

We are here to help you.

Working Parents/ Carers and Childcare during Covid-19 closures: Safeguarding Risks/ Implications



The spread of Coronavirus (Covid-19) is unprecedented and we understand this is an incredibly difficult time for families and businesses. We are here to help customers and businesses who are affected by the impact of Covid-19 in these challenging times and have created guidance on how to deal with safeguarding risks and implications for parents who may be working whilst also looking after children.

Important Note

Please ensure that you comply with ongoing Government guidance regarding vulnerable individuals, individuals that need to self-isolate, the need to limit non-essential travel and lone work risk assessments. Please consider the need for alternative skilled personnel.

It is understood that customers will complete their own risk assessments. We understand and support our customer's responsibility to safeguard staff, persons they owe a duty of care towards and follow Government guidance and laws.

The spread of Coronavirus (Covid-19) is unprecedented and we understand this is an incredibly difficult time for families and organisations. One concern that is at the forefront of our minds is the continued safety of children and young people who are no longer able to attend school due to closures. It's vital to ensure that organisations are aware of all the safeguarding risks associated with distance learning and children in the workplace. We are here to help our customers who are affected by the impact of Covid-19 in these challenging times and have created this guide on some of the safeguarding risks and implications.

Unsure what we mean by safeguarding? [Click here to read our comprehensive guide](#) and advice from our dedicated Safeguarding Risk Consultant Marie Williams.

Advice for Organisations and Individuals

During this unprecedented time, you may have needed to reduce your staffing levels or indeed close your sites/ businesses altogether.

Of course, this has a significant impact on your employees' and their own families, especially regarding their ability to care for vulnerable dependants and in the case of children – to educate them.

Many of you will be looking for ways to potentially support your employees and alleviate their pressures and anxieties. We have created this document to provide you with some guidance on the safeguarding implications of these new working conditions and our advice for ensuring the safety of your employees and their families.

This guide covers the following topics:

- 1. School Closures**
- 2. Childcare in the Workplace**
- 3. Homeworking**

1. School Closures

The Government has given very clear guidance for schools stating that they must, where at all possible, remain open for vulnerable children and children of critical workers aka 'key workers'. Usual safeguarding arrangements for schools will continue to apply, whereby they still have responsibility to safeguard children within their care - as directed by government legislation and statutory guidance i.e. Children's Act 2004, Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) 2018, Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018, etc.

Usual safeguarding arrangements continue to apply irrespective of reduced numbers of children/ staff. Schools will ensure that they have appropriate staff: pupil ratios to properly supervise, care for and safeguard children.

Schools must ensure staff who are present at the school are fully aware of and confident with the safeguarding escalation process/ crisis situation. All schools will have a designated safeguarding lead (DSL). Ideally their designated safeguarding lead (DSL) or deputy designated safeguarding lead (D/DSL) should always be on site to support staff and children throughout this period. Schools may put these roles on a rota in order to avoid any key-person dependencies.

1.1 Vulnerable Children

A 'vulnerable child' will be any child who, for whatever reason, will be at increased risk due to not attending school on a regular basis. This may apply to any child who is known to relevant authorities such as social services or police – and any child who has an allocated social worker or an education, health and care plan (EHC).

A 'vulnerable child' may also extend to children who have a special educational need, learning disability, physical or sensory impairment. If a child is identified as a 'vulnerable child', schools should be in contact with parents/ carers directly to discuss and consider options on a case by case basis.

If your employees are unsure whether their child is 'vulnerable' and they have not yet spoken to their school, they should contact the school directly to discuss.

1.2 Children of 'critical workers'

The Government has laid out clear guidelines on who would be considered a critical worker. These are workers whose roles are vital in ensuring the county continues to function during this unprecedented time.

These will be*:

- Members of emergency or uniformed service & military,
- Employees of education providers i.e. schools, nursery's
- Health care workers i.e. NHS staff, carers
- Social care staff e.g. social workers
- Farmers
- Delivery drivers & postal workers
- Food retail staff

*Among others, this is not an extensive list.

Schools must, wherever possible, remain open to support employees who are in a critical worker role. Children with at least one parent or carer who is a critical worker, and who's role is crucial to the COVID-19 response, may be eligible for this support. This is provided it is not otherwise possible to keep their child safe at home. If required, this may also include children of school staff i.e. teachers.

The schools will also need to continue to provide support services such as cleaners and caterers, so these staff members may also be classed as critical workers. Therefore, the same considerations will apply.

If you employ staff who are in a critical worker role, you need to be very clear in communicating this to them and setting out expectations required of them. Being a critical worker will have a significant impact on their family and especially their ability to care for and educate their children. They will most likely need your support to communicate with schools and other organisations so, wherever you can, you should make arrangements to support your staff with this.

