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Early childhood education and care needs urgent & tough coronavirus rules: Union releases plan

United Workers Union, the early childhood union, says that hygiene and safety must be improved and increased in centres – or they should be shut down to protect young children and educators.

The union has released a **6 point plan** to provide clear and strong rules for early childhood education and care (ECEC) and urges the National Cabinet to adopt this plan when they meet tonight.

The sector has been thrown into chaos from the lack of leadership from the Federal Government and can no longer wait for action. There can be no further delays on decisions to help centres continue to operate during the Covid-19 crisis. Urgent funding is needed to support centres so they can put measures in place now.

Union asks include temperature checks upon arrival, increased personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff, and adequate time for increased cleaning and hygiene implementation. Because early childhood educators cannot practice social distancing with very young children extreme measures must be taken.

Centres that cannot meet the **6 point plan** should be shut down.

Helen Gibbons, director of early childhood education at United Workers Union says, “Staff, parents and the community must have confidence that centres are doing everything they can to have safe and healthy centres that are actively limiting the spread of Covid-19.

“Early childhood education is the only place where young children can receive care while health workers save lives, cleaners and council workers keep our homes and cities clean, and retail staff work hard to make sure we have everything we need to get through this crisis.

“Educators cannot practice social distancing with very young children. For example, when a young child falls over and hurts themselves, educators offer care and comfort. Australia’s educators need to be confident that everything possible has been done to prevent any infection getting into their environment.

“The union’s **6 point plan** gives confidence to educators and parents that early education is as safe as possible for everyone during the current crisis.

“Pre-entry temperature screening must be urgently implemented. We cannot enact social distancing in ECEC, we need to make sure that anyone who enters is not sick.

“Centres must get on the front foot and enact these measures, they must spend the money on increased cleaning and hygiene and allow the time for this to happen each day. It is the only way that this essential service can safely remain operating.

“As well as centres taking action now, we need these measures to be locked in by the Federal Government urgently.”

Tamika Hicks, centre director in Victoria says, “As a centre owner and educator I have a duty of care to my families and children attending our service. Whilst the Federal Government is telling us that children are safe in early education, we know that children are affected by this virus. My centre worked together with our families and educators to make sure that we have the screening and infection control measures in place.

"There has just been no clear policy for the sector. We are not schools. We are working with very young children where the recommendations that have been put in place about social distancing don't apply. Educators are taking great care and consideration about the pandemic, but we also need support and resources from the government to ensure workers are as safe as possible. We need recommendations and funding from our leaders specific to early childhood."

Bron Jefferson, early childhood educator from Melbourne says, "As early childhood educators we are an essential service. Other essential services workers rely on us so that they can continue to go work. As an educator I am totally committed to keeping our families and children safe. But at the moment I don't feel safe. We don't have the PPE we need, we don't have screening processes in place. We need these measures so that we can feel safe and keep coming to work so our centre stays open. If we don't have the protection we need, we won't be able to keep our whole community safe and we won't be able to come to work. We just shouldn't be operating without these measures in place."

Parent of young children Catherine Gardner, essential services worker and ICU nurse from Melbourne says, "I have a two year old son who attends a fantastic community centre. I am also pregnant with my second child and my partner works full-time. We want to feel confident to keep sending our son to his centre. But as an ICU nurse working in a public hospital I know just how important measures like hand hygiene, temperature screening and having the right PPE and training to use it is. I would expect nothing less at my child's centre and I'll be taking these union guidelines to the Centre Director and the Committee and asking them to put them in place."

United Workers Union plan for ECEC includes:

Pre-entry Screening: Every child must have their temperature taken by an educator in the foyer of the centre before being admitted, every single day they access the centre. The child must have a temperature reading no higher than 37.5 degrees. If it is higher than that the child will be refused access to the centre and the parent will be told to take the child home. The educator conducting the pre-entry screening must be covered in appropriate PPE (that includes a duck mask as well as gloves).

Adequate PPE: Before a centre is opened up each morning to receive children it must be satisfied that it has enough PPE for the next 48 hour period as a minimum. This includes antibacterial soap; disposable gloves; duck masks; thermometers; sterilising equipment; cleaning detergent and disinfectant; cleaning mops and buckets; antibacterial floor cleaner; toilet paper and nappies. If the centre does not have enough PPE it should not open and receive any children until such time as it does.

Adequate cleaning: High traffic areas of the centre must be comprehensively cleaned every 2 hours. Door knobs, hand rails, coded door entries, exit buttons etc. Every toy and every surface must be comprehensively cleaned 2 times per day. At the end of each day, after the last child leaves, the entire centre, including all objects and surfaces must be comprehensively cleaned.

Adequate staffing: Additional staff must be rostered to be available to do the cleaning. Educators cannot be responsible for doing deep cleaning and care and educate the children in their room at the same time.

Hygiene: Educators and children must have hands washed on entry to the centre, before and after consuming food and drink, after going to the bathroom, after cleaning children's faces, before and after playing with toys, AND on the hour, every hour.

Staggered times: Children's starting and finishing times must be staggered to enable social distancing and transitional meal times must be observed.

If a Covid-19 infection does happen in a centre:

- Every parent and educator must be informed immediately;

- The centre must be shut down immediately;
- All relevant departments and regulatory bodies must be notified;
- A registered industrial cleaning company must be brought in to do a comprehensive clean of the centre to make sure it is virus free;
- All educators and children must undergo a Covid-19 test to ensure they are virus free;
- Only once the above is done, may a centre re-open;
- Centres to comply and follow the advice of the relevant health department.

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