**COVID-19 guidance for licensed early learning services and kōhanga reo at Alert Level 2**

**Updated 7 September 2021**

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# Introduction

Public Health authorities have advised that all early learning services (including Playcentres) and kōhanga reo can open at Alert Level 2 if appropriate public health measures are put in place.

At Alert Level 2 it is okay to leave home, but we need to do so in a safe and conscientious way. The two key public health principles that support our approach at Alert Level 2 are:

* first to minimise the risk of someone contracting COVID-19, and
* second to ensure we can identify and contact anyone who has been in close contact with a person if someone connected to an early learning service or kōhanga reo tests positive for COVID-19.

In an early learning environment, it is not practical to have a physical distance between children and adults. Young children require a lot of physical support and it is not possible to explain or maintain a physical distance between young children. This means good hygiene practices are even more important.

It is also important that parents and caregivers fully support this approach by doing their bit – keeping children home if they are unwell and seeking medical advice about whether a child may need to be tested; and ensuring good hygiene practices at all times.

This guidance has been developed to support licensed early learning services and kōhanga reo to operate during Alert Level 2. It is an iterative document that will be updated as we learn and understand more about COVID-19 under Alert Level 2. We suggest you add the following links to your favourites and check them regularly:

* [Alert Levels and updates | Unite against COVID-19 (covid19.govt.nz)](https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-levels-and-updates/)
* <https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-system/alert-level-2/#education>
* <http://www.education.govt.nz/covid-19/advice-for-early-learning-services/>
* <https://www.education.govt.nz/early-childhood/how-the-ministry-works/early-learning-bulletin/>

This guidance does not include information on funding for licensed early learning services and kōhanga reo. Funding information is published on our website and can be accessed on the following link: [Frequently Asked Questions – Education in New Zealand](https://www.education.govt.nz/covid-19/advice-for-early-learning-services/frequently-asked-questions/#Funding)

This guidance builds on the principles of your existing plans for dealing with emergencies and infectious illness and aligns to licensing standards and criteria wherever possible.

Each early learning service or kōhanga reo has an obligation to eliminate health and safety risks where possible. Where this is not possible you must substitute or provide the highest level control possible. To that end, there is an expectation that you look to maintain, or create new practices that meet or exceed the public health measures.

**This guidance applies to all licensed early learning services**

We acknowledge this guidance does not reflect differences in philosophy and learning settings which exist across the sector; however, the public health measures **must** be met by all services and kōhanga reo that are open under Alert Level 2.

As this guidance applies to all licensed early learning settings our language for referring to teachers, educators, kaiako, or adults required to meet ratio requirements has been standardised to staff, adults or educators, so think about how the guidance applies to your setting. Early learning service or service means all licensed early learning settings including playcentres, kindergartens, kōhanga reo, education and care centres, and home-based services.

Certificated playgroups can also operate under Alert Level 2. As they operate under separate regulations we have developed separate guidance to support certificated playgroups to open under Alert Level 2.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact your regional Ministry office.

# Public health measures across all alert levels[[1]](#footnote-2) for early learning services and kōhanga reo

**If adults and children are sick, they should stay home.**

If they have cold, flu or COVID-19 symptoms phone Healthline on 0800 358 5453 or their GP.

Information about the COVID-19 symptoms can be found here: [COVID-19 symptoms | Unite against COVID-19 (covid19.govt.nz)](https://covid19.govt.nz/health-and-wellbeing/about-covid-19/covid-19-symptoms/)

**Wash and dry hands, cough into elbow, don’t touch your face**

You should actively encourage staff and children to regularly wash their hands, including on arrival to the service, after going to the toilet, and before and after meals. The Ministry of Health advises handwashing for at least 20 seconds, and drying hands thoroughly afterwards. Regular routines such as washing hands after blowing noses, toileting or changing nappies should continue to be emphasised.

Staff and educators should direct and supervise hand washing at a minimum of before and after eating food, playing outside and going to the toilet, either through washing hands with soap and water, or use of hand sanitiser according to need. Children who are too young to wash their own hands will need to have this done for them regularly, including after having their nappy changed.

Hand sanitiser is not required at Alert Level 2. But if available, staff must supervise its location and use.

