



A Guide to Preparing for Child and Older Adult Care During a Flu Pandemic



Preparing for Child Care During a Pandemic

Planning and preparation are the keys to successfully managing school and child care challenges during a health crisis. Before you hear about cases of H1N1 flu in your community, check with your child care provider or child's school to find out what plans they have in place in case there are a large number of flu cases. Ask the school or provider directly for a copy of their plan—many will already have sent home this information, but all providers should have a plan available.

The decision to close child care and schools is made by local public health officials based on guidance from federal and state governments. Many providers may stay open if there are enough healthy staff and children to carry on, but will be unlikely to accept even mildly ill children into care or school. Find out what, if any, plans the providers have in the event it is necessary to close until a local outbreak is over or at least slows down considerably. Some providers may have arrangements available for back-up care, but do not assume that this will be the case. Here are some things you can do to prepare if your usual arrangements are not available.

Organize or Join a “Carepooling” Parent Group

- STEP 1:** Speak to co-workers or other parents from your child's school, pre-school program, or your neighborhood to find out if they are interested in taking part in a “carepooling” group that will mobilize to share responsibility for caring for well children in the event of a school/child care closure.
- STEP 2:** Approach the PTA in your child's school or your community association to find out if they can help coordinate a “carepooling” parent group. If not, continue to organize a group of your own or share the responsibility for organizing with other parents.
- STEP 3:** Once you have identified interested parents, start a shared directory of participants (include email, work, and cell phone numbers, and names of emergency contacts and their phone numbers), and be sure to find out the best way to reach each parent (keep in mind that email might not be best for some people). Your parent group should include, whenever possible, children more or less the same age as your child. Planning ahead will give you time to introduce children to each other and also allow you to build relationships with the other parents. Try to include only those parents you already know and feel comfortable with supervising your child. Be sure you know about or have



visited the homes of the other parents in the group. This is especially important if your child has certain allergies and one of the families has pets, or if there are areas outside or inside the home (especially swimming pools) that might not be safe for younger children.

STEP 4: Plan, in advance, how the group will work so you can start operating as soon as needed. For example, parents will indicate which day(s) of the week they can be available to watch all of the children in the “carepool” group. If there are some non-working parents in the group (or someone who is taking vacation days), perhaps they could agree to be responsible for children more than one day a week. The idea is to spread responsibility among parents to enable you to keep working or to greatly minimize the amount of time you will miss work.

STEP 5: As soon as you suspect a school or child care provider is closing, mobilize the group. It is a good idea for one parent to act as coordinator by keeping a record of which parent has responsibility for care each day. The coordinator’s role could be rotated as long as there is always someone who knows where the children will go each day of the week and ensure that all parents have that person’s contact information.

Ensure that there is open communication among all parents regarding such issues as TV watching and use of other media, appropriate activities, amount of physical activity, snacks and lunch foods, special needs (including any food allergies or other medical conditions), and appropriate time and space for reading and school work. Discuss behavior expectations and how discipline will be handled.

It is recommended that one parent watch no more than five children at a time if the children are under 11 years of age. Older children, who are still too young to stay alone, can be in larger groups. However, you need to be assured that enough adults are present to provide adequate supervision.

Agree in advance that children with fevers and/or flu-like symptoms will be kept at home, and that children who start to show symptoms during the “carepooling” day will be separated from other children and picked up as soon as possible.



Ask a Relative to Take Care of Your Child

Once you have someone in mind who would be a reliable caregiver, here are some things to consider.

- STEP 1:** Establish clear boundaries and expectations. While having a relative provide care may feel informal, it is nevertheless important to be clear about expectations regarding aspects of the child care arrangement. Make sure your relative understands the exact days and hours that you will need assistance.
- STEP 2:** Discuss costs. Don't assume that relative care will be free; this should be discussed openly. Even if your relative wouldn't consider any payment, a small gift is a nice way to show appreciation.
- STEP 3:** Take a close look at the environment. If a relative cares for your child in his or her own home, ask yourself if the space can accommodate your child safely. For example, your sister's studio apartment may not offer enough space for your preschooler. Or your mother-in-law's house is not child-proofed and can present danger for your toddler. Be sure to check if there is access to safe, outdoor space and no pets that could harm your child.
- STEP 4:** Match the caregiver to your child's age and development. Your elderly mother-in-law may be the perfect caregiver for your infant, but may not be able to handle an active four-year-old. Base your decision for care on the developmental needs of your child and any limitations of the provider.
- STEP 5:** Air differences about parenting. Conflicts in parenting styles are particularly difficult to handle with a close relative. For example, your mother may allow television programs that you would not, or she may give children sweets while you prefer carrot sticks. Deal with these differences fairly and openly, without involving your child. Your plans will cover a relatively short period of time, so while safety standards cannot be compromised, other things may not be as important. Remember you are asking for assistance in a crisis situation so you need to be somewhat flexible.
- STEP 6:** Show your relative the same respect you would give any other care provider. Be punctual. Call ahead of time if you will be late or will not be needing care.



If Your Child Is in a Child Care Center, Family Day Care, or School

STEP 1: Get the plan for operating (or closing) in the event of a flu outbreak.

STEP 2: If the plan is to remain open find out the policy for admitting mildly ill children. (Note: children must be kept home 24 hours after they are free of fever without the use of fever-reducing medicine such as ibuprofen and acetaminophen.)

