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Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medical Services

Secretary, Ministry of Women and Child Affairs,
Secretary, Ministry of Education
Director – Child Secretariat

Guideline for prevention of COVID-19 spread in preschool settings
(22 May 2020)

As you know, with the reopening of the country after recent lock down due to COVID-19 epidemic, there is a possibility that Preschools will be resuming their functioning in coming months. It is important that all stakeholders (Preschool owners and managers, preschool teachers, supporting staff) are aware of the necessary precautions to reduce the risk of COVID transmission through preschools.

The annexed document contains health information and guidelines related to the prevention of children, staff and family members from acquiring the COVID -19 infection via preschools. Please be kind enough to share this guideline with the institutions and staff of your Ministry who are involved in preschool supervision and management.

Dr. Anil Jasinghe
Director General of Health Services

Copies:

Secretary/ Ministry of Health,
Additional Secretaries of Health,
All Deputy Director Generals,
Director/Maternal and Child Health,
Chief Epidemiologist
Director/Health Promotion Bureau,

Guideline for prevention of COVID-19 spread in preschool settings

(22 May 2020)

ABOUT COVID -19

COVID-19 is an infection caused by a virus called COVID-19, which is a member of the family of viruses called Corona viruses. Common cold, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) are also caused by Corona viruses. The present epidemic is due to a coronavirus named COVID-19, which is a new strain that has not been previously identified in humans.

Signs and symptoms of COVID-19

Fever, cough, difficulty in breathing, are the main symptoms and signs of COVID-19 infection. In addition, some patients may have aches and pains, sneezing, nasal congestion, sore throat and diarrhoea. These symptoms are usually mild and they can occur gradually. Most people (about 80%) recover from the disease without needing hospital treatment, while others require hospital admission. It takes around 2 to 14 days to appear these symptoms after getting exposed to the infection.

These signs and symptoms of COVID-19 infection are similar to those of common respiratory tract infections that are experienced by children and adults frequently. It may be difficult to differentiate COVID-19 infection from other respiratory tract infections. Hence, it is very important that all to be vigilant of early identification of these signs and symptoms and separate the affected personnel from others to prevent the spread of illness which may be potentially a COVID-19 infection.

Mode of transmission

COVID 19 infection can be directly acquired if a person is exposed to cough and/or sneeze of an infected person and there by inhale infected droplets or by touching mouth, nose and eyes after touching a surface or item contaminated with the virus. Three key preventive measures in preventing COVID-19 transmission are:

- i. Proper hand washing
- ii. Maintaining physical distancing of at least 1 meter between persons
- iii. Maintaining respiratory etiquette

CURRENT COUNTRY SITUATION

At present Sri Lanka reports over 1048 COVID-19 cases, where the spread seems to be limited to selected geographic clusters. Though there are signs of reasonable containment of the epidemic owing to the comprehensive preventive measures implemented, still there is a considerable risk of spreading the infection. Furthermore, there is a possibility that the infection may be continued on cluster basis, requiring implementation of preventive actions for a reasonable period of time.

Sri Lanka has nearly 600,000 children attending 19000 preschools. It is very important that the preschool managers, teachers and parents are made aware and guided on how to prevent the potential spread of the COVID-19 infection via preschools when they restart.

PREPAREDNESS

Upon the clearance to reopen preschool is given by the Government, the Provincial Preschool Authorities should decide the process of reopening, preferably through an advisory committee comprising of District Secretary, Provincial Director of Health Services (PDHS), Provincial Director of Education (PDE), Provincial Preschool Authorities, Regional Directors of Health services (RDHS), and other relevant officials. This decision should be taken after careful evaluation of the scenario including local situation and disease transmission patterns of COVID -19, preschool setting and ability to maintain COVID-19 prevention and control measures, need to revive the economic activities etc, carried out by health, education, police, tri-forces, social service, transport authorities and other key stakeholders. Re-opening of preschools should be done in a phased-out manner on incremental basis with caution.

PREVENTIVE ACTIONS

In order to prevent the potential spread of COVID-19 infection via preschools, observing the following actions are highly recommended.

Prevent contact with infected persons

1. Prevent persons (children, parents and staff) with suspected signs of respiratory tract illnesses: Fever, cough, difficulty in breathing, sneezing, nasal congestion, sore throat, body aches, diarrhea from attending the preschool. It is important that a designated person from the preschool enquire from the parent or care giver, whether the child or any family member are suffering from the above symptoms at present and if so ask them to return home until the these symptoms are cleared.
2. Educate parents in advance on the importance of not sending their children to the preschool if the child or an immediate family member is having above-mentioned signs of respiratory tract illness.
3. All preschools should communicate with the area Medical Officer of Health (MOH) to get advice regarding Infection prevention and Control (IPC).
4. Children who are on medical treatment for a long-term illness should obtain medical advice for suitability of attending preschool with a view to prevent those with potential immune compromising situations from contracting COVID 19 infection.
5. Allow children to attend preschool in clothing of their choice, without enforcing the requirement to wear a uniform with ties, bows etc.
6. Identify drop-off and pick-up points at the preschool to limit contact between parents/caregivers and the staff.