<https://covid19.govt.nz/covid-19/how-were-uniting/cough-or-sneeze-into-your-elbow/>

**If your service is connected to a confirmed or probable case, staff or children and whānau at your service may be required to self-isolate or go into managed isolation/quarantine.**

If this is the case public health officials will advise you what you need to do – [Ministry of Health information for self-isolation](https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-novel-coronavirus-health-advice-general-public/covid-19-self-isolation-close-contacts) If your service is required to close you will be directed to do so by the Medical Officer of Health. Public health officials will support you with what to do. While the service is closed distance learning can still take place. If you become aware of a case associated with your early learning service and haven’t received that notification from public health authorities, please contact your local public health unit or your local Ministry of Education contact for information and support:

[Public health unit contacts](https://www.health.govt.nz/new-zealand-health-system/key-health-sector-organisations-and-people/public-health-units/public-health-unit-contacts)

[Regional Ministry contacts](http://education.govt.nz/our-work/contact-us/regional-ministry-contacts/)

## General cleaning information following a suspected, probable or confirmed case

See [here](https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-novel-coronavirus-information-specific-audiences/general-cleaning-information-following-suspected-probable-or-confirmed-case-covid-19) for general cleaning principles.

**Face coverings are not required in early learning services.**

Face coverings are **not** required in early learning services and early learning services are **not expected** to provide face coverings for children or staff. It remains an option for those individuals and a decision for the individuals and parents/caregivers.

**Indoor temperature must be a minimum of 18 degrees Celsius.**

You **must** maintain a minimum temperature of 18 degrees during operating hours at Alert Level 2 as per the licensing criteria.

You should ensure rooms, particularly those where children are sleeping, are well ventilated to keep the temperature at a comfortable level whilst allowing adequate airflow. This does not mean windows and doors need to be kept constantly open particularly when outdoor temperatures are cold. Opening windows and/or doors periodically throughout the day or at the end of each day to allow fresh air to flow should be sufficient.

**Early Learning services are required to display QR code posters for the NZ COVID Tracer App and have means for providing contact tracing for those not able to use the QR code.**

The mandatory record keeping rule does not apply to early learning services because services are already required through licensing criteria to keep records of people on site.

You already need to maintain a visitor book (or the equivalent), keep attendance records and staff rosters. These can be used for contact tracing for those who cannot use the QR code posters.

The details must include the date, time, name of any person on-site (staff, child, parent/caregiver, whānau member or any visitor). Parents or caregivers who enter the premises and need to sign in, do not need to provide contact details if you hold up to date contact records.

Examples of visitors:

* Parents/caregivers or whānau member that enter the premises (i.e. picking up or dropping off a child).
* Tradespeople completing repairs in the premises.
* Education support workers working with children with learning support needs.

You should consider limiting visitors inside the premises where possible to facilitate physical distancing between adults.

## Physical distancing between children and staff is not required. Adults should where practicable use 1m as a guide between themselves and other adults.

## Young children require a lot of physical support and it is not possible to explain or maintain a physical distance between young children given the age of the children and set up of services. There does not need to be a measurable physical distance between children or children and staff. This means good hygiene practices and records for contact tracing purposes are even more important

Adults should, where practicable, use 1m as a guide between themselves and other adults. For example in the staff room, you should consider how the staff room is set up and used to maintain physical distance where possible.

# Public health measures for licensed early learning services and kōhanga reo at Alert Level 2

Some measures are absolute requirements and are indicated with a ‘**must’** in the text below. We have also included recommendations and best practice that you should consider when determining how your service will operate under Alert Level 2**.**

## Children and staff who are at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 stay home wherever possible.

Children can continue to be supported through distance learning if they stay home.

Staff at higher-risk of severe illness from COVID-19 (for example, older people and those with underlying medical conditions, especially if not well-controlled) are able to work, but should take additional precautions when leaving home.

At risk people who have been fully vaccinated should feel safe to go out and about at Alert Level 2.

Staff and employers should discuss and agree whether additional control measures can be put in place, whether these workers can work from home, or if not, what leave and pay arrangements will apply.

Staff to work with their GP or specialist if they need help understanding their own level of risk and how best to stay healthy.

## [Go to COVID19.govt.nz for further information](https://covid19.govt.nz/health-and-wellbeing/about-covid-19/people-at-higher-risk-of-severe-illness-from-covid-19/)

## The minimum licensed indoor space for children is 2.5 sqm per child. Outdoor requirement of 5 sqm per child is also as specified in the regulations.