Your employees will also need flexibility in working hours in order to drop off/ collect children from school/ nursery. Be mindful of this and where at all possible, be as flexible as you can in order to facilitate your employees' ability to continue to work and manage childcare responsibilities.

Further advice and guidance on school closures and critical worker roles can be found here, [in this briefing document by the Government](#).

1.3 School Hubs

The pressure on schools to remain open and continue to support children and their families is immense. Many schools within the local community will be pulling their resources together in order to combat this - with numerous authorities moving to an 'Education Hub' model. This is an innovative way to help schools maintain their vital service to vulnerable children and children of critical workers during this time of crisis.

In these situations, usual safeguarding arrangements will apply, as set out above. Staffing of the hubs should be existing educational staff from other local schools. All schools involved with manning the hubs should carry out a risk assessment to identify the practical and liability risks associated with this.

2. Childcare in the Workplace

2.1 If the workplace is a school

In this situation, irrespective of whether the school is open as a standalone establishment or is combining resources to create an Education Hub, the children of school staff will be identified as children of critical workers. Education staff will be vital in helping the country function. Therefore, school staff may need to bring their own children to work with them if necessary.

Schools, by nature of what they do, will be fully set up to manage safeguarding risks within their environment. Many schools may also have staff whose own children already attend the same school so, the safeguarding risks associated with this is minimal. In these situations, this should be accommodated, and the schools should conduct a risk assessment to facilitate this. In these scenarios, the children of staff members will not be 'employees' and so therefore usual Public Liability considerations should be applied.

Usual safeguarding considerations, as set out above, should be followed and staff must always remain professional.

2.2 If the workplace is not a school

Businesses will be wondering how they can best support their employees during this difficult time – with some employers considering allowing children into the workplace, in order to alleviate childcare problems.

From a safeguarding risk perspective **this should not be allowed under any circumstances, irrespective of the current climate**. Unless you already have an established childcare facility on site i.e. an on-site Ofsted registered creche or nursery, this is a liability which no organisation should be exposing themselves to.

There are many far reaching and truly concerning safeguarding risks associated with bringing children of any age, into the workplace without the proper checks and balances. If you are considering employing Ofsted registered childminders to come into the workplace to look after employees' children whilst they are working, please be aware that **this is also not allowed**. This is not acceptable from a safeguarding perspective and childminders are not allowed to operate on commercial premises, otherwise they will be in violation of their Ofsted registration.

Exposing both children and staff to unregulated childcare, within a commercial environment, significantly increases the risk of child abuse and creates a detrimental liability.

There are many risks associated with bringing a child into the workplace, for example, to name a few:

- Child suffering physical abuse e.g. getting injured with workplace equipment such as machinery
- Inappropriate behaviour of other employees/ colleagues. What if a child hears/ sees/ witnesses something that may cause them alarm or distress?
- What about facilities e.g. changing rooms, toilets?
- What if the parent is actually a perpetrator of abuse themselves (in which case their child should be classed as a 'vulnerable child' but, only if agencies are aware of this risk in the first place)?

Some of these may initially seem far-fetched but unfortunately, even with the best intentions, these situations can and do occur and **we strongly advise you not so allow children to be brought onto your premises as a means of childcare.**

Unfortunately, experience tells us that those who are disposed to harming children simply need an opportunity to do so. It is for this reason that there are so many inbuilt legal protections that apply to people working with children or who have access to them on an occasional basis.

2.3 Latest Government instructions

On 23rd March 2020, the Government announced new increased measures to reduce contact and slow the spread of the coronavirus. This instruction ordered certain businesses and venues to close with immediate effect and until further notice.

If homeworking is an option, businesses are being urged to facilitate this and support staff to be able to do this where at all possible. This minimises the risks relating to commercial business providing unsafe and unregulated childcare. Furthermore, should an organisation be required to remain open in order to provide critical services to the community, then their staff may well be classed as critical workers and the protocols set out above will come into force.

However, if homeworking is not an option for employees and it is absolutely essential for them to come into work, businesses may still remain open. This may include businesses who are not considered to be providing a 'critical' service and therefore, whose employees may not be classed as critical workers.

In these scenarios' you must ensure that all staff can adhere to the Public Health instructions regarding social distancing, including maintaining a two-metre distance from others, regularly washing hands etc.

Further advice for businesses relating to going into work can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others#going-to-work>

In this situation, many employees will be faced with difficulties in managing their childcare responsibilities safely. Perhaps their usual source of support may be an elderly relative e.g. grandparent, who is now considered to be at high risk and who will be self-isolating in lockdown. It is therefore important that you are sensitive to this and, wherever you can, be as flexible as possible to safely support your staff with this challenge.

