

Hosting a Learning Pod?

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, some parents having their children join learning “pods.” These pods may take a variety of forms, including but not limited to:

- **Facilitated Pods-** A facilitator, who may or may not be a certified teacher, supervises and assists children while they engage in their school’s remote learning activities.
- **Co-ops-** Parents from two or more families take turns hosting all the children in their homes for remote learning.
- **Micro-schools-** A certified teacher teaches the children who may not be enrolled in a formal school or using a school’s remote curriculum.
- **Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care-** An informal care arrangement with a family member, friend, or neighbor to care for school age children from one or more families during the day.
- **Community Learning Spaces-** Facilitated by community organizations, groups of parents, faith-based organizations, or public entities that provide in-person support to students during times of remote instruction.

Similar to COVID-19 health concerns with children going back to school, there are health and safety considerations for learning pods. Austin Public Health expects anyone hosting a pod to have a detailed health and safety plan. The host must take steps to keep students safe and prevent the spread of COVID-19. It is not possible to reduce all risk of COVID-19 in pods. The host should plan for the possibility that one or more people in the pod will contract COVID-19.

Do you have a COVID-19 health and safety plan that addresses the following?

1. **At-home Symptom Screening** (See page 17 of [Austin Public Health \(APH\) Interim Guidance for Schools.](#))
 - APH recommends that each pod participant be screened for symptoms of and exposure to COVID-19 at home before joining the pod each day.
2. **Face Coverings** (See pages 14-16 of [APH Interim Guidance for Schools.](#))
 - Per Austin Health Authority Rules, individuals age 10 and over must wear a face covering when outside of their residence.
 - APH recommends that children age 2 and over wear face coverings.
3. **Physical Distancing** (See page 13 of [APH Interim Guidance for Schools.](#))
 - Ensure your indoor and outdoor spaces are large enough to allow for participants to remain 6 feet apart from one another.
4. **Healthy Hand Hygiene** (See page 12 of [APH Interim Guidance for Schools.](#))
 - Ensure you have ample supplies of soap, hand sanitizer, and tissues accessible to children.
 - Plan for participants to [wash hands frequently](#) at key times throughout the day.
5. **Cleaning and Disinfection** (See page 19 of [APH Interim Guidance for Schools.](#))
 - Make a schedule for increased routine cleaning and disinfection of:
 - High touch surfaces and spaces used by the pod
 - Toys and supplies that must be shared
 - Follow [CDC guidance on cleaning and disinfection](#) if someone becomes sick.
 - Use products that meet EPA disinfection standards.
 - Cleaning products should not be used near children, and adults should ensure that there is adequate ventilation when using these products to prevent children or themselves from inhaling toxic fumes.

- 6. Meals and Snacks** (See pages 24-25 of [APH Interim Guidance for Schools.](#))
- When feasible, have children bring their own meals, utensils, and refillable water bottles.
 - Any snacks or meals served by the host should be individually plated or packaged, rather than served buffet or family-style. Use disposable plates, cups, and utensils.
 - Make sure children are at least 6 feet apart while eating.
- 7. Isolation of Individuals with COVID-like Symptom(s)** (See page 31 of [APH Interim Guidance for Schools.](#))
- Designate a separate area for isolating individuals showing COVID-19 symptoms.
 - Implement appropriate safeguards to ensure that children are isolated in a non-threatening manner, within the line of sight of adults, and for very short periods of time.
 - Notify parents immediately if their child shows symptoms, so the child can be picked up and taken home quickly.
 - The isolation area should be cleaned according to [CDC Cleaning and Disinfecting guidelines](#) between uses.
- Find out about COVID-19 testing [here.](#)
- 8. COVID-19 Positive Case** (See pages 34-36 and 39 of [APH Interim Guidance for Schools.](#))
- Close Contacts are any persons who were within 6 feet of a COVID-19 infected person for at least 15 minutes, during the 48 hours before the person began feeling sick until the sick person began isolation.
 - Any pod participant who tests positive for COVID-19 should follow [CDC guidance on isolation.](#)
 - Immediately identify the close contacts of that person and notify their families of potential exposure.
 - Close contacts should be advised to quarantine for 14 days from the time of their last contact with the infected individual. The close contacts should not return to the pod until the 14-day quarantine period has passed.
 - APH recommends families in pods notify the pod host if any household member tests positive for COVID-19. APH recommends the host immediately notify the other families of potential exposure.
- Find out about free lodging at the Isolation Facility for those who cannot safely self-isolate due to COVID-19 [here.](#)

Have you also thought about these health and safety steps?