You will be able to operate at your normal enrolment levels as long as you can meet public health measures and regulated licensing requirements, including adult:child ratios.

## Parents/caregivers are asked to keep any sick children at home. If a sick child comes to the service or kōhanga reo, send them home.

You need to communicate clearly with parents/caregivers that children **must** not attend the service if they are sick. If parents/caregivers or whānau are sick, they **must** not enter the premises when dropping off children. It is recommended parents/caregivers seek health advice about children attending early learning services when someone in the household is unwell with a potentially infectious illness. You could consider including this information as part of an addendum to the existing enrolment agreement that parents or caregivers agree to and sign. This could be one page setting out the terms of enrolment under Alert Level 2.

Any child that becomes unwell while at the service **must** be immediately isolated and arrangements made for them to be collected by their parents or caregivers. Parents/caregivers should seek medical advice about whether a child may need to be tested.

If anyone at your service has symptoms of a respiratory illness, you should call Healthline ([0800 358 5453](tel:08003585453)) for advice.

There is no requirement to notify your community that either a child or staff member is unwell or has been tested for COVID-19. There are also privacy concerns to take into account. If you are notified of a positive test result, public health authorities and the Ministry will support you with messaging to your community.

For more information about COVID-19 symptoms please refer to the website below:

[COVID-19 symptoms | Unite against COVID-19 (covid19.govt.nz)](https://covid19.govt.nz/health-and-wellbeing/about-covid-19/covid-19-symptoms/)

## Ensure that children have separate food containers and do not give and take food to and from each other. Food can be supplied in accordance with public health guidance.

You **must** ensure there is no sharing of food and drink between children, for example from one child’s plate to another. This includes birthday parties at the service, and candles should not be used.

You **must** ensure drink bottles, baby bottles, crockery and cutlery are not shared between children, meaning that they are cleaned between different children using them.

If continuing to provide food prepared on the premises, food handlers **must** adhere to standard good hygiene practices. Shared platters are not appropriate, but individual portions could be distributed to children.

Adults **must** follow the same principles and ensure they are not sharing food, crockery or cutlery.

## All toys and resources can be used

All toys and resources can be used in Alert Level 2 if all children are regularly washing their hands and are staying home if unwell.

This includes soft toys and dress-ups, playdough and finger paint.

You should consider your procedure for ensuring children wash their hands regularly.

Toys should be wiped down at the end of each day. Dress ups and other fabric items should be regularly laundered. Any item that has been in children’s mouths should be removed from the play space and thoroughly cleaned.

## Outdoor play areas and equipment including sandpits can be used but children must wash their hands after use.

You should consider your procedure for ensuring children wash their hands after playing outside.

## Disinfect and clean all surfaces daily.

You **must** ensure you have appropriate cleaning supplies and these are stored safely out of reach of children.

You **must** ensure thorough cleaning of all surfaces takes place at the end of each operating day as a minimum. In addition sleep furniture needs to the wiped down daily.

Make sure the specific instructions are followed for the disinfectant being used (e.g. spray and leave on surfaces for 30 seconds before wiping down).

Ensure the availability of appropriate cleaning supplies (e.g. disinfectant and cloths) for cleaning of high-touch surfaces. It is recommended that cleaning cloths are disposable.

You should develop a routine to disinfect and clean high touch surfaces (e.g. play gyms, tables, hard-backed chairs, doorknobs, light switches, remotes, handles, desks, toilets, sinks) regularly throughout the day. In a space with crawling infants, this will include table legs and items a child uses to pull themselves up to a standing position.

There is information about cleaning surfaces on the [COVID19.govt.nz](https://covid19.govt.nz/covid-19/how-were-uniting/cleaning-surfaces/) website.

## Gatherings at your premises

Educational facilities are not considered gatherings under the COVID-19 alert level framework. This means there are no restrictions on numbers of people indoors or outside during the operating hours for early learning services other than what other public health or health and safety measures require, and usual licensing and building requirements apply.

The exception is where the early learning service hosts events. Gathering rules will apply and in Alert Level 2 you need to consider the following as gatherings:

* Meetings, hui, events, excursions, and celebrations
* On-site training and professional development
* Use of site/premise by another group including hiring out in the evenings and during the weekend e.g. for birthday parties.

