk of domestic violence, whether they are learning at school or at home. See [Services Australia's website](#) for more resources.

### **School leaders, teachers & support staff**

School leaders will play a pivotal role in supporting students and staff to adopt new ways of operating, teaching and learning at this time. In doing so, it is important that school leaders and staff look after their own mental health and wellbeing by accessing support services available to them.

Schooling systems should continue to communicate regularly about existing Employee Assistance Programs and other support mechanisms that are available to staff, and encourage staff to access them as required. Staff can also talk about how they are coping with colleagues, supervisors, friends or family, who can then provide peer support.

There are also many [digital health services](#) that staff can access online or over the phone. They can also connect with a health professional such as their GP, a psychologist or other mental health professional via these modalities.

State or territory education departments may have further guidance.

### **Communication**

Continuing clear and consistent communication will help to ensure everyone has access to current and accurate information while schools deploy multiple modes of learning. This will also help students, teachers and parents understand we all have a part to play in slowing the spread of COVID-19.

Schools should continue to keep parents informed through their normal channels of communication with their communities, including:

- Newsletters (letter or email) on actions the school is taking
- Where possible, use of school social media channels and SMS

Schools should continue to communicate key messages to students and parents through:

- Where possible, TVs around schools displaying messages relating to physical distancing, hygiene, and mental health.
- Where possible, age-appropriate posters also displaying key messages relating to physical distancing, hygiene and mental health.
- Provision of posters and/or fact sheets to the parents of children who are engaging in distance learning.
- Provision of links to websites and information portals e.g. [Beyond Blue](#) and [eSafety.gov.au](#)

Read [previous statements](#) from the AHPPC.

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