1. Training and Safety

- Never use physical discipline of any kind. Use positive reinforcement of good behavior. Redirect children when they need to change their behavior. Respond calmly to inappropriate behavior. See tips and training at these websites: [Conscious Discipline](#) and [Triple P Positive Parenting Program.](#)
- Have current training/certification in CPR and First Aid
- Have a first aid kit on hand.
- Take the following course offered by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension: [Special Considerations for Infection Control During COVID-19.](#)
- Review the safety tips from the [Safe Kids Worldwide](#) website.
- Get a criminal background check and have all other adults in the host's home get a background check.
- Ensure you have the contact information for all parents/guardians and a backup emergency contact for each child.
- Ask parents for critical information about their children such as allergies and medications.

- Review and follow the [Texas Health and Human Services' Minimum Standards](#) for child care providers.
- 2. Environmental Safety**
- If you have firearms in the home, ensure they are locked and inaccessible to children. Ammunition and firearms should be stored separately.
 - Test the smoke detectors in your home to ensure they are in proper working condition.
 - Ensure children know the quickest evacuation routes to use in the case of fire or other emergency.
 - Ensure cleaning supplies, chemicals, and medications are stored securely and kept out of reach of children.
 - If there is a pool or other body of water onsite, ensure it is fenced off and gate is locked. Do not let children go near the water without an adult. An adult must be watching at all times when children are in or any body of water. [Follow water safety tips.](#)
- 3. Families in the Pod**
- Do you know the other families and children in the pod?
 - Talk to families who may join the pod about what steps they are taking to avoid getting COVID-19. For example, are they using face coverings, physically distancing, avoiding large gatherings, and skipping outings that are not necessary?
 - Make sure all families agree on the steps they will take to protect themselves and the pod.
 - Limit the pod size to a small, stable group of children and adults to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread.
 - Per the [Austin Health Authority Rules](#), no more than 10 individuals may gather together.
- 4. People at High Risk** (See pages 10-11 of [APH Interim Guidance for Schools.](#))
- Inform families that if someone in their household has a condition that puts them at high risk for severe illness from COVID-19 that being in the pod may increase that risk.
- 5. Outdoor Time**
- Whenever possible, hold lessons, mealtimes, and playtime outdoors to minimize risk.
 - If possible, have outdoor activities in shady or covered areas.
 - Ensure children regularly apply and reapply sunscreen for outdoor activities and drink plenty of water to stay hydrated in the Texas heat.
 - APH recommends that participants wear face coverings while outdoors. Children may remove masks when doing vigorous physical activity outdoors if they can stay 6 feet apart.
 - Take steps to control pests indoors and outside.
 - Keep outdoor space in good condition. Check outdoor area daily before use by children and remove any safety hazards.
- 6. Transportation**
- APH recommends that each family drop off and pick up their own child(ren) and that pod hosts do not transport children.
 - If hosts will be transporting children, ensure you are equipped to do so safely and know the [law](#) (i.e. you have a current driver's license, enough seat belts, properly installed car seats and booster seats for the children in your care, children under 13 ride in the backseat, etc.).

Child Care Regulations Information

Texas Health and Human Services Child Care Regulations (CCR) protects children by regulating and educating child care providers. CCR responsibilities include:

- Regulating all child-care operations and child-placing agencies to protect the health, safety, and well-being of children in care.
- Permitting and monitoring operations and agencies for compliance with state licensing standards, rules and laws.
- Investigating complaints alleging violations of minimum standards in child care and residential child care operations.
- Informing parents and the public about child care, including how specific child care and residential child care operations are complying with minimum standards of care.
- Giving child-care providers technical assistance on meeting licensing minimum standards, rules, and laws.

Child Care in Homes

A family home that provides regular care in their home for compensation for three or fewer children, excluding children who are related to the caretaker, must become a **listed family home** with CCR. A family home that provides care for four or more children, excluding children who are related to the caretaker, must become a **registered child care home** with CCR.

Visit the CCR website for [information on becoming a child care home provider](#). See the [licensing requirements on the CCR website](#) for more information about if you should seek a license, registration, or listing. Providers must get the listing, registration, or license within three weeks of opening.

If you want to host a pod in your home and do not currently have a child care license, contact the unregulated operations unit at unregulatedoperations@hhsc.state.tx.us. For potential providers who would like to apply for an exemption, instead of a license, registration, or listing, contact the unregulated operations unit at unregulatedoperations@hhsc.state.tx.us.

Employer-Based Child Care

A Small Employer Based Child Care Operation can exist if it meets the following:

- Is located on the employer's premises.
- Employs less than 100 full-time employees.
- Provides care and supervision for up to 12 children of the employer's employees.

If a business wants to offer child care/learning pod for their employees beyond what is defined above, they would need to either become licensed (and follow minimum standards) or try to obtain approval for an exemption (exempt operations do not have to follow minimum standards).

Background Check

The caregivers need background checks completed through CCR by calling 1-800-645-7549. Background check results may take at least two weeks.

Permitting

Care arrangements for more than six persons in a residential structure, or at a property other than a residence, may require approval from Development Services. For additional information, please contact Development Services at 512-974-6370 or dsddsc@austintexas.gov.