These gatherings can continue but public health measures **must** be met.

For more information about gatherings in Alert Level 2 please refer to the website below:

[Alert Level 2 | Unite against COVID-19 (covid19.govt.nz)](https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-levels-and-updates/alert-level-2/#gatherings-and-events)

# Requirements under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015

To meet your requirements under the Health and Safety Act 2015 during Alert Level 2 you must manage risks and protect staff, children and young people. How you will do this needs to be detailed in your COVID-19 safety plan.

The expectation of the government, community, staff and regulators is that services will meet the highest possible standards and that management and individual staff actively manage adherence to the safety measures and expectations. It is expected that all involved ensure they are looking out for the health and safety of their colleagues and community, while at work. It is crucial that all managers are seen to be leaders in this work.

Workplaces are obliged to eliminate transmission risks where possible and where not, to substitute work practices or provide as high a level of control as possible. A simple example is where possible, propping or wedging a door open rather than focusing on wiping the handles regularly. It is expected that you maintain or create new practices that meet or exceed the public health requirements as they are updated.

Implementing or maintaining infectious disease controls remains vital for the health and safety of workers and other people.

All early learning services need to think about how to work differently to minimise the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

The key controls for work and workplaces are:

* ensure people who are sick or who have COVID-19 symptoms stay away from your service
* maintain physical distancing (in early learning services this means physical distancing between adults)
* enable good hygiene practices
* keep track of all people that enter your service

As you’re thinking about what working at Alert Level 2 means for how you operate, you need to consider how you’ll implement these infection controls.

It’s important that you discuss your approach to operating at Alert Level 2 with staff or their representatives. This means your staff will understand how you intend to manage work safely and what they need to do to help.

WorkSafe also recommend you document your Alert Level 2 approach so it can be shared with others, including parents, caregivers, whānau and wider community.

To ensure you are minimising the risk of COVID-19 appropriately, and that your early learning service can continue to operate within the public health measures, you need to consider the following questions:

* How will you ensure all staff are able to keep themselves safe from exposure to COVID-19?
* How will you gather information on your staff’s wellness to ensure they are safe and well to work?
* How will you operate your service in a way that keeps staff, children, and other people coming on-site safe from exposure to COVID-19?
* How will you manage an exposure or suspected exposure to COVID-19?
* How will you check to see if your work processes and risk controls are effective?
* How do any changes impact on the risks of the work you do?

This guidance has been designed to support you in this process.

# Operating your early learning service or kōhanga reo at Alert Level 2

## At Alert Level 2 all early learning services (including Playcentre) and kōhanga reo can be physically open. Distance learning is available for those unable to attend on site (e.g. where there are people self-isolating).

Early learning services are able to operate to their full licence numbers providing they can continue to meet public health measures. There are no requirements for bubbles at Alert Level 2.

You should continue to support children who are unable to attend your service (e.g. those that are self-isolating) through distance learning.

Children can return to their normal/previous attendance pattern including mixed service provision eg. playcentre on one day and a licensed early learning service on the other four days.

Home-based services can operate as normal, and educators can care for children from multiple families. Visiting Teachers (VTs) can visit educators and the children receiving education and care in person. Appropriate physical distancing and hygiene requirements should be maintained during these visits.

## Site preparation

A summary of key site requirements for operating under Alert Level 2 is available [here](https://assets.education.govt.nz/public/Documents/Early-Childhood/Covid-19/September-2021/Early-Learning-services-checklist-for-operating-at-Alert-Level-2.docx):

## Staffing

Staff at higher-risk of severe illness from COVID-19 (for example, older people and those with underlying medical conditions, especially if not well-controlled) are able to work, but should take additional precautions when leaving home.

At risk people who have been fully vaccinated should feel safe to go out and about at Alert Level 2.

Staff and employers should discuss and agree whether additional control measures can be put in place, whether these workers can work from home, or if not, what leave and pay arrangements will apply.

Staff to work with their GP or specialist if they need help understanding their own level of risk and how best to stay healthy.

