

“We Are First Responders in Our Communities”

Advice for Child Cares to Proactively Communicate About and Respond to the Rapidly Changing Circumstances of the COVID-19 Epidemic and How to Keep Calm and Respond as Best You’re Able

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These notes are based on the 3/16/20 THRIVE Webinar sponsored by Hinge Brokers, “Child Care Network’s Response to COVID-19” and are merely summarized and sprinkled with a few of my own thoughts. Thank you, [Child Care Network](#) executives, for your fantastic first-hand information and experience offered in Monday, 3/16/20’s webinar sponsored and moderated by Kathy Ligon of [Hinge Brokers](#). Your positive work and reflections on how to respond were invaluable. I took extensive notes during the webinar and summarized them below. This advice is based on the Child Care Network’s first-hand experience of finding out on 3/9/20 that one of their teachers had contracted COVID-19, directly exposing 27 children and half of the center’s staff to the virus. All those children and staff had to isolate for 14 days as a result of this direct exposure.

First Things First

- This is the biggest health crisis that almost any of us have ever experienced before.
- The situation and information about what to do are rapidly changing.
- Be gentle, honest, and loving with yourself and others as you make the best decisions you can with the best information you have.
- It is absolutely critical that child cares stay open as much as possible. Child care providers are first responders and serving families and children that need care right now. It is a great honor and service to perform in this response effort.
- There will recovery. We will be able to lead everyone back into safe place. It will just take time.

Get Your Priorities Straight

- Dealing with the rapidly changing COVID-19 epidemic and landscape is your top work priority right now. Outside of the daily care, education, and safety of children in your care today, all other projects/priorities should be put to the side for now.
- Child cares are sanctuaries for our children and safest place they can be right now. We know how important the work we do is to the overall response to COVID-19. Without child care, many other first responders will not be able to work.
- Your teachers need to know right now that you love them and have their backs. Give them information, meet with them individually and as a group (see more below).
- Reinforce for your parents, staff, and the broader community that child care is one of the safest places for young children year-round. We always have extensive cleaning and personal hygiene procedures in place, and have amped up those activities more now than ever.

Communication Is Key

- As always, strong, consistent, and clear communication is critical to success.
- Should a parent of a child get COVID-19, or a teacher or child in your program get COVID-19, you will need to communicate with many different people, and very rapidly (see more below).
- Begin to think about various agencies you will be communicating with should this directly impact your program. **Make sure all of your contact lists are up to date.**
 - o Families
 - o Public health department
 - o Licensing/regulatory agency
 - o Media
 - o Public officials (mayor, governor)
 - o The general public
- Think about how to use your social media, website, and other electronic communication software to communicate with the above stakeholders.
- Communicating well helps you make decisions well.
- This is a very emotional situation and many people are first and foremost worried about keeping their families safe, so keep personal safety and scientific facts forefront in your communications about this issue.
- In all of your communications, make sure that your constituents know that you are taking on this issue together. And, as a leader, you need to ensure that your staff and families know they need to take care of themselves first.

Don't Make Decisions Alone

- Don't do this alone or make decisions out of fear. Proactively pull together a team of stakeholders now to help you make decisions about what you will do "when x happens".
- Your team of stakeholders should have discussions, starting as soon as possible. Stakeholders in your decision making conversations should include: staff members, families, a community partner, regulatory agency folks, health department folks.
- If you are a home-based child care provider, work with your parents (maybe even some past parents you trust), your CCR&R, and other home providers to find support, get ideas, in order to help you to make decisions well.
- Discussions with your stakeholders will help you figure out the best solutions. Every person has a role and an important voice.
- This is a rapidly changing landscape that you don't control. What you decide today might change tomorrow. After you make a decision, it's ok to change your response. For example, Child Care Network felt they made a mistake in a decision they made, after getting new information. So, they admitted that they were wrong and that they are humans and that they had made the best decision they could in that moment. Then, as soon as they fixed the decision, they moved on to the next decision to be made.

