



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts' "Testing for Child Care" Protocols for
EEC-Affiliated Child Care Programs

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Key Update May 24, 2022

- EEC has replaced its COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and Guidelines for Child Care with joint quarantine and isolation guidance developed in partnership with EOHHS, DPH and DESE. All programs participating in Testing for Child Care should utilize those updated guidelines.
- Eligible participants in all **Testing for Child Care** options continues to include educators/staff and children served in EEC-affiliated programs.

Testing for Child Care Background:

Testing for Child Care provides EEC-affiliated child care programs access to free COVID-19 tests, resources, training, and protocols designed to keep children in care. The Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) has partnered with [Neighborhood Villages](#), a non-profit organization with a proven track record of supporting EEC child care programs with COVID-19 mitigation, to support distribution of tests and implementation of testing at child care sites. Given the importance of providing stable care for children, EEC strongly encourages child care programs to use the testing resources available through Neighborhood Villages in order to have access to free rapid antigen tests and support to implement testing strategies. Enrollment with Neighborhood Villages is required to access the Commonwealth’s supply of free rapid antigen tests; enrollment is free for all EEC-licensed or approved programs. Programs that do not enroll with Neighborhood Villages should follow the protocols outlined in **Testing for Child Care** when implementing their own testing strategies.

Please note: Only programs who are enrolled with Neighborhood Villages will have access to free rapid antigen tests from EEC.

Distribution of free rapid antigen tests to programs enrolled with Neighborhood Villages is expected to begin the week of January 31, 2022. EEC-licensed and approved programs can enroll on a rolling basis; however, programs must enroll with Neighborhood Villages prior to January 24, 2022 to begin testing the week of January 31st.

All programs should refer to the [COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and Guidelines for Child Care](#) for further information on all recommendations about returning to care.

Testing for Child Care Overview:

Testing for Child Care consists of testing protocols that enable children to stay in care and staff to continue providing care. For programs that are following appropriate health and safety protocols to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, the risk of transmission of COVID-19 within a child care site has been minimal and testing is an important component.

There are three testing protocol options for child care providers to use under Testing for Child Care. These include:

- ***Symptomatic Rapid Testing (New):*** Rapid antigen testing for staff or children who show symptoms consistent with COVID-19.
- ***Rapid Cohort Testing (New):*** Rapid antigen testing for individuals with a known direct exposure to an individual who has been confirmed COVID positive to replace the need for exclusion from care. Please refer to EEC and DPH's [COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and Guidelines for Child Care](#) for a definition of cohorts.
- ***Weekly Surveillance PCR Testing:*** Weekly PCR testing for all individuals who have provided consent.

All EEC-licensed or approved child care programs are eligible to enroll with Neighborhood Villages to access free tests, trainings, and other online resources to support implementation of any of these testing options. Programs that access Neighborhood Villages' resources must adhere to all EEC testing, masking, quarantine and isolation guidelines and protocols.

Programs and families should familiarize themselves with the Commonwealth's definition of a "[close contact](#)," and refer to the [COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and Guidelines for Child Care](#) for clarification on individuals who are exempt from quarantine and therefore not required to participate in the **Testing for Child Care** program in order to remain in a child care setting. *Please note* all fully vaccinated individuals are exempt from quarantine requirements. Testing is not required before allowing children and staff to return to care, per the [DPH's Public Health Advisory](#). Testing can be used to reduce time a child needs to be excluded from care based on the [COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and Guidelines for Child Care](#).

Eligible participants in all **Testing for Child Care** options include educators/staff and children served in EEC-affiliated programs. All individuals within the child care program (vaccinated and unvaccinated) are eligible to participate in **Testing for Child Care** options as long as they meet the eligibility criteria outlined within each of the protocols.

Testing for Child Care program options are intended for programs that meet the following criteria:

- Programs must adhere to the [COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and Guidelines for Child Care](#). Mitigation of COVID-19 and adoption of these strategies are an essential strategy to support ongoing attendance and care of children in child care programs.
 - These include infection control practices, such as cleaning and disinfecting, and illness policies outlined in [EEC licensing regulations](#) and policies and in accordance with [EEC's COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and Guidelines for Child Care](#)
 - Effective February 28, the Commonwealth discontinued its statewide mask mandate for all EEC-licensed and funded programs. EEC and DPH still strongly recommend mask wearing for unvaccinated individuals, positive individuals returning to care after five (5) days of isolation, and those who have had a close contact with a known positive case.
- Programs must have written consent from families to have their child tested by the child care program. Neighborhood Villages will provide a consent form as part of enrollment. Consent forms must consist of the following permissions:
 - Bidirectional information sharing between the program and family on test results, symptoms, isolation guidance, and COVID-19 exposure risk to classroom contacts;
 - When and how the tests will be used at the program site (frequency, duration, and methodology for administration);
 - Notification policies for positive test results.
- Programs can either have a designated staff member or volunteer administer the rapid antigen tests onsite or arrange for the tests to be performed by families at home prior to dropping the child in care.
- Both families and staff can choose not to participate in any **Testing for Child Care** option, and then must abide by the child care provider's illness policy, in accordance with EEC's [COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and Guidelines for Child Care](#).
- Programs are encouraged to adopt strict cohorting of children and staff to enable easy identification of any potential direct exposures when a positive COVID-19 case is confirmed. While strict cohorting is not a requirement to participate in any **Testing for Child Care** testing option, the Commonwealth strongly recommends this as a strategy for **Rapid Cohort Testing**.