[Go to COVID19.govt.nz for further information(external link)](https://covid19.govt.nz/health-and-wellbeing/about-covid-19/people-at-higher-risk-of-severe-illness-from-covid-19/)

Staff **must** stay at home if they:

are sick or unwell generally,

if they need to self-isolate as directed by public health authorities.

if they are caring for dependents who need to self-isolate as directed by public health authorities.

Staff who become unwell at the service **must** be sent home. You should have a process for managing this in terms of continued compliance with ratio requirements.

We recommend taking a health and safety risk-based approach to understand and investigate staff concerns in good faith, refer to the WorkSafe website for further information.

[Workers - Managing Health and Safety - WorkSafe website](https://worksafe.govt.nz/managing-health-and-safety/workers/)

You should develop and discuss your safety plan with staff.

You should involve staff in the development of the plan to help you assess risks and identify solutions. All staff should be familiar with the plan before you open.

Early learning services that are not able to operate within the parameters of the public health measures should remain closed. Please contact the Ministry of Education if this applies to your service so that we can assist you where possible.

## Learning Support

At Alert Level 2 learning support staff and independent early intervention providers are able to provide direct support to children and families/whānau across multiple sites and for those learning from home. Centre-based early intervention services will be open at Alert Level 2, while also providing remote support.

Education Support Workers (ESWs) can support children attending an early learning service during this time. They can work across multiple early learning services during Alert Level 2. Early learning services will need to work through the allocation of these resources across their sites in order to provide the required support to all the children with learning needs they have attending.

## Offering transport to and from service

If you transport children to and from your service think about how you can best manage this. The vehicle will need to be included as part of your daily cleaning routine during Alert Level 2. Physical distancing of 1m is encouraged between all adults involved in the pick-up/drop off. If parents/caregivers are putting their children into the van they should follow appropriate hygiene practices and minimise contact with other children already in the van. We recommend that you communicate any changes to your usual transport routine to parents/caregivers and whānau as soon as possible.

## Excursions

Excursions are possible during Alert Level 2 providing you can meet the physical distancing requirements under Alert Level 2, that children and staff must maintain a 2m distance from others outside the service.

# Ongoing compliance with ECE Regulations and Licensing Criteria at Alert Level 2

The ECE Regulations and Licensing Criteria set minimum standards and requirements to ensure the health, safety and well-being of children attending licensed early learning services.

At Alert Level 2, all early learning services must comply with all regulatory requirements including adult:child ratios and supervision by a Person Responsible at all times children are attending. The health, safety and well-being of children and staff should remain your primary consideration.

The Secretary for Education has been given powers to act to mitigate some practical effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on situations where there may be difficulties complying with regulatory requirements because of the restrictions in place over this time.  
  
The Secretary has exercised this power to allow a recently expired first aid certificate to be considered current/valid for the purposes of first aid requirements in the licensing criteria (HS25 for centre-based services and kōhanga reo; HS22 for home-based services).   
  
This extended recognition applies to first aid certificates that expired on or after 1 August 2021 and is in force for 3 months (1 December 2021).   
  
Service providers do not need to contact the Ministry for approval to access this exemption, however they must attest in writing to the current first aid knowledge of these staff and retain this documentation.   
  
For home-based services there is already leeway of 4 months for new educators to gain a first aid qualification if access to first aid training is limited due to circumstances beyond the service provider’s control. The service provider must also ensure that staff have knowledge of first aid and keep a record of the actions taken by the service provider.

# Ministry licensing activity at Alert Level 2

During Alert Level 2, Ministry licensing activity will resume, but in accordance with public health requirements. Where compliance with conditions on a provisional, probationary or suspended licence can be assessed through documentation, we will do this. Please contact your local Ministry office if you have any questions or concerns about your particular circumstances in respect of your licence.

Education Advisers will be able to undertake assessments of premises for new probationary licences, however these visits and our ability to progress these applications may be subject to some delay. It is important that we prioritise support for existing services to operate within the public health measures at this time.

Ministry staff will respond in person to serious incidents or complaints, including concerns regarding implementation of the public health measures in early learning services.

# Providing information and advice for your community

Use your usual channels of communication and methods for translating information and advice for your community. Translated information and advice about COVID-19 and Alert Level 2 is available here: [Translations | Unite against COVID-19 (covid19.govt.nz)](https://covid19.govt.nz/iwi-and-communities/translations/)

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)