Decisions You Need to Consider Now

- How to meet the needs of your teachers. Your staff is the key to the operation of the program and they are truly on the front lines in communicating about this crisis and your program's response. Meeting their needs and answering questions they have right now is critical to

building their trust, empowering them, and helping them feel safe at their workplace. Find out what staff members' current concerns are on an individual basis so that you can address their concerns one-one-one. Also, if you can, call a group staff meeting to discuss the issue and the decisions you have facing you as an early education program. You need staff member representation and engagement in your stakeholder group and, again, you need to address staff concerns, whether they are medical, stress-related, family-related, or otherwise.

- How to best adjust set-up of your facility. How can you limit access into the building, how to consolidate children, how should you clean the building effectively.
- Look at your operational practices today and look at way to reduce number of movements of children and teachers in classrooms. Do your best to keep children in same rooms and teachers in just one room. This not only mitigates exposure but it also supports social emotional development. This will give a sense of calm and peace.
- How could you engage children in distance learning?
- Start thinking of different scenarios for paying staff. Things to consider: Is the center still open, or did you close it? Is the classroom still open, or did you close it? Is it a publicly funded classroom, like Pre-K for all or EHS? What other work do you have if staff members aren't needed in classrooms?
- Make a grid of scenarios of how to charge families. For example: if families choose not to attend, if families are isolated or quarantined, if the program closes.
- How will you continue education for children in public pre-K programs and classrooms you have? How will you communicate with families in those program about educating children at home?
- How can you take more school-age children, especially those of first responders or others who have to continue to work for whatever reason?
- How will you get food and other supplies if supply chains break down?
- Enrollment will be down. Start thinking about how to manage expenses and income in different scenarios.
- Though we know how critical child care services are right now and that you want to serve the children and families you have as best you can, still start thinking about benchmarks for when you would close for a period of time. Put together a matrix to show when you will close a school, when you will close a classroom, when a child has to be quarantined. Be willing to adjust this plan, but at least have an initial idea.

If/When Someone in Your Program has COVID-19 or Direct Exposure to COVID-19

- Public health department in your county should be your first phone call.
- Also know that the Public Health Department is dealing with so much right now and their cases are growing exponentially.
- After Child Care Network talked to their public health department, they had a good idea of how to respond to exposed children and staff.
- Then, they had to figure out who the host was and what their relationship with everyone else was. Remember that the person with COVID-19, be it a teacher, student, or parent, is a person and he or she has a family. You don't want to lose sight of compassion and love for that person, especially because this will stir up many feelings of fear in others. Child Care Network was able to isolate a group of children and parents who had been exposed and told that group to self-

isolate for 14 days. After that, they had to look at staff who were in direct contact, through attendance sheets and teacher interviews, and determined that about half the staff had had direct contact with that teacher – that is, were within 6 feet.

- Make sure you have clear attendance systems that show where children are at all times – all classroom transition documented. Also, make sure that all staff are tracked in terms of where all teachers were with which kids.
- After Child Care Network communicated with all affected people, they contacted the rest of the families and staff and decided to close for two days to figure out what to do next. They closed the center mid-day. Ultimately, the center remained closed for five total days as they worked to problem solve.
- After your initial communication and closure, gather your stakeholders and start working on solutions to the considerations above.
- After this, Child Care Network thoroughly cleaned the site so that families, children, and staff would feel comfortable that they were walking back into a clean environment when they did re-open.
- Designate a point person to convene all response efforts and communicate about them.
- Communicate broadly all community stakeholders twice daily about information, if not more often. That way, everyone is abreast of new developments.

Advocate Now For a Stronger Tomorrow

- We need local, state, and federal policy responses that support the child care industry through this crisis.
- Our teachers are some of the most important yet lowest compensated professionals in the country. What the early childhood community does now will significantly help our country to get through this period, and after the crisis has subsided, the community and economy will not be able to get going again without restoring child care first.
- Join local advocacy groups and speak up on issues and your experiences to your local government, to your state government, and to the federal government.
- We should use experiences during this time to show how important our work is.