Children's safety is paramount, and businesses should consider how they can adapt employees working arrangements to support them in keeping their children safe. Fundamentally, an employee's priority must be to the needs of their children or other dependants. Therefore, if it is not possible for an employee to keep their child safe whilst they come into work, either at home or via other means, it may be very likely that an employee will need to stay home to look after them. Employees are entitled to take time off work to help or look after someone who depends on them (a child or other vulnerable family member), in an unexpected event or emergency. This could apply to situations relating to coronavirus.

Further advice relating employee rights regarding this can be found here:

<https://www.acas.org.uk/coronavirus>

3. Homeworking

Any organisation who can facilitate their staff to work from home is being urged to do so. Many employees will therefore be faced with the challenge of balancing childcare and working from home.

Some schools will be moving to a distance/ virtual learning process at this time. However, if a school has opted not to do this, there will be an expectation placed on parents/ carers to home school their children. If this is the case, it will be the employee's responsibility to continue their child's education at home. It is therefore essential that organisations support their staff where at all possible to do this. If the prospect of this is daunting, there are many resources available online which can help parents/ carers prepare for lessons, schedule timetables and carry out the teaching. Websites such as [BBC bitesize](#) and [Hungry Little Minds](#) can be a useful place to start.

Many parents will still need to work, albeit at home. Another challenge that many parents/ carers will therefore face will be trying to balance working from home and home schooling their children. In an unprecedented time such as this, your staff will need a lot of flexibility and support to help them do this. Sending clear communication to staff that you, as their employer, is sympathetic to their situation and will support them where at all possible, will help alleviate anxieties.

Urge your staff to be as open and honest about their situation, as there may be other options that could be explored. Staff should be encouraged to set realistic timetables/ schedules which include both 'jobs' and include regular check ins with their children. Reassure your staff that you will accommodate this where at all possible. This will help everybody to better structure their day and set clear expectations for everyone.

3.1 Digital technology

Whether school instructed distance-based learning or parent home schooling, the use of digital technology will be essential. However, the increased use of digital technology heightens the safeguarding risks of online harm i.e. through social media, cyber bullying, sharing indecent images. You should consider how your employees could manage and mitigate these risks within their own households and keep their families safe i.e. not conducting virtual meetings/ lessons in areas where children/ adults will be in a state of undress e.g. bathrooms.

Many households will not be set up for working from home. It is therefore very likely that families will need to conduct work or learning in their bedrooms or other similar locations. There is nothing particularly wrong with this, as long as general Health & Safety guidance is adhered to. As well as this, children/ parents/ carers need to be reminded about the potential safeguarding risks associated with this and take into account matters such as ensuring people present are appropriately dressed, are not visible if carrying out personal care of self or others etc.

Consider other contextual safeguarding risks associated with children spending extended time at home. Understand that staff will need to keep regular tabs on their children throughout the day and ensure their safety and wellbeing. If children are too young to entertain themselves for short periods of time or conduct home based learning, it is highly likely that employees will not be able to work at all.

When children are at home for extended periods of time, there is an increased risk of neglect or so called 'holiday hunger' – usually associated with the school holidays. Whether leaving the house for work commitments or working from home, remind your employees about such risks and signpost them accordingly.

[You can view some further guidance specifically related to this by the NSPCC here.](#)

Challenges and appeals

We know that many schools and other childcare providers are struggling with the pressures of staying open during this difficult time. Some critical workers are experiencing challenges with schools being unable to provide the necessary childcare that they need.

If any of your employees are having trouble with this despite their 'critical-worker' or 'vulnerable-child' status, there are ways in which you can support them. If you are unsure who should be considered a critical worker [visit this government information page](#). A list of the critical-worker roles as determined by the government [can be found here](#).

You can also use this letter template to support your critical workers who may be facing any challenges:



Confirmation-of-Ke
y-Worker-Status.doc

If this doesn't work, then you can assist your employee to challenge/ appeal by going to their Council or Local Education Authority (LEA). Their LEA will be responsible for delivering Educational Services within their area and will be whom the schools take their lead from.

If you need any further support or advice regarding the information contained within this guidance, Zurich have a dedicated in-house Safeguarding Risk Consultant. Her role is to guide our work on supporting organisations to better understand their safeguarding exposures and to better manage their risks. Please contact your usual Zurich representative for further information.

For more information visit <https://www.zurich.co.uk/municipal/en-gb> or <https://newsandviews.zurich.co.uk/>

Material displayed on this website is intended to be general information for schools outside local authority control. It is not to be relied on as specific advice or as an alternative to taking legal advice.

Zurich Insurance plc, a public limited company incorporated in Ireland Registration No. 13460. Registered Office: Zurich House, Ballsbridge Park, Dublin 4, Ireland UK branch registered in England and Wales Registration No. BR7985

UK Branch Head Office: The Zurich Centre, 3000 Parkway, Whiteley, Fareham, Hampshire PO15 7JZ.