



## **Guidance on Play and Recreation, Childcare and Youth Services during the current Covid Restrictions**

### **1.0 Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented challenges for our society leading to the implementation of significant measures by government as they have sought to contain the spread of the virus and reduce the risk of contraction to individuals.

Following an increase in the Covid-19 infection rate, on the 18<sup>th</sup> December 2020 the Northern Ireland Executive introduced a series of time-bound restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of Covid-19.

Restrictions were further tightened by the NI Executive on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2021 with the introduction of a legally enforceable 'Stay at Home' order meaning that people are only able to leave their home for medical or food needs, exercise and work that cannot be done from home. Following review by the NI Executive on 18<sup>th</sup> February these restrictions remain in place.

The purpose of this guidance is to provide parents/carers and those working within childcare, youth or school settings with an overview of the current position as it relates to children's play.

### **2.0 The Importance of Play during the Pandemic**

Children and young people have a natural desire to play and the opportunity to engage in a range of outdoor play activities is critical to their physical and mental health and wellbeing, social development and the learning and development of new skills.

Research undertaken by PlayBoard NI and the University of Ulster, Barnardo's and others during the pandemic has highlighted the significant negative impact lockdown restrictions have had on children and young people's health and wellbeing. Reductions in physical and social outdoor interactions have led to reduced levels of physical activity through play, whilst restricted social play opportunities have resulted in increased levels of anxiety and concern at the long term impact of social isolation on friendships.

As we continue to come through the pandemic it is important that we not only recognise the importance of play and getting outdoors but work to ensure that children continue to have access to play opportunities, albeit in line with broader public health messaging regarding social distancing, personal hygiene etc.

### **3.0 Covid-19 and Play**

The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) for Northern Ireland has previously stated that evidence gathered through the early stages of the pandemic indicated that child-to-child and child-to-adult transmission within childcare, play and outdoor settings was not common.

The Executive has determined that childcare and outdoor play parks should remain open and accessible at this time with due consideration given to public health guidance as it relates to personal hygiene, social distancing and face mask wearing in public spaces. Childcare providers also continue to adhere to strict infection prevention and control guidance issued by the Department of Health.

This position is confirmed by scientific evidence and research conducted by the UK Play Safety Forum, which indicates that the level of Covid-19 risk to children, particularly in outdoor locations such as outdoor fixed play areas, parks and open spaces is relatively low in comparison to other groups in society.

### **4.0 Play in the Community**

Under the current restrictions (including the Stay at Home orders) children are permitted to play outdoors within their community for the purposes of exercise, or if they do not have access to other outdoor space.

Children can therefore play outside in the community for the purposes of exercise but only with members of their own household or support bubble. Children should not arrange to meet with children from other households at this time.

This guidance applies to children both under and over 11 years of age. Children should be encouraged at all times to follow public health guidance regarding prevention of spread of Covid and to avoid mixing outside their support bubble.

### **5.0 Fixed Play Areas**

Outdoor fixed play areas reopened on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2020 and under the current Covid-19 restrictions announced by the NI Executive are permitted to remain open.

This decision is based on recognition of the benefits of outdoor play in terms of physical and mental health and wellbeing, and scientific evidence indicating that outdoor environments represent a lower level of risk in relation to Coronavirus transmission.

Whilst the level of transmission risk is lower for children than for adults, it is critical that when visiting fixed play areas adults accompanying children ensure adherence to guidance developed by PlayBoard NI and local council partners. This includes:

**a) Closed Play Parks**

If the play park is closed do not attempt to gain access or use the equipment.

**b) Secured equipment**

If a piece of play equipment has been secured to prevent use do not attempt to remove temporary barriers or use the equipment.

**c) Social Distancing and Face Masks**

When visiting a play park make sure that you follow current government guidance on social distancing, encourage and support your children to do the same and keep a safe distance from others not in your household/social bubble.