School-age children participating in a DESE-approved testing program in local schools and districts: School-age children served in EEC-affiliated Out-of-School-Time (OST) programs may already participate in a DESE-approved Commonwealth testing program during the school day. For those school-age children who already participate in a DESE-approved testing program, no additional testing is recommended at the EEC-affiliated program. If children are permitted to attend school, child care programs are to allow them to attend OST programs. OST programs and those EEC-affiliated programs serving school-age children are to align to the testing protocol already adopted by the children during the school day.

Testing for Child Care Testing Option Protocols:

Rapid Cohort Testing (NEW! RECOMMENDED BY EEC):

Rapid Cohort Testing should be used to support continued attendance in child care for children and staff members who have had direct exposure to an individual who has tested positive for COVID-19. This option ensures that unvaccinated children and staff who experience direct exposure to COVID-19 within a child care setting can monitor their health while continuing to attend care. Rapid Cohort Testing works best when there are defined cohorts in the child care setting (i.e. a single classroom or stable family child care attendance) ensuring cohort testing adequately monitors for transmission. Please refer to the [COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and Guidelines for Child Care](#) for a definition of cohorts.

Who Is Eligible: Educators/staff and children with a known direct exposure to an individual who has been confirmed COVID positive within their cohort. **EEC and DPH strongly recommends this option to support continued attendance for children 2-5 years old who cannot be vaccinated.**

Vaccinated children and staff are exempt from quarantine requirements and are eligible but not required to participate in Rapid Cohort Testing in order to remain in care after a direct exposure.

When to Use This Strategy: Rapid Cohort Testing should be used to test a cohort who have had direct exposure in a child care setting to someone who has tested positive for COVID-19) instead of requiring the entire cohort to be excluded from care.

Protocols For Using This Strategy: When a staff or child tests positive for COVID-19 all unvaccinated cohort members (usually defined by classroom, family child care home provider or other designation determined by the program) can remain in care as long as they commit to daily rapid antigen testing either administered by the child care program or the family (legal guardian) for five consecutive days. These five consecutive days refer to calendar days following the last exposure to the individual who tested positive.

- Children and staff participating in this option must test negative at the start of each day to continue attending child care.
- Those participating in this option are strongly encouraged to wear masks on days they are being tested.
- Exposure to the COVID-19 positive case can occur at the EEC-affiliated program or outside of the EEC-affiliated program, including exposure by a household member .
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- Staff or a child designated as a close contact who chooses not to participate and is not otherwise exempt from quarantine will need to be excluded from care in accordance [COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and Guidelines for Child Care](#) for at least five days from point of exposure.
- Individuals participating in the **Testing for Child Care** Program who test positive for COVID-19 at any point must immediately isolate in accordance with the [COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and Guidelines for Child Care](#).
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Symptomatic Rapid Testing:

Child care programs care for children who frequently display symptoms consistent with COVID-19. The use of immediate, rapid antigen tests can help programs identify when symptoms are related to COVID-19, so they can immediately isolate confirmed positive COVID-19 cases to reduce further risk of transmission or reassure families whose children have symptoms but no known direct exposure to COVID-19 that their children do not need to be excluded from child care unless otherwise required by the program's illness policy (e.g., the child has a fever).

Who Is Eligible: All staff and children who show symptoms consistent with COVID-19 and attend an EEC-licensed or approved child care program are eligible to participate. Individuals under the age of eighteen (18) must have written family consent to receive a COVID-19 test administered by an individual who is not their legal guardian. Both center-based programs and family child care homes are eligible to participate in this testing option.

When to Use This Strategy: When a child or staff member has onset of symptoms consistent with COVID-19 while attending or providing care in an EEC-affiliated child care program. Programs should familiarize themselves with the symptoms and combinations of symptoms listed in the [COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and Guidelines for Child Care](#) to determine when a child or educator should use a COVID-19 rapid antigen test.

Protocols for Using This Strategy:

- Individuals at the child care program who display symptoms consistent with COVID-19 should be immediately isolated in accordance with the child care program's child illness policy and programs should use an antigen test or provide families with an antigen (such as a BinaxNOW, iHealth or other authorized viral test) to determine if they test positive. If the individual tests positive, the child care program should follow the isolation protocol in accordance with the [COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and Guidelines for Child Care](#) and any unvaccinated individuals with direct exposure to the COVID positive person can participate in **Rapid Cohort Testing** and, if negative, remain in care.

