

# EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE (0-3 YEARS)

An Information Booklet for Parents and  
Guardians



GOVERNMENT OF MALTA  
MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION  
DIRECTORATE FOR QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN EDUCATION

# Contents

<b>Who is the booklet for? .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Who are we?.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Why is Early Childhood Education and Care important for my child? .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>How do Childcare Centres support learning? .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>What should I expect from high quality service in Childcare Centres?.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>How do I know it is the best Childcare Centre for my child? .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>How do I keep in touch with what my child is learning at the Centre? .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>How are parents involved?.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>How do I support my child’s learning at home? .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>How long can my child stay at the Centre?.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>How do I settle my child at a Childcare Centre? .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>What if my child has special needs? .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Are carers qualified? How can a Service Provider reassure me that carers are responsible people with no criminal records? .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>What are the types of Childcare Centres in Malta? .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Does this include payment? .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>What if I have concerns about the Childcare Centre?.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Frequently Asked Questions.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Contact us.....</b>	<b>22</b>

Children are like tiny flowers, they are varied and need care, but each is beautiful alone and glorious when seen in the community of peers.

- Friedrich Froebel



## Who is the booklet for?

*This booklet is intended for all parents/guardians who have babies and/or toddlers and who are thinking of enrolling them in a Childcare Centre.*

In recent years, Malta has been experiencing a steady increase in the proportion of children from 0 to 3 years attending childcare settings.

Choosing a Childcare Centre for your child is one of the most important decisions to take. Knowing that this decision will affect the first very important years in your child's life makes it even more challenging. This booklet is a practical tool for any parent/guardian who wants to be informed prior to taking this decision. It gives readers a clear idea of what to expect from a Childcare Centre and addresses frequently asked questions that any parent/guardian may ask.



## Who are we?

The Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) within the Ministry for Education (MFED), quality assures and provides guidance to Childcare Centres so that they can continuously improve their educational service provision. Childcare Centres are guided by the *National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities (2006)*.<sup>1 2</sup> The DQSE evaluates all Childcare Centres at least once a year to sustain quality of the educational services provided.

DQSE officials monitor and regulate these services through a visit followed by a written report based on these standards. This process helps providers reflect on their current practices and guides them to meet the expected standards.

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<sup>1</sup> *National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities (2006)* - [https://education.gov.mt/en/childcareservices/Documents/booklet\\_standard\\_cdc\\_facilities\\_en.pdf](https://education.gov.mt/en/childcareservices/Documents/booklet_standard_cdc_facilities_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> These standards are currently being updated to reflect developments in the area of Early Childhood Education and Care.

## Why is Early Childhood Education and Care important for my child?

The Early Childhood Education and Care builds the foundation for a love of lifelong learning. During the first 1,000 days, the brain develops more rapidly than at any other time in a person's life. During these years, babies and toddlers learn important skills which shape their approach to learning and schooling for the rest of their lives. They start to learn about themselves, about others and about the world around them. Supporting learning in these crucial years is, thus, not only about investing in the future but also about contributing to the quality of children's lives in the present.



Giving every child a chance  
to reach their full potential is  
the best work anyone can do.

Hillary Clinton

“ quoteagency

## How do Childcare Centres support learning?

### **MY CHILD IS UNIQUE....**

Every child is unique. The aim behind the service of Childcare Centres is to cater for the different age groups whilst keeping in mind each child's individual needs. For this reason, most Childcare Centres offer physical spaces and activities suitable for each age group. Furthermore, a designated carer is assigned to each child to help support his/her emotional well-being and form a secure trustworthy relationship.

### **HEALTHY LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS....**

Learning environments are designed in each centre. They are purposefully planned to support care, learning and play. Activities are focused on all the areas of child development including social, emotional, physical, intellectual, communication and creativity. The learning environment covers an area where young children can be active within different indoor and outdoor places and where they can gain more knowledge and understanding of the world around them through all of their senses and physical activity.

### **CURIOSITY, EXPLORATION AND PLAY...**

A daily programme is designed for each year group. Activities are balanced and play based. Through play, learning is stimulated and encouraged. The sense of curiosity and exploration that children are born with is fostered and encouraged and they are led by their emergent interests and needs. These interests are then developed into fun and interesting hands-on learning experiences through a variety of representative mediums.

Play is the central medium through which children learn, develop and acquire the desired learning outcomes within the Centre. Learning activities are planned to be age-appropriate, unhurried, and built around the learning experiences that follow the rhythm of each child.

Resources and books are age-appropriate, made accessible to children, and used effectively to stimulate, support, and extend children's learning.

The following are some examples of activities used to help babies and toddlers develop healthy life skills:

### **Babies (0 – 18 months)**

- Encouraging one-to-one responses by offering opportunities for communication
- Talking to babies to show that language is used to communicate (balancing the use of Maltese and English)<sup>3</sup>
- Offering various opportunities for exploration and play
- Encouraging movement through the use of games
- Instilling a love for early literacy through the use of baby books
- Using play opportunities to help babies understand cause and effect
- Establishing consistency by providing healthy routines (mealtimes and sleep times)
- Creating a calm, serene and homely environment so that the transition from home to centre is smooth and stress-free.

