Adapting Curriculum to Keep Children Well

At the time of this writing, early childhood programs are working to protect children, staff, and families from COVID-19. Below, you will find 10 possible strategies to adapt classroom play and learning practices to reduce the potential spread of illness.

**This is not a list of regulations.** Decisions in individual classrooms will be guided by the size and features of the space, overall group size, and abilities and needs of individual children within the group. The strategies in this article may assist programs as they make informed decisions.

Programs are also urged to read and follow all guidelines and regulations from the Arkansas Department of Human Services, the Arkansas Department of Education, and the Arkansas Health Department, along with any other city, state, or federal orders. **Guidance from those entities supersedes anything in this article.**

1. **Choose materials that can be washed and sanitized.**

   These include dress-up clothes and soft toys that can be cleaned in a washing machine, along with materials made of plastic, stainless steel, silicone, and other water-safe materials.

   If desired, wooden materials may be coated with non-toxic cutting board sealant. This makes them water-resistant so that they can be washed and sanitized. Paper materials – such as pattern cards - could be laminated or covered with clear contact paper.

   Reduce or eliminate the use of cardboard and other permeable materials. Although the risk of the virus spreading on these surfaces appears to be low, young children sometimes put materials in their mouths and often forget to cover sneezes and coughs. Washable classroom materials are far easier to clean, sanitize, and return to the play area as needed.

2. **Remove soiled materials right away.**

   Collect soiled materials and set them aside—out of reach of children—to be cleaned and sanitized as soon as possible. Designate a plastic dish tub or another sturdy container for this purpose and label it clearly: “Soiled Toys”. Wash hands thoroughly after collecting soiled toys, before handling any other classroom materials.
3. **Rotate, and wash materials often.**

Establish a routine for washing toys and materials. Work with other groups in your program to establish and follow a laundry schedule. The sturdiest toys and play objects can be placed in a mesh delicates laundry bag and washed in the top rack of a dishwasher. Other toys can be hand washed with warm, soapy water.

Many preschool children are eager to help with this task. Educators may even opt to create a toy cleaning play area on a classroom table! Children who choose to play here can scrub toys in bins with mild soap and water and spread them out on towels to dry. Important: This process should only be used with toys that are not visibly soiled. Mouthed/soiled toys should be cleaned by adults and should be sanitized, in addition to being washed.

Educators might choose to group materials to create alternate sets to rotate over time. For example, three sets of books might be rotated, with books swapped out at the end of each day. This means that each set of books is only used each third day. This is another task that preschool children may be eager to help with.

When sanitizers and disinfectants are used, read labels very carefully. Many products – including disinfectant sprays and wipes – should not come in contact with skin and can be poisonous if ingested and harmful to the eyes and lungs. The safest sanitizers are labeled as safe for use on food-service surfaces. Bleach-water solution can be used when mixed according to the manufacturer’s instructions. A stronger solution is not more effective and increases risks for children and adults.

4. **Replace materials that say, “Put me into your mouth.”**

Educators report that children seem to be compelled to put certain preschool materials on/in their mouths. There is a risk that saliva on these materials will transfer to other children’s hands. When these children touch their mouths, noses, or possibly eyes, germs can spread. Here are some examples of higher risk materials and possible replacements.

- In your dramatic play area, keep plates, pots, and other dishes, but remove play foods, drinking cups, and play utensils such as spoons and forks. To keep the play space from feeling sparse, find interesting additions like colanders, salt and pepper shakers, and laminated recipe cards.

- Remove doll bottles and pacifiers. Try replacing them with rattles and washable baby books, a doll stroller, and/or a child-sized rocking chair for rocking babies.
• Remove toy thermometers and syringes in doctor or vet kits. You may want to try a different set of props altogether. How about plastic tools for repairing appliances or hats, boots, hoses, and flashlights for firefighters?

• Remove cups and bowls from water play areas. Replace with things like whisks, scoops, turkey basters, and/or waterwheels.

• Remove toy microphones from your music area, and, as always, avoid instruments that go in the mouth, such as harmonicas, kazoos, or recorders. Try adding fresh props like tap shoes or tutus.

• Swap bubble wands that children and adults blow through with larger wands that can be waved through the air. Or, use a bubble machine and focus on chasing and popping bubbles.

5. Replace shared, moist play materials with individual play materials.

Germs often thrive in wet materials, especially when those materials are kept at room temperature all day long. Consider replacing your larger, shared water table with individual dish tubs. Three or four dish tubs can be placed on a low, each with a tray of materials for use by one child. These can be emptied and sanitized between children, especially if you have a second set of tubs and trays to swap out.