Weekly Surveillance PCR Testing:

Beginning February 14, 2022, all EEC-affiliated programs participating in Weekly Surveillance Pool Testing with Neighborhood Villages will be thoughtfully transitioned to an Individualized Weekly Asymptomatic Surveillance PCR Testing Model. This adjustment will enable programs the resources to individually test (instead of pool) their participating staff/educators and children and more quickly to identify and isolate positive cases within their programs. Neighborhood Villages communicated this shift to participating programs the week of February 7th, with resources and training available to support programs during the transition.

Weekly asymptomatic surveillance PCR testing provides programs with an additional layer of COVID-19 mitigation. Routine, asymptomatic PCR testing involves weekly individual PCR testing for participating staff and children to test for COVID-19. This approach allows for regular asymptomatic testing in EEC-affiliated child care programs. This protocol will help programs detect any asymptomatic positives and prevent transmission of the virus within the child care site.

Who Is Eligible: All staff and children over the age of 3 who provide written family consent to receive a COVID-19 test administered by an individual who is not their legal guardian. Both center-based programs and family child care homes are eligible to participate. Programs must enroll with Neighborhood Villages in order to receive support implementing Weekly Surveillance PCR Testing.

When to Use This Strategy: This program is one of many mitigation strategies that programs can leverage to prevent transmission of COVID-19. This surveillance model should be used by an entire program to help proactively identify and prevent spread of COVID-19 incidents within a child care site. This option will help identify asymptomatic positive COVID-19 cases to ensure the individual can be isolated and all unvaccinated direct exposures can take the appropriate preventative measures.

Protocols for Using This Strategy: By signing up with Neighborhood Villages, programs will receive specific instructions on the administration of the PCR testing program, including training, testing, technical assistance, and resources.

- In this surveillance testing program, participating individuals submit to weekly testing for COVID-19. Programs should adhere to the protocols outlined in the [COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and Guidelines for Child Care](#) for instances in which a positive COVID-19 case is identified.
- Programs that participate in the Weekly Surveillance PCR Testing are encouraged to use the Rapid Cohort Testing to help ensure any individuals who may have had direct exposure to the COVID-19 positive person can continue attending care.

Neighborhood Villages Implementation Supports:

EEC has partnered with Neighborhood Villages, a non-profit organization currently administering COVID-19 testing options for programs statewide, to support programs with access to tests and on-going implementation of the **Testing for Child Care** options for all EEC-licensed or approved programs. Programs interested in getting free rapid antigen tests and access to the Neighborhood Villages support, should sign up [here](#).

Those who sign up with Neighborhood Villages can expect to be offered the following services:

- Ongoing access to free testing supplies for weekly PCR testing
- Ongoing access to free rapid antigen tests to maintain access to care
- Access to the online portal and navigation to support reporting requirements to DPH
- Training for staff and others responsible for administering rapid antigen tests
- Support in understanding and operationalizing the [COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and Guidelines for Child Care](#)

Please Note: Only for programs enrolled with Neighborhood Villages, EEC will provide and distribute a recurring supply of free, rapid antigen tests for implementation of the **Testing for Child Care** Program in their center or family child care home.

Additional Resources for Child Care Programs:

1. [EEC Healthline for Testing for Child Care](#): EEC has partnered with Neighborhood Villages to develop the EEC Healthline to support programs with implementing the [Testing for Child Care Program](#) and navigating [EEC's COVID-19 Mitigation Guidelines & Protocols](#).

This Healthline is a free resource available to all EEC-affiliated programs in both English and Spanish. It is supported by public health experts with deep understanding of COVID data and research. While Neighborhood Villages continues to be a resource for all questions related to logistics of the testing program itself, the public health experts with the EEC Healthline will now answer questions related to public health and the guidelines.

Effective February 21st, programs can call or email the helpline with any questions at **857-488-4418** or EEChealthline@primary.health.

2. [State Contract Support for Antigen Test Purchasing](#): Programs that want to purchase their own antigen tests now have access to the [Statewide Contract](#). Programs are able to order directly from a manufacturer. Eligible programs include Child Care Programs, Family Child Care Systems, and any other organization working with the state. There are minimum orders for most contracts, so this may only be feasible for larger programs or collaboratives. Programs are also encouraged to work with their municipality to access any local test distribution, as many municipalities may have purchased tests for distribution, as well.
3. [EEC COVID-19 Mobile Testing Sites \(PCR\)](#): EEC continues to support families, educators, and programs with mobile testing sites across the Commonwealth through FY22. These sites offer PCR tests with an average turnaround time of less than 48 hours. Information on EEC's mobile testing sites can be accessed [here](#). Programs and families should refer to the [COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and Guidelines for Child Care](#) for appropriate use of PCR tests.