

From the Chief Medical Officer



Castle Buildings

Stormont Estate

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Dear Parent/Carer

As parents and carers I appreciate that some of you will be worried and possibly anxious about sending your children to childcare. Let me reassure you this concern is natural and wholly expected given the last number of months. It has most certainly been a challenging year for everyone so far. Now that childcare is available to all parents I am writing to provide you with some advice if a child or young person in your care develops symptoms of a common cold or other similar infections during the current pandemic.

The decision to fully reopen childcare settings and schools was not taken lightly. We know that there is clear evidence that the great majority of children have mild symptoms or none and make a full recovery. We have considered the scientific and medical evidence alongside the negative impact that closures were having on the health and wellbeing of our children and the capacity of parents to return to work. The broad evidence indicates that child-to-child and child-to-adult transmission of COVID-19 in childcare settings is not common. However we must all be aware that COVID-19 is still active in our communities. It has not gone away and parents, children and indeed wider society need to stay vigilant and not become complacent. Everyone has a role to play in ensuring that hygiene, social distancing and all other public health measures continue to be followed. In order to ensure children and young people can continue to benefit from positive early years experiences, it is important to be clear about how COVID-19 symptoms differ from those of other infections that we usually see circulating at this time of the year. All of us – including parents and the wider school community – must remain vigilant for the symptoms of COVID-19, and understand what actions are required should someone develop symptoms either at home or in the childcare setting. If your child or anyone in your household develops any of the following symptoms of COVID-19 they should stay home and arrange to get tested as soon as possible:

- A new, continuous cough – this means coughing a lot for more than an hour, or alternatively 3 or more coughing episodes in 24 hours; or

- A high temperature/fever – this means you feel hot to touch on your chest or back (you do not need to measure your temperature); or
- A loss of or change in sense of smell or taste.

Details on how to book a test can be found [here](#).

I would emphasise that if an individual does not have any of the stated symptoms, they do not require a test. Childcare providers should not ask parents to book a COVID-19 test unless their child has one or more of the symptoms above. We are currently experiencing significant demand on our testing programme, it is important that testing is reserved for people who have symptoms of COVID-19 and people who have been advised by our contact tracing or other health services to get tested.

I recognise that at this time of year, it is common for colds and similar viral infections to circulate. In many cases, children will be well enough to attend childcare with little or no interruption. In other cases where they may have a heavy cold they may need to take time off to recover. There is no need to contact your General Practitioner or attend other health services unless you are concerned about you child or would normally attend for other health reasons.

But they do not need tested for Covid-19 and do not need to self-isolate. There have been reports recently that ‘tummy bugs’ may be a symptom of COVID-19 in children and young people. Whilst recent research provides useful early findings, there needs to be a wider discussion at a UK wide level about this. You therefore do not currently need to get your child tested.

That said, where a child displays gastrointestinal symptoms, such as vomiting or diarrhoea, they should not attend childcare until after their symptoms have resolved for at least 2 days (this means they should not have been sick or had diarrhoea for at least 2 days before they return to childcare).

The Department of Health has produced advice for childcare providers and parents, which is available at: <https://www.familysupportni.gov.uk/News/index/178>, advising what you should do if your child or anyone you live with has any symptoms of COVID-19. On the same website you will find the latest copies of Department of Health guidance for childcare providers, intended to ensure childcare is provided as safely as possible. I would urge you to familiarise yourself with that guidance, and if you have any queries please discuss them with your childcare provider or local HSC Trust Early Years Team. Trust Early Years Teams can be contacted on the following numbers:

Belfast Trust: 028 9504 2811
South Eastern Trust: 028 4451 3807
Southern Trust: 028 3756 4020
Western Trust: 028 7132 0950
Northern Trust: 028 2766 1340

We can expect that there will be cases of COVID-19 among children and young people in the weeks ahead. When this happens, and when necessary our teams in

the Public Health Agency (PHA) will respond and will work closely with childcare providers involved to ensure that all necessary measures are taken to protect your child, other children and staff.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all. Parents and carers across Northern Ireland have made monumental efforts to keep themselves, their families and the wider community safe over the past few months – and I thank you all for your ongoing vigilance in this regard. I have no doubt that with your continued support we can help ensure that childcare remains a safe place for all our children and young people.

Together we can fight this virus. Together we can ensure the risk of COVID-19 is minimised and we can continue to support our children's learning development and wellbeing.

Yours sincerely



DR MICHAEL McBRIDE
Chief Medical Officer