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To parents and guardians

Through your hard work and willingness to work with public health guidance over the past two months, we have made real progress in suppressing the most recent wave of COVID-19. This progress has meant that restrictions on the operation of early learning and care and school-age childcare services – including childminding services – can now be removed on a phased basis, alongside the reopening of schools.

The importance of early learning and care and school-age children for the overall health and wellbeing of children and the ability of parents and guardians to work cannot be overstated, and the risk of COVID-19 has been carefully weighed against the very real harm that can be caused by sustained restrictions to these services. Early learning and care and school-age childcare services are at the heart of our communities and they play a fundamental role in the learning, social development and wellbeing of our children and in enabling our society and economy to function; the benefits of early learning and care are particularly significant for vulnerable children and those with disabilities.

Our priority is to ensure a safe return to early learning and care and school-age childcare for children, their families and practitioners, which is why we have recommended a phased removal of current restrictions in place.

In making this recommendation, the NPHE's most significant concern is that it will be taken as a signal by parents and wider society that other forms of household mixing, and mobility are now acceptable.

We cannot afford for this to happen at this time. Despite the progress we have made, COVID-19 is still circulating at high levels in our communities. We must do all we can individually and collectively to ensure that the lifting of restrictions to early learning and care and school-age childcare results in the minimum possible upward pressure on the reproduction number.

What we are asking you to do is:

- Please avoid congregating outside services over the coming weeks.
- Please do not have play dates or organise other activities which involve household mixing.
- Please continue to work from home unless essential.



It is only through your continued support of these measures that we can ensure that our children will get back and then stay back in early learning and care and school-age childcare services.

I know these are difficult requests. We all – adults and children alike – want to meet up with our friends and neighbours and get back to our old routines. And we will get there.

We now have three very effective vaccines with, hopefully, three more on the way. Over the coming weeks, older people, and those at high or very high risk of severe disease will be vaccinated and we will see substantial increases in supply from April onwards. And we are already seeing the very positive impact of vaccines in our nursing homes and among our healthcare workers. If we can combine this rollout with a continued suppression of the disease through March and April, we will have many more options in terms of easing of measures and should be able to provide much greater levels of certainty to people about the months ahead.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for all you have done to keep your family and our communities safe over the last year. I also want to thank all the staff of early learning and care and school-age childcare services and all the childminders who have worked so hard to ensure measures have been put in place to limit the risk of spread of COVID-19 in their services. It has been this kind of work, done quietly and by the majority, which has underpinned our national response to COVID-19 and which, ultimately, will see us through to brighter days ahead.

Kind regards

Dr. Ronan Glynn  
Deputy Chief Medical Officer  
Department of Health