

**Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Department of Education and Skills**

**Student placements in Early Learning and Care settings
Covid-19 guidelines and protocols for course providers and Early Learning and Care settings**

Introduction

This note sets out on behalf of the two Departments guidelines, principles and protocols for educational course providers and Early Learning and Care providers to follow in respect of student placements in Early Learning and Care settings in the context of the Covid-19 situation and public health guidance.

This note has been prepared having regard to public health advice, and following consultations with representatives of Early Learning and Care providers and of educational course providers.

While the primary concern of this note relates to supervised practice placements in Early Learning and Care settings for students on courses leading to relevant qualifications, it is applicable to any situation in which a student might be placed in an Early Learning and Care setting.

Students arriving from abroad must follow the Government guidelines in relation to travel. Further information can be found at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/75d92-covid-19-travel-advice/>.

It is also noted that students may engage in placements in locations other than Early Learning and Care settings (e.g. schools, offices or other workplaces). Such placements should be managed by reference to the public health advice and the health and safety procedures that are in place for those locations and settings, and educational course providers should bear in mind that the procedures and protocols for other workplaces may not necessarily be the same as those applying to Early Learning and Care settings.

Key principles

This guidance recognises the following key principles:

- Student placements are critical in the professional formation of practitioners, and Early Learning and Care providers welcome students, who may enrich the programme of care. Student placements should therefore be enabled as far as possible even in the current context, consistent with public health advice;
- Early Learning and Care settings are generally willing to facilitate student placements, provided adjustments are made as set out below in this note;
- Student placement should be carried out and managed in a way that maximises safety and minimises the risk of spreading Covid-19;
- The advice of the public health authorities should be followed at all times;

- Student placement should be managed collaboratively between Early Learning and Care settings, course providers and students, though it is recognised that management in Early Learning and Care settings are best placed to make judgements and decisions about health and safety in their own settings.

Placement practices

Below are the principles and practices for supervised practice placements during the academic year 2020-21, in the context of the Covid-19 public health situation:

1. As a general principle, there should be no student placements in the initial stages of reopening, until January 2021. However, some Early Learning and Care providers might be able to accommodate placements before January 2021. Such placements are allowable, subject to agreement of all the parties involved – the Early Learning and Care setting, the course provider, and the student.
2. Student placements should be in blocks, rather than part-week in the setting and part-week in the education institution, so that students limit contact with others during the course of the placement. Some Early Learning and Care providers might be able to accommodate placements that are part-week in the setting and part-week in the education institution. In those circumstances such placements are allowable, subject to agreement of all the parties involved - the Early Learning and Care setting, the course provider, and the student.
3. Students should be placed with one play pod for a block of time, rather than moving between play pods, to minimise cross-contact between different groups of children. To minimise the risk of cross-infection, there should, as far as possible, be a gap of at least two days (which may be a weekend) between the placement of students in different play pods or settings. The gap may be longer than 2 days if the setting so decides.
4. It may be necessary for students to have more than one placement in order to gain placement experience with for example different age groups.
5. Students should receive training in infection prevention and control before beginning placements: both general training and training specific to the setting they will be placed with. Course providers should be responsible for Covid-19 training, although it is recognised that Early Learning and Care settings will need to offer advice and assistance in relation to elements of training that are setting-specific. Course providers should require students to sign up to adhere to codes of conduct regarding Covid-19, and should set out for students the course of action to be taken in the event of non-adherence to codes of conduct.
6. This guidance does not specify the general training that should take place, and it is a matter for course providers to put that in place. However, the following resources should be of assistance to course providers in deciding on appropriate training for students:

HPSC Covid-19 childcare settings guidance

[Childcare Guidance - Health Protection Surveillance Centre](#)

Dept of Children Principles underpinning practice in Early Learning and Care during Covid-19

<https://first5.gov.ie/userfiles/files/download/f4bd3ef77da6da58.pdf>

Tusla EY Inspectorate – Infection Control training

<https://first5.gov.ie/userfiles/files/download/a799e4398276c832.pdf>

Dept of Children FAQs for practitioners on reopening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare settings -

<https://first5.gov.ie/userfiles/files/download/b7c4c1d91a3ece65.pdf>

HPSC/Dept Children webinar on infection prevention and control -

<https://www.hpsc.ie/a->

[z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/webinarresourcesforipc/](https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/webinarresourcesforipc/)

Course providers and Early Learning and care settings are also advised to check

<https://first5.gov.ie/practitioners/reopening> for up-to-date information.

7. Course providers should ensure that students keep records of instances where they have been in close contact with other individuals, and should advise students to minimise non-essential close contacts while on placement. Students and course providers should be aware the Early Learning and Care providers will also be keeping records of contacts in their settings, and that these records will include students on placement.
8. It is expected that adjustment will be needed to how students are assessed, as it will be difficult if not impossible to facilitate course tutors spending time in Early Learning and Care settings. This guidance note does not of itself prevent course tutors accessing settings. However, it is understood that this will be difficult to achieve, may only be allowed if it is in line with the prevailing public health advice, and in any case may only be permitted at the sole discretion of Early Learning and Care setting management.
9. It is a matter for course providers to determine best approaches to assessment in accordance with appropriate academic standards, regulations of the course providers themselves, and regulations and standards set by, for example, QQI, or the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines published by the two Departments. Course providers should be conscious of not disadvantaging students in terms of assessment, particularly if some students go out on block placements while others complete placement as they work in the settings where they are employed. Because the focus of this guidance is on public health considerations in settings, this note does not specify any measures that should be taken by course providers, though the Departments understand that course providers have been active in putting appropriate measures in place.

10. Adjustment will be needed to feedback sessions for students, which usually take place on the premises immediately following visits. This format will be difficult if not impossible to facilitate in the 2020/21 academic year. This note does not set out what adjustments should be made, as these are a matter for course providers, though the Departments understand that course providers are actively developing alternative feedback methods using, for example, online and video communications.
11. Because circumstances in a location or an Early Learning and Care setting can change quickly, it is recognised that an Early Learning and Care setting management may have to cancel or suspend a placement arrangement at short notice for reasons relating to public health and safety. Course providers and students should co-operate with reasonable decisions of this nature made by Early Learning and Care setting management. Early Learning and Care setting management should only take such a course of action where it is necessary for public health reasons, and should as far as is practicable give the affected students and course provider as much notice as possible.
12. In accordance with paragraph 12 above, course providers are expected to have contingency plans in place so as to minimise disruption for students and for their own academic systems and procedures.

Review and amendment

It is acknowledged that the public health situation is evolving and can change quite quickly, and that this guidance is subject to ongoing review and amendment. The operation of student placements should be kept under review by Early Learning and Care provider representatives, educational course providers and the two Departments. Where the Departments propose to review or amend this guidance, this will be done as far as possible having regard to experience of the operation of student placements and the prevailing public health advice, and will be done in consultation with representatives of Early Learning and Care providers and of educational course providers.

Queries

Early Learning and Care providers should direct queries about the operation of these guidelines to their local City/County Childcare Committee.

Educational course providers should direct queries about the operation of these guidelines in writing by email to the Early Years Education Policy Unit of the Department of Education and Skills, email address earlychildhood@education.gov.ie.

Early Years Education Policy Unit
Department of Education and Skills

Early Years Quality Unit
Department of Children and Youth Affairs

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