



Learning During COVID-19 in the Primary Years Questions and Answers for Primary Educators

The Chief Medical Officer of Health in collaboration with the Department of Education has developed guidelines for K-12 school settings that will help teachers, administrative staff, students and families prepare for a safe return to school. These guidelines can be found here: <https://yukon.ca/en/guidelines-k-12-school-settings>

COVID-19 and children and youth

- The COVID-19 virus has a very low infection rate in children and youth. In larger jurisdictions, like British Columbia, less than 1% of tested children and youth have been COVID-19 positive. Most children and youth are not at high risk for COVID-19 infection.
- Children and youth typically have much milder symptoms of COVID-19 most often presenting with low-grade fever and a dry cough.
- There is no conclusive evidence that children who are symptomatic pose a risk to other children or to adults.
- Evidence indicates transmission involving children is primarily limited to household settings and from COVID-19 positive adults to children.
- Clusters and outbreaks involving children and youth are unusual and tend only to occur in areas where there are high levels of community spread.
- Children are not the primary drivers of COVID-19 spread in schools or in community settings.
- Schools and childcare facility closures have significant negative mental health and socioeconomic impacts on vulnerable children and youth.
- Prevention measures and mitigation strategies involving children and youth must be commensurate with risk.

The questions and answers provided below were developed to support Yukon Primary Educators and to support developmentally appropriate pedagogical practice in an early learning environment. The information provided is subject to change as the local and national epidemiology of COVID-19 evolves.

How do Educators mediate COVID-19 through the lens of developmentally appropriate pedagogical practice in an early learning environment?

Young learners learn best in a child-centered, purposeful play and inquiry rich environment. In the Primary Grades, physical distancing will not always be possible or developmentally appropriate. Primary children require authentic learning experiences that support social interactions and a child's growing ability to regulate emotions and abilities. The social and emotional well-being must be considered as carefully as a child's physical well-being. Yukon Education supports an experiential Early Learning environment where children will pose their own questions, make their own discoveries, construct their own knowledge, communicate their findings, build a positive attitude towards school and learning, and enjoy friendships; all within a primary program that fosters health across all developmental domains including during pandemic times.

How do you create a caring classroom environment in the primary years that is also mindful of health and safety?

For young children, maintaining a strict two-meter physical distance is less practical and not developmentally appropriate, as such teachers should be focused on how to minimize physical contact instead. The focus in the primary classroom should be on minimizing physical contact and emphasizing other measures such as staying home when sick, hand hygiene and enhanced cleaning and disinfection. At times, close physical contact may be necessary to comfort a student and the benefit of a hug may outweigh the risk. Personal practices, such as staying home when sick and handwashing, will help mitigate the risk associated with physical contact. Encourage non-physical gestures when possible such as “air hugs” and “air fives”.

Can children still play in the primary classroom?

Purposeful play and experiential learning are essential to the way children learn. Play is also a powerful antidote to stress and can be very therapeutic for children. Play promotes physical and mental health and development, and is essential in a primary learning environment. It is not developmentally appropriate to expect young learners to stay seated at desks; as children learn experientially and with their whole bodies. Physical playing and socializing is central to child development and having time at learning centers and working and playing together is important to ensure optimal academic, social and emotional learning. Emphasizing measures such as staying home when sick, minimizing physical contact, increased hand hygiene and enhanced cleaning and disinfection is recommended in the early years.

How can the Primary Program best be strengthened at this time?

Outdoor and Place learning is a key area in which primary educators can strengthen their primary program. Plan to use the outdoors as a learning environment as much as possible. Whenever possible physical and health education classes should also be held outside. Organize learning activities outside including snack time, place-based learning, and unstructured time.

What are some ways classrooms can be adapted to support a rich learning environment that will also comply with the public health measures and guidelines for schools?

- Remove unnecessary or hard to clean materials such as soft toys from the classroom.
- Remove unnecessary furnishings to create increased classroom space.
- Choose materials and toys such as; blocks, figurines, plastic animals, manipulatives, and loose parts that do not require physical contact between students for use. After playing with shared materials, have students wash their hands as part of the clean-up routine.
- Divide clay into individual bags labelled with the students names and offer water play in small individual bins that can be washed rather than a communal table.
- Designate a bucket or bin where students can deposit washable items after their use.
- Implement increased outdoor learning time.
- After the use of playground equipment implement a hand-washing routine.

What should be considered for the lunchtime routine?

Physical distancing should be maintained when students are eating. Children should be regularly reminded not to share food and drink with others. Learning to share is important in the Early Years so there may be confusion as to when it is and is not appropriate to share. Be mindful to have students practice proper hand hygiene before and after eating and this practice should be explicitly built into the lunchtime routine.

Are primary students able to use the playground equipment?

Children can use school playground equipment with appropriate hand hygiene practices before, during, and after outdoor play.

Do children need to wait in line to use swings or slides or other outside play equipment?

As much as possible children should be encouraged to play outside. We recognize that it will be difficult for children to understand physical distancing and not touching each other. Our recommendation is for educators to do their best in messaging to kids about not touching each other (hands to oneself) etc.

Can children play games such as tag?

As for tag, a game of tag is unlikely to result in transmission of COVID-19. Tag can be supported with messaging about not hanging on to each other or wrestling each other to the ground.

Can Lego, blocks and puzzles still be in a classroom and used by the children in class? Does each child need to have their own Lego or blocks, or can they be shared in the class?

Yes, shared manipulatives can be used by the class. Children should wash or clean hands before and after use. Blocks, if used daily by one class, should be sanitized at the end of the day.

Should children bring their own sports equipment such as balls or use equipment owned by the school?

It is recommend that kids use school equipment, hand washing after playing and then wiping down equipment between groups is sufficient. There will be more control with the use of dedicated school equipment that can be wiped down.

Should the 6ft or 2 metres apart signs created by government be used in schools?

It is recommended that any signage be age appropriate for the children, educators will know the students best. Signs can and should be placed where adults or older students who understand the concept of physical distancing (such as high school hallway, or staff room). The suggested signage that speaks to “keeping hands to myself” that is simple easy to understand messaging for elementary school students. We are currently working on age appropriate signage.

How should the primary program be structured to ensure student learning can be supported from home if needed?

The beginning of the 2020-2021 school year is an ideal time to set up new routines that can help support greater communication and collaboration with families. Fresh Grade, a Weebly Website and Sway are recommended platforms for Yukon Primary Educators to use. Implementing the use of technology now will offer the benefit of increased communication with families and will establish the routines and tools to allow for a more seamless transition to support children learning at home, should circumstances require.

Should there be an increase in the use of technology in the Primary Classroom?

When incorporating technology, consider whether it will provide the most appropriate and effective avenue for meeting learning outcomes. Reflect on how the learning experience fosters interaction for the learner at school and at home. Children should be creators, collaborators, communicators, and critical thinkers through technology infusion, rather than passive consumers of games or applications. To support play-based learning whether children are at home or in the school, continue to use small manipulatives, such as collections of loose parts, dice, cards, books, writing materials, art supplies, and creative materials that can be used for designing and creating. When learning at home there should be a balance of face-to-face interaction, play-based learning, outdoor experiences and digital activities with on-line tools.