Ensure frequent hand washing

7. Provide adequate age appropriate hand washing stations and adequate supplies of soap, hand sanitizers at the entrance and inside the preschool.
8. Ensure all (staff and children) wash their hands properly with soap and water for 20 seconds and or disinfect hands using sanitizers in the following occasions. *(Please ensure that children use hand sanitizers under the supervision of staff and they are kept away while not being used).*

- i. Before entering the preschool
 - ii. Before and after play activities
 - iii. Before and after meals
 - iv. After using the toilet
 - v. In any other occasion, where the hands are potentially contaminated
- 9. Encourage hand washing by children and staff through display of educational messages and practice sessions.

Annexure I1 shows the proper procedure for hand washing.

Keep physical distancing

- 10. Maintain physical distancing of minimum 1 meter between children as far as possible.
- 11. Keep at least 1-meter distance between children's desks. Or place children 1 meter away while sitting at desks.
- 12. Reduce the number of children in the preschool by following alternate day classes &/or conducting classes for only more than 3-year-old children.
- 13. Avoid sharing items among children (reading material, stationary, coloring sticks, food, water bottles etc.).
- 14. Ask parents to send food and water for their children from home.
- 15. Avoid/reduce interactive or body contact activities (e.g. hugging, touching), close contact games etc.
- 16. Organize outdoor play activities while maintaining the recommended physical distance as above.

Implement personal protective measures

- 17. The staff should always wear masks.
- 18. Inform the staff to remind children to avoid touching face, eyes, mouth and nose at all times.
- 19. Ensure "respiratory etiquette" by the staff and children – Cover mouth, nose with a handkerchief, tissue or with the flexed elbow while turning the head to a side when coughing or sneezing. Dispose used handkerchiefs/ tissues immediately. (Tissues into a lined bin with a lid; preferably pedal operated)/ handkerchiefs into a polythene bag without touching and sent for cleaning at home.

Carry out regular cleaning and disinfecting activities

- 20. Provide adequate sanitary supplies, including soap / liquid soap, sanitizing liquids, tissues and garbage bins (pedal operated better).
- 21. Disinfect floors, furniture, play items (indoor, outdoor) before the preschool begins and after the closure. Frequently touched surfaces like door handles, wash basins, bathrooms, handrails, toys, should be wiped with 70% alcohol-based disinfectant before school starts, and once every 2 hours. Frequently opened doors can be kept open if safety concerns allow.
- 22. Use sodium hypochlorite at 0.5% (equivalent 5000ppm) for disinfecting the preschool floor areas.

23. Use separate tableware (eating and drinking utensils) per each child. Ensure proper cleaning of tableware.
24. Strengthen house cleaning and removal of rubbish regularly. Disinfect rubbish bins daily.
25. Disinfect the toilets frequently (before, at the middle and after the pre-school).

Miscellaneous actions

26. Ensure proper air circulation within the premises by keeping the windows open and discourage air conditioning.
27. Have posters and pictograms on respiratory etiquette, hand washing and physical distancing and display them clearly to children and parents.
28. Minimize events (sports meets/ fairs/ concerts/birthday parties etc..).
 - Use text messages, telephone, e-mails to communicate with parent groups or use a poster and display it outside the preschool – as daily notices.
 - If you want to have a meeting ensure wearing masks, proper hand washing before and after the meeting and ensure seats are arranged at 1-meter distance.

Provide psychosocial support

Some children may be distressed due to the changing environment and new activities related to the epidemic in the preschool or at home. Children may respond to stress in different ways. Common responses include having difficulty in sleeping, bedwetting, headache and stomachache, and being anxious, withdrawn, angry, clingy or afraid to be left alone.

29. Respond to children's reactions in a supportive way and explain to them in an age appropriate manner. Listen to their concerns and take time to comfort them and give them affection, reassure them that they are safe. (Annexure III)
30. Create opportunities for children to play and relax while maintaining physical distancing.

