

Big Situations – Stories for Reflection

Epidemics and Pandemics



This story refers to the coronavirus pandemic and may raise big feelings. Before you read this, make sure this is the right time for you, and that you can access support for yourself if you need it. Should any of the information in this document cause distress for you, it may be helpful to contact Lifeline on 13 11 14, Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636 or the Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800.

Read this story to help you be better prepared to respond to an epidemic or pandemic, or if you want to hear about other educators' experiences. This is a fictional story informed by real experiences. If you are facing a situation like this now, you can find [Tips for responding now](#) and resources to support children, parents and educators in the [Big Situations](#) section of the NSW/ACT Inclusion Agency website.

COVID-19 Riding the waves of the pandemic

If you'd told me two years ago that we'd be caring for children while wearing masks, and that a virus would be the main topic of conversation I'd never have believed you. It's been a long, tiring ride.

The pandemic came in waves, the first wave when everything was new and scary, the second wave when the centre was hit directly, and it was even more scary, and then the third wave, when loads of people were sick, and it was less scary, but really complicated.

Early on we explained to children about the virus. Back then the focus was on hands and surfaces. It was important for children to know what was happening, but we also tried to make sure that the virus didn't take over. We encouraged parents to focus on the positive things they could do, but also to maintain their usual routines as much as possible.

Our first positive case was a team member. We'd been on edge waiting because there was a lot of COVID in our area. We just had to stay calm and follow our procedures. It wasn't long before another team member was sick, then some families and children. Before long, our service community had been so impacted by positive cases, that we needed to close.

Something we were unprepared for initially was providing support for families while we were closed, or while they were isolating. It's one thing to provide resources, but families really appreciated the personal connection through our zoom sessions. In the past we've had children who haven't been able to attend for health issues, and we will probably use some of our zoom skills in the future so they can keep a connection with us while they are recovering.

People were under a lot of stress, especially if they were in jobs where they couldn't work from home. Rules and supports changed a lot and people got confused. We had to spend extra time explaining all sorts of things to parents. We used an app to connect with families quickly, but sometimes they really needed us to talk to them directly before they understood.

Early on we kept thinking things would be back to normal soon. After a while we found it was better just to focus on what we were dealing with right now, and not to make assumptions.

Keeping up with admin requirements was demanding. We used the ACECQA links to keep track of the government web pages for current information. We had to close a number of times because of infections. We could never remember closing before, and we had to stay on top of advising the regulator that we'd closed and making sure we let them know when we'd reopened. Bookmarking the link helped, so we could find it quickly.

The other challenge was staffing. We had people isolating, we had people off sick, and we had people who decided they'd had enough. Sometimes we had to let some things go, and just focus on

the children. Routine was our friend. We found if the children knew what was happening next, it really helped them. As a team we tried to celebrate the little wins, such as when a child engaged in an activity.

Once the vaccine became mandated for early childhood educators, we felt there could have been tension between staff. We discouraged people from discussing the vaccine issues because it became clear that people would have to make their own decisions about what the government was directing, and there wasn't any point in arguing at the service about it. We did agree that people wouldn't use the centre staff app to post vaccine information one way or the other, and that helped keep things calm.

Things to think about:

- ▶ What have you learnt about supporting children during an epidemic or pandemic?
- ▶ How do you keep track of changing information and directives from government departments and support organisations?
- ▶ What do you need to consider and/or put in place when team members have different viewpoints?
- ▶ What have you learnt about how best to communicate up to date information with your families?
- ▶ How can policies and procedures support your responses and planning? Do you need to develop or review any policies and procedures?

The following resources can help you be better prepared for critical incidents:

- ▶ [National Mental Health Education Initiative](#) (Be You)

Access professional learning modules for educators or to get the most benefit from Be You, sign up your service to create a learning community and access a Be You consultant from Early Childhood Australia.

- ▶ [Community Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#) (Emerging Minds)

Access short courses and resources to help educators support children following a disaster or community trauma

Note: See additional resources on the [Epidemics and Pandemics](#) page of the Big Situations online resource

Please remember:

An Inclusion Professional can support educators to proactively prepare to have the skills and confidence to respond to big situations that may occur. This preparation could include support to use the [Big Situations](#) resource and may involve strategic inclusion planning. It should be noted that big situations often require support from experts that sit outside the role and expertise of the Inclusion Professional. Inclusion Professionals can help you connect with external organisations and agencies as needed.

Disclaimer:

This is a fictional story informed by real experiences to support you to reflect and plan for the future. If you would like support or have any feedback on this resource please [contact us](#).