Preparing for the COVID-19 Pandemic in Child Care Programs

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness caused by a novel (new) virus. There is currently no vaccine to protect against COVID-19. At this point, the best way to prevent infection is to avoid being exposed to the virus that causes it. Stopping the spread of the virus is the best way to keep people healthy.

Coronavirus

COVID-19 is caused by a new strain of the coronavirus. A coronavirus is a common virus that can cause cold-like symptoms. In fact, you have probably had a coronavirus infection in the past and thought it was a common cold. COVID-19 seems to affect children at lower rates than adults. While some children and infants have been sick with COVID-19, adults make up most of the known cases. Children with confirmed COVID-19 usually have mild cold-like symptoms, such as fever, runny nose, and cough. High-risk populations for COVID-19 include older adults, people with chronic health conditions, and people with weakened immune systems.

Pandemics

A pandemic occurs when a new virus spreads rapidly around the world. Since COVID-19 is a new coronavirus, people have no immunity to it, and there is no vaccine to protect us at this time. New viruses behave differently – some cause only minor illness, and others may cause very serious illness. Health officials closely monitor illnesses caused by new viruses because they can cause a pandemic.

Preparing for Pandemics

Child care programs, schools, and large public gatherings provide opportunities to spread viruses that cause illness. In the event of a pandemic, exclusion policies for ill children, staff members, and those who have ill family members become stricter. Some schools and child care programs may be closed by local public health officials to decrease the risk of spreading the illness. Parents may not be able to work if they have to care for an ill child or another family member, or if they are ill themselves. Parents may also miss work when schools and child care centers are forced to close. A pandemic could seriously impact the health and well-being of staff and families in your program.

Steps to Prepare for a Pandemic:

Form a task force. Plan for how your program will deal with a pandemic. The task force might include staff members, a school district representative, a health professional, the program director, the licensing analyst, and a parent or guardian.

Identify reliable sources of information. Watch for public health announcements about the pandemic including: school closings, cancellations, updates, and guidance to prevent the spread. Parents and staff may be fearful and stressed, so make sure the information you provide is correct and not based on rumor. Try to provide materials in the native languages of your families. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides reliable and up-to-date information in many languages. www.cdc.gov

Contact your local public health department. Learn about your local community's plan for a pandemic. Determine who in your area will have the authority to close child care programs if there is a pandemic emergency. Decide how you will contact families and staff in the event of school or child care program closure. Communicate this information to families and staff.

Educate children, staff and families in your program about preventive health practices. Hand washing (see the CCHP poster Wash Your Hands Properly), covering your cough and sneeze, coughing into your sleeve, getting a yearly flu vaccination, and staying home when sick are topics to reinforce with children, families, and staff on a regular basis. Provide information about common-sense measures to stay healthy such as serving healthy foods and beverages, and getting regular exercise and plenty of rest.

Follow policies and procedures for routine cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfecting. (See the CCHP publication, Safe and Effective Cleaning, Sanitizing, and Disinfecting). Choose sanitizing and disinfecting products with EPA registration numbers, and always use products according to label directions. Pay special attention to high-touch surfaces like door knobs, cabinet handles, and light switches.

Work with families. Encourage families to have a backup plan for child care if your program is required to close or if their child is ill. Talk about ideas like working from home, parents joining efforts to care for well children in small groups in their homes or asking well neighbors or extended family members to provide temporary child care. Give families ideas for learning activities for young children while they are home.

Check supplies for hygiene products. Make sure you have enough soap, paper towels, tissues, cleaning, sanitizing and disinfecting products, and hand sanitizer to help control the spread of infection.

Plan for staff absences. Consider absences for child care staff, custodial services, waste management, food service, and transportation. If your program provides meals, keep a back-up supply of non-perishable and canned foods. Trash collection may be slowed or interrupted, so be prepared for uncollected garbage. Bathrooms may need to be cleaned by non-custodial staff members. Determine who will be in charge if the director is absent due to illness or caring for a family member who is ill.

Responding to Illness

Report illness. Ask families to inform your program if a child or a family member is ill. If there are COVID-19 cases in the program, assure families that you will maintain confidentiality. Keep accurate records of when and why children and staff are absent. Report illnesses to local public health officials if indicated. Include the symptoms that have been reported such as coughing, fever, body aches, diarrhea, etc. Anyone who is ill should stay home until fever free for at

least 24 hours (without the use of fever-reducing medications) and feels well enough to participate in activities in the program.

What if a child or staff member becomes ill while at your program? Have a plan for keeping the child away from the other children such as assigning a sick room with designated staff or placing a cot away from other children in the classroom where staff can see the child. Staff with symptoms of illness must stay home. If they become sick while at the program, they must go home.

Communicate with your staff. Discuss the extent of illness in your program and any changes that may take place in the usual routine or staff assignments.

Licensing waivers. Certain child care licensing regulations may be waived when the Governor declares a State of Emergency. Contact your Regional Licensing Office for information about applying for an emergency licensing waiver.

Recovering from a Pandemic

Provide resources and support. Families who have experienced losses as a result of a pandemic will need your support. Families may have loss of income, long-term health effects, or even experience deaths among friends and family. Understand that the pandemic will be a stressful event for many people.

Adjust your program activities. Be sensitive to the energy level of staff and children. Provide rest time and quiet areas for children and staff as needed.

Assist families. Families may need long-term support or intervention. Refer them to the appropriate community services.

The California Childcare Health Program (CCHP) has many educational materials to help prevent the spread of disease. Visit the CCHP website at cchp.ucsf.edu

References and Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html

California Department of Public Health, COCID-19 Updates https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Guidance.aspx

Pandemic Flu Checklist for Child Care Agencies and Pre- schools in California updated March 2020 available at https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/documents/preschpflucheck.pdf

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