Responding to a suspected case:

If a child or staff becomes ill with COVID like illness while they are in the preschool

31. Plan on what to do in case if a child/staff member becomes ill with COVID like illness.
32. A separate area or room needs to be identified as an isolation room to keep a staff member or a child who has COVID -19 suspected symptoms, until they are sent home/for the treatment.
33. Separate the sick student/s or staff member from others – without creating stigma or panic among children and parents. Empathize with the parents and support them to get necessary medical advise
34. If the teacher becomes ill with an acute respiratory tract infection, the preschool will preferably be closed unless an alternative teacher is available.

35. Have all the contact numbers of Area MOH, PHM, PHI, Nearest hospital, contact numbers of the parents/caregivers.
36. Children /staff may need to be referred directly to a health facility, depending on the situation/context. Staff can call 1390 or 1999 hotline numbers for medical advice.

Preparing to re-open

37. Preschools should fulfil the criteria mentioned in the Annexure I before re-starting school activities.

Annexure I

Checklist for preschool administrators, teachers and staff

#	Item	Checked
1	Before preschool opens, verify the availability of the below a) Running water and soap are available for hand washing for children, staff and other staff (security, etc.)- at least 1 tap should be available for 50 children b) Adequate number of lined bins (ideally pedal operated lined bins) with a lid should be available at least one per class to put used tissues c) Posters / notices to be displayed to educate the children / staff on respiratory etiquette, hand washing and physical distancing d) Availability of a Preparedness plan on what to do if a student/ staff becomes ill during school hours e) Availability of adequate stock of masks to be used in a case of emergency f) Availability of masks, gloves for the cleaning staff g) Adequate amount of disinfections / bleach is available for disinfecting toilets/ classes/ frequently used places and surfaces	
2	Promote and demonstrate regular hand washing and positive hygiene behavior a) Availability of soap and safe water at hand washing stations b) Availability of hand sanitizer	
3	Clean and disinfect preschool buildings, classrooms and especially water and sanitation facilities at least twice a day, a) Availability of hypochlorite at 0.5% (equivalent 5000ppm) b) Availability of isopropyl alcohol for disinfecting persons and small items c) Availability of adequate numbers of face masks and gloves	
4	Adequate ventilation should be provided in the classroom by opening windows No air conditioning	
5	A separate area or room identified as an isolation room to keep a staff member or a child who has COVID -19 suspected symptoms, until sending for treatment.	
6	A method to ensure daily safe disposal of trash is available	
7	Availability of a contact list of area MOH office, Local hospitals, area PHI and parent contact details	

Annexure I1: How to wash hands properly



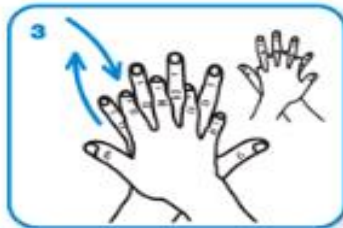
Wet hands with water



apply enough soap to cover all hand surfaces.



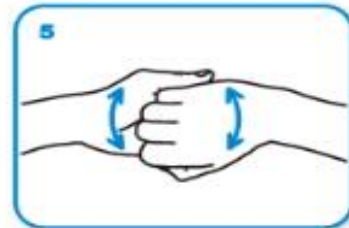
Rub hands palm to palm



right palm over left dorsum
with interlaced fingers
and vice versa



palm to palm with fingers
interlaced



backs of fingers to opposing
palms with fingers interlocked



rotational rubbing of left thumb
clasped in right palm
and vice versa



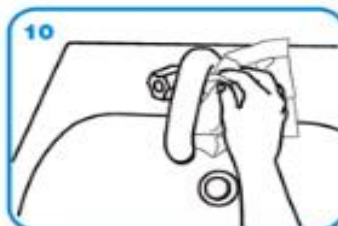
rotational rubbing, backwards
and forwards with clasped
fingers of right hand in left
palm and vice versa.



Rinse hands with water



dry thoroughly with a single
use towel



use towel to turn off faucet



...and your hands are safe.

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Annexure III: Age-specific health education – Pre Schools

Below are suggestions on how to engage Preschool children on preventing and controlling the spread of COVID-19 and other viruses.

- Focus on good health behaviors, such as covering coughs and sneezes with the elbow and washing hands frequently.
- Sing a song while washing hands to practice the recommended 20 second duration. - Children can “practice” washing their hands with hand sanitizer.
- Develop a way to track hand washing and reward for frequent/timely hand washing
- Use puppets or dolls to demonstrate symptoms (sneezing, coughing, fever) and what to do if they feel sick (i.e. their head hurts, their stomach hurts, they feel hot or extra tired) and how to comfort someone who is sick (cultivating empathy and safe caring behaviors)
- Have children sit further apart from one another (1-2 meters), have them practice stretching their arms out or ‘flap their wings’, they should keep enough space to not touch their friends.