### **Toddlers and Children (1 to 3 years)**

- Encouraging movement through play activities and toys
- Establishing consistency through healthy routines (mealtimes and sleep times)
- Communicating meaningfully to stimulate speech development
- Offering opportunities for problem solving
- Allowing for flexibility, curiosity and imagination
- Providing experiences to understand social situations
- Offering play activities to help children reach their milestones



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<sup>3</sup> A Language Policy for the Early Years in Malta and Gozo - <https://medecms.gov.mt/en/Documents/A%20Language%20Policy%20for%20the%20Early%20Years.pdf>



## What should I expect from high quality service in Childcare Centres?

Service providers should refer and adhere to the *National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities* (2006) to find out what is expected when providing ECEC services and take the necessary steps to reach the National Standards. These standards take into consideration the day care and educational needs of children within this age group. The table below outlines what the ten standards are and what they mean:

Quality Area/Standard	What does it mean?
Standard 1: Suitable Persons	Children are looked after by suitable and qualified staff.
Standard 2: Physical Environment, Premises and Equipment	The physical environment is welcoming, and the premises are suitable for the service provided.
Standard 3: Management and Organisation	The facility is managed by a qualified person, the service has a written manual of policies and procedures, which is available to users and the premises are suitable for the service provided.
Standard 4: Health and Safety of Children	The good health and safety of children is promoted at all times.

Standard 5: Care, Learning and Play

Activities and opportunities for play are organised so as to meet the full range of children's developmental needs.

No **formal** academic activities (eg. Writing/Homework) will be given.

Standard 6: Working in partnership with parents

Carers work in close collaboration with parents and encourage the involvement of parents to improve the quality of the service provided.

Standard 7: Behaviour Management

The service has a clear code of behaviour management. Children learn to develop social skills and appropriate behaviour management.

Standard 8: Child Protection

Childcare providers have a duty to protect and care for each child during their period of attendance at the Centre.

Standard 9: Food and Drink

The service provision promotes a healthy diet and encourages parents to provide healthy nutritious snacks for their children.

Standard 10: Equal Opportunities and Children with Special Needs

Each child is valued as an individual and helped to develop his/her full potential through inclusion and participation.

## How do I know it is the best Childcare Centre for my child?

All parents want their child to be happy, safe, secure whilst learning new skills. It is advisable for parents who are thinking of enrolling their child to a childcare centre to be observant so as to make an informed decision.

A good Childcare Centre should have a welcoming, warm, friendly atmosphere and be known for its nurturing environment. You may wish to ask other parents as they will give you first-hand experience and testimony.

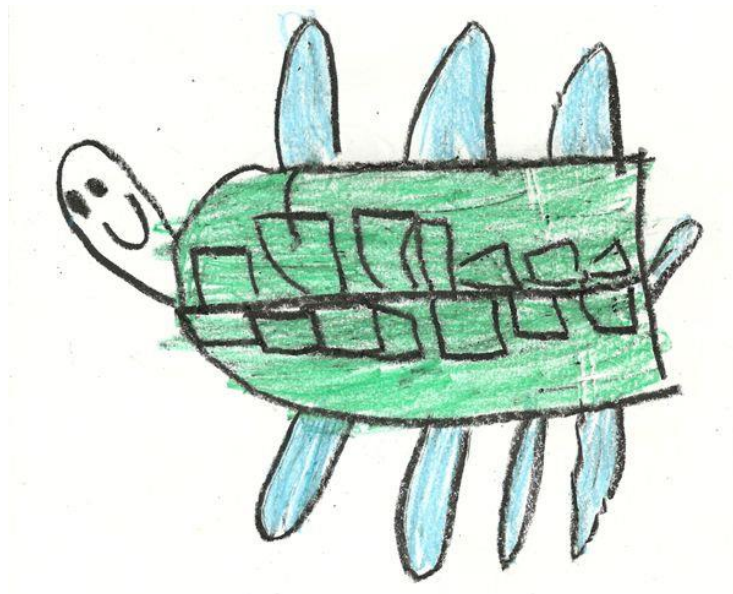
The following are a few ideas intended to serve as a starting point when choosing a Childcare Centre:

- Make sure that the Childcare Centre is registered<sup>4</sup> with the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education. The Centre will have a registration certificate showing this;
- Visit the Centre and meet the provider/centre manager to get a sense of the place and the staff members. Quality Centres convey a sense of calmness and security that comes from knowing that this is a safe indoor and outdoor place for children; ask for and go through the manual of policies and procedures to see if the Centre is a good fit for your child, your family, and your lifestyle. A manual of policies and procedures includes amongst other things information about admission to Childcare Centre, how the centre works in partnership with parents, information regarding safety of children, sick protocols, accident management and behaviour management, transitions as well as information regarding child protection;
- Monitor that upon enrolment children are assigned to a 'designated carer'. Parents can inform the designated carer on any issues about the child and in partnership do what is best for the child. Note that the members of staff interact warmly and frequently with the children and that they balance between the use of both Maltese and English;
- Observe that the learning environment is designed and planned to support care, learning and play. The learning environment should be an area where young children can be active within different indoor and outdoor places and where they can gain more knowledge and understanding of the world around them through all of their senses and physical activity;

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<sup>4</sup> Provisional registration is an interim measure that enables Child Day Care Facilities to have their service provision assessed in relation to the established standards on a voluntary basis. Assessors from the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) carry out an assessment visit, and compile a report indicating areas for improvement. Providers collaborate with DQSE to plan out an action to respond to the improvement identified through the assessment visits. Following this review exercise, the DQSE will decide to issue a certificate of Provisional Registration or otherwise. All facilities which have been granted this certificate are obliged to display it in a prominent place within the facility. Failure to comply with the conditions of the action plan will result in the withdrawal of the certificate of Provisional Registration.

- A Childcare Centre should welcome parents and encourage parental involvement. Parents have a fundamental right and obