

Covid-safe plan for cleaning in early childhood settings

Advice to AEU members



What cleaning is required?

The advice from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) is to adhere to the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) childcare cleaning guidelines “*Staying Healthy, Preventing infectious diseases in early childhood education and care services*” (5th ed).

The NHMRC guidelines are required under the regulatory framework at all times and should be familiar to all services.

These guidelines cover all aspects of reducing the risk for any infectious disease. They address effective hand hygiene, exclusion of unwell children and staff, cough and sneeze etiquette, dealing with nasal discharge, effective cleaning practices, and worker health and safety.

The AHPPC advise that services adhere fully to the NHMRC childcare cleaning guidelines, and in addition:

- clean and disinfect high-touch surfaces at least daily (e.g. play gyms, tables, hard-backed chairs, doorknobs, light switches, remotes, handles, desks, toilets, sinks)
- wash and launder play items and toys including washable plush toys as appropriate in accordance with the manufacturer’s instructions – if possible, launder items using the warmest appropriate water setting for the items and dry items completely.

How often do furniture, surfaces, toys and equipment need to be cleaned?

The AHPPC and NHMRC advise that high-touch surface should be cleaned daily and play items should be cleaned/laundered as appropriate.

Table 3.5 on page 53 of *Staying Healthy* shows how often different surfaces, furniture and equipment should be cleaned.

Surface or area	Wash daily plus when visible dirty	Wash weekly plus when visible dirty
Bathrooms – wash tap handles, toilet seats, toilet handles and door knobs. Check the bathroom during the day and clean if visibly dirty.	✓	
Toys and objects put in the mouth.	✓	
Surfaces that children have frequent contact with (e bench tops, taps, cots and tables)	✓	

Beds, stretchers, lines and mattress covers (if children do not use the same mattress cover every day)	✓	
Door knobs	✓	
Floors	✓	
Low shelves		✓
Other surfaces not often touched by children		✓

Staff should not be following children around cleaning every item and surface they touch throughout the day. It's simply not feasible, sustainable or necessary.

Who should be undertaking cleaning duties?

It is reasonable to expect that all teachers and educators share a responsibility for maintaining a clean and hygienic environment for children and staff (this is simply an aspect of working in the sector). It is also reasonable to expect that some additional basic cleaning will be required during the day (i.e.: paying extra attention to high-touch surfaces). However, teachers and educators are employed to carry out their core duties of teaching young children. Service providers should have measures in place to ensure that the daily cleaning required by the NHMRC guidelines is undertaken by an appropriately employed person (a cleaner, whose contract and position description require this level of cleaning). It is the employer's legal obligation under the OHS Act to provide workers with a safe workplace as far as is reasonably practicable. This includes your health and hygiene as well as managing any physiological risk factors such as unreasonable workload.

Under our two main industrial agreements (the VECTEA and EEEA), teachers and educators are not required to undertake "industrial" cleaning. By "industrial" this means the type of cleaning that you would expect a cleaner to attend to on a regular (hopefully daily) basis, and the type of thorough daily clean that should be carried out to reduce the risk of infectious disease as required by the NHMRC guidelines.

At Schedule 4 of the VECTEA and EEEA, the roles and responsibilities for educators are prescribed:

- *Assist with the preparation, general cleanliness (non-industrial) and cleaning up and packing away of activities.*

In respect of teachers, no specific mention of cleaning is mentioned but it is covered by the descriptors:

- *Ensure the service's policies and procedures are adhered to; and*
- *Ensure a safe environment is maintained at all times.*

What can we do?

If you believe that you've been directed to undertake work that is excessive or unreasonable and outside of your contracted roles and responsibilities, raise this with your employer. Any request made

of you to undertake additional or different duties should align with expert health advice, with your industrial entitlements under the relevant agreement or award, and the OHS Act. The AEU can support members in raising these matters.

If you are undertaking excessive cleaning at your own initiative, perhaps it is time to reflect on the expert advice and requirements, and whether this additional workload is necessary and sustainable.

Early childhood teachers and educators are well-experienced at “papering over” the gaps and inadequacies in our system. Many services simply don’t have the resources to support the employment of contract cleaners to carry out this type of daily cleaning. But this is not a burden for the profession to bear. Services and educators need appropriate support to manage the consequences of this pandemic, including cleaning. The AEU notes that schools have been supported with an additional \$45 million dollars from the state government for additional daily cleaning. The AEU will continue to call on the government and the Department of Education and Training to offer an appropriate level of support to early childhood services.

Resources

Statement from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee about COVID-19 in children and early childhood and learning centres. 6 April 2020: <https://www.health.gov.au/news/australian-health-protection-principal-committee-ahppc-coronavirus-covid-19-statement-on-3-april-2020>

NHMRC Staying Healthy guidelines

<https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/reports/clinical%20guidelines/ch55-staying-healthy.pdf>.

DET Coronavirus (COVID-19) advice for early childhood services

<https://education.vic.gov.au/childhood/Pages/coronavirus-advice-early-childhood.aspx>

Victorian Early Childhood Teachers and Educators Agreement 2016

<https://www.fwc.gov.au/documents/documents/agreements/fwa/ae419502.pdf>

Early Education Employees Agreement 2016

<https://www.fwc.gov.au/documents/documents/agreements/fwa/ae418644.pdf>