STEP 3: If the school/center plans to close, you will need to have made your plans for care in advance, such as “carepooling” or relative care. **Now, before flu season is in full swing**, is the time to identify individuals, e.g., family members, close friends or other parents who could care for your child so that you can go to work. You should find out: their availability, whether care would take place at your home or theirs, if they expect some payment for care, what arrangements will be made for getting your child to and from care; and if there will be other children there. Make these contacts before you actually need them. If you wait until it appears that schools/centers will be closed, your options will be severely limited. Check in periodically with your contacts to make sure that they are still available.

If there are no options available at your current program, check with other programs in your area. If you need the names of programs that will provide back-up care for well children, contact us and a specialist will provide you with referrals, if available.

STEP 4: Share the flu preparation materials for child care centers and schools on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at www.cdc.gov/h1n1/flu/childcare OR [/schools](http://www.cdc.gov/schools).

Child Care Center, Family Day Care

If you contact programs on your own, ask if they accept drop-ins. For example, most centers require pre-registration for back-up care. They may also require pre-payment for a minimum number of hours and have guidelines for notifying the center that you need services. Keep in mind that during a flu or other emergency, there may be no or a very limited number of available slots in centers or family day care homes that offer back-up assistance. Although some centers normally accept mildly ill children, providers will not accept children with fevers and/or flu-like symptoms.



High School

While high school students can stay alone, the reality is that this age group needs structure and some guidance/accountability to ensure that the freedom of a closed school doesn't lead to groups of unsupervised teenagers left to be creative about how to spend their time. Also you may want to limit their presence at public gathering places during a flu outbreak.

Develop a plan for your high school students so that you know where they will be, with whom, and what they will be doing. Set expectations. Ensure they have contacts for emergencies. Establish check-in times.

Explore Additional Options for Care

- STEP 1:** High school or college students or retired people may be available to care for your young child. Contact high school guidance counselors or the employment centers of local community colleges and ask them to post signs at the school. Also place posters at senior centers, houses of worship, and community centers. It is important to find out what resources are available as much in advance as possible.
- STEP 2:** Make sure to get references from other families who have used the person to care for their child.
- STEP 3:** Prepare an information sheet for any back-up provider, including phone numbers of family members, health care providers, and other important people and services.



Preparing for Older Adult Care During a Pandemic

Whether your elderly relative is presently being cared for in a facility or at home, you need to prepare now for the possibility that current arrangements could change dramatically if there is a flu outbreak. Before you begin planning, ensure that your relative has communicated with her/his doctor about specific risk factors considering their current medical condition(s) and any recommendations to help minimize potential threat to their health.

- STEP 1:** If the older adult is being cared for at home by a home health care worker, identify a back-up caregiver who can take over if that person becomes ill. If the worker is through an agency, contact the agency as soon as possible to find out what, if any, plans they have made for staff reductions during a flu pandemic. At the same time, consider other options if the agency is unable to fulfill a request such as lining up a relative or close friend who could come to the home.
- STEP 2:** If your older relative is living in his or her own home, recognize that it may be difficult if not impossible to take care of ordinary tasks such as shopping for groceries. If your relative lives nearby, provide, as soon as you can, bottled water, canned goods, staples, and any heavy items that might be hard for them to carry. They'll also need batteries, flashlights, and extra prescription medications. Contact, or have them contact, their doctor and pharmacist to get an extra month or two of necessary medications.
- STEP 3:** If you have older relatives living at a distance and you are concerned about a possible breakdown in care, try to get them to understand that they need to stock up on staples. If they need help, contact a friend or relative within driving distance. If no friend or relative is available, consider contacting a home care agency that can send someone to the grocery store, pharmacy, etc. Many older people may find it hard to accept that something drastic can happen. Don't scare them, just try to get them prepared.
- STEP 4:** Keep in touch. Whether your parents, or other relatives, are close or far away, regular phone calls will make them feel more in touch with the world, and possibly less scared. A quick chat with a grandchild will do wonders to brighten up the day of house-bound or facility-bound elders. If your older relatives have access to email, sending digital photos of you and your children engaged in fun activities at home can be a cheerful reminder that people can maintain a sense



of normality even in trying circumstances. Keep in mind that older parents may be more worried about your health and the health of their grandchildren than they are about their own well-being.

STEP 5: Get help. If you don't live near your relative, find a neighbor who can look in on or call your relative daily. If someone lives across the street, he or she can check if lights are going on in the morning and out at night. If you can't get in touch with your loved one, you can call the neighbor.

STEP 6: If your older relative is in a facility, don't assume that an assisted living facility or nursing home is prepared for an emergency. Ask to meet with or speak to someone in charge at the facility as soon as possible to find out what they will do if a large number of staff and/or residents become ill. Be aware that if the older adult does not require skilled nursing care, the facility may expect your relative to be taken home. In this case, hopefully you will have already identified back-up care through a home health care agency or by contacting other family members and friends.



How We Can Help

Call us for the following services:

- Seasonal flu vaccination locators.
- How to find H1N1 vaccination site locations (when available).
- Contact information for the Department of Health and the Department of Education in your state and community.
- Tips for planning ahead for back-up child care, especially informal arrangements and “carepooling” to prepare in the event of little or no child care center availability.
- Tips for planning ahead for older adult care, including referrals to home health care agencies.
- Help locating resources to meet specific needs.

Web Resources

Flu.gov (www.flu.gov) and **U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** (www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu)

These government sites are updated frequently and provide the latest news on the H1N1 virus as well as the seasonal flu. Go to the homepage of www.flu.gov and then click on “Where You Live” on the left-hand navigation bar. You will see a map of the U.S., choose your state, and you can find information from your state and local health departments.