Play dough or clay should not be shared between children. You may consider giving each child an individual container of play dough or clay, labeled with his/her name. Careful consideration should be given to whether it is safe for even individual children to use play dough or clay over time. Especially in classrooms in “hot spots” or with high-risk individuals, play dough/clay might not be reused at all.

As always, do not use moist food materials – such as pudding, cooked pasta, or gelatin – for art or sensory play. Moist sand, gak/slime, water marbles, and other wet materials should also be avoided at this time. Fingerpaint is an exception; it can be portioned onto disposable or washable plates, with a plate for each child. Leftover paint on the plates can be discarded, rather than reused.

Hand sanitizer may be used with preschool-aged children before using art and sensory materials but requires extremely close supervision to protect children’s safety. Hand sanitizer should be locked away when not being directly supervised by an adult.

Some pre-K students may be able to manage individual, lidded art boxes. Each box might contain crayons, markers, scissors, a pencil, and other materials. This is one way to reduce the risk of germs on harder-to-clean materials. However, it is only
appropriate for children who can understand the system and find and open their boxes when desired.

Most group cooking activities and food experiences are not appropriate at this time. Activities that each child can complete independently with his/her own ingredients and utensils may be an exception. Also, consider sending favorite recipes home for families to try.

Handwashing will be of special importance after eating food or using art and sensory materials. Hand sanitizer should not be substituted for handwashing when hands are visibly soiled.

6. **Arrange play spaces to naturally encourage distancing.**

   Social interaction is vital for preschoolers and adults should not insist that children play alone. However, the following strategies can be used to reduce crowding in the most popular play areas.

   - Expand favorite play areas, such as the block building area and dramatic play center. Move furniture to create a larger space so that children can spread out as they play.

   - Create alternative play areas that draw children away from the most popular areas. Fuzzy bath mats can be used to create pop-up play areas for one and two children. Create stand-alone spaces with highly appealing materials such as interlocking train tracks, magnet tiles, dollhouses or barns with props, and/or character toys like My Little Pony. Having alternatives such as these can help everyone find satisfying play spaces, even when the number of children allowed in favorite learning centers is reduced.

   - If two sides of a larger, divided room are used for two groups of children, ensure that each side of the room offers opportunities for dramatic play, constructive play, artistic expression, and quieter activities.

7. **Modify or replace activities that require close physical contact, such as holding hands.**

   Seek alternatives that allow distanced social interaction. For example, handshaking or high fives in a good-morning song could be replaced with waving or bumping elbows. Replace a snug circle game on the playground with something like Red Light, Green Light, which children can play while spread apart.
8. **Consider assigned seats for meals and group activities.**

Preschoolers thrive when they are allowed to make choices. Under normal circumstances, we invite them to choose their seats and neighbors. However, consistently grouping children with the same peers can reduce cross-contamination and make it easier to identify a child’s closest contacts in the event of illness.

Reduce the overall number of chairs at each table to increase the distance between children. Use tape to mark names on the back of seats, rather than on the table surface. Children might be invited to join these same peer groups for small group activities. Larger group activities, such as storytimes, might be conducted with half the group at a time, arranging the labeled chairs in a distanced circle.

Transition between activities a few children at a time to avoid standing in lines. Tape can be used to help define waiting spots in busy areas near sinks, restrooms, and the classroom door.

9. **Spend as much time outdoors as you comfortably can.**

Children have more space to play during outdoor play, and sunshine and fresh air may help reduce the spread of illness.

In addition to active, physical play, unique play spaces may be created to ensure that children have many different experiences during the day. Much like indoor learning centers, you can create zones for simple activities like building with Duplo bricks, painting on fence-mounted easels, engaging in active pretend play, and so on.

Small group activities might be conducted under an outdoor shade structure or on quilts spread under a tree.

Plan for health, safety, and comfort during extended outdoor play times by:

- Applying and reapplying sunscreen as needed.
- Packing tissues and moist wipes, along with gloves and sealable trash receptacles, such as a lidded trash can or large zipper bag.
- Providing frequent drinks of water with close supervision.
- Offering frequent opportunities for children to use the restroom.
- Watching for heat index advisories and other indicators that it may be too hot to remain outdoors.

If you can safely do so, open windows to help air out the classroom.
10. Remember that you set the tone!

Patiently model and teach healthy practices and updated routines. Provide heightened supervision and plenty of gentle reminders as children learn. When problems occur, respond with calm composure, rather than irritation or impatience.

Offer empathy and reassurance. Understand that changes to usual classroom procedures may frustrate or worry children. As always, it is crucial for children to experience nurturing interactions with adults they can trust.