With regards to the wearing of face masks, whilst the wearing of face masks outdoors is currently not a requirement set out in government guidance, given the often-confined nature of play parks it is recommended that adults should wear a face mask as an additional precaution unless they are within one of the exempt categories.

**d) Busy Play Parks**

If the play park is busy, consider coming back at a later time and let your child know in advance that this may be a possibility to avoid disappointment.

**e) Hand Washing**

Wash your hands and wash your children's hands before and after visiting the play park. Take hand sanitiser with you and ensure that you and your child use it frequently whilst in the play park.

**f) Waste Management**

Make sure that any disposable tissues, PPE equipment etc. is disposed of in the litter bins provided or, if one is not available take it home for disposal.

**g) Be Sensible**

If you or anyone in your household are showing any Coronavirus symptoms, stay home and do not visit the play park.

**6.0 Childcare**

Play and the opportunity to play is a critically important aspect of childcare, providing children with an opportunity to develop their physical, social and learning capacity. An important focus for childcare providers at this time should be the increased use of outdoor spaces for play and recreational purposes.

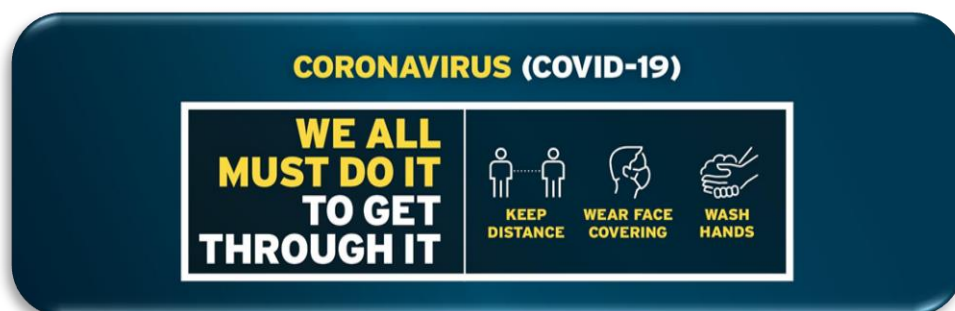
Guidance issued by the Department of Health highlights the importance of maximising outdoor spaces during the pandemic. Paragraphs 30-35 of the guidance for group childcare settings, for example, advise that:

- Evidence suggests that outdoor environments can limit transmission, as well as more easily allowing for natural physical distancing between children, and staff should consider how they can safely maximise the use of their outdoor space;
- Where childcare services have access to an outdoor area or garden, they should try to use this space as much as possible throughout the day. If outdoor equipment is being used, settings should ensure that multiple cohorts of children do not use it simultaneously, as well as considering appropriate cleaning between cohorts of children using it;
- Staff should plan for children to enjoy active energetic play throughout the day and this may include making use of other areas near to the service. Within any public spaces staff should be aware at all times of the need to physically distance and to keep cohorts of children distanced from any other children or adults who may be in the vicinity;
- Staff should take the necessary precautions to protect children from the elements and this should include suitable clothing, head coverings and sunscreen; and
- Outdoor equipment should be appropriately cleaned between groups of children and young people using it, and multiple groups should not use it simultaneously.

## 7.0 Youth Services

Under guidance issued by the Education Authority on 6<sup>th</sup> January 2021 generic youth services have moved to online provision at the discretion of management committees.

During this time EA Youth Service will continue to lead on targeted provision for those deemed to be vulnerable or at risk. This can include limited face to face work with appropriate steps taken to minimise risk and prevent the spread of the virus.



## **References**

### NI Executive Regulations

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

### Importance of Play during the Pandemic

<http://www.playboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Our-Voices-Matter-Summary-Report-PlayBoard-NI-Nov-2020.pdf>

### Childcare

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-about-childcare>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>

### Youth Service

<https://www.youthonline.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Guidance-Update-Letter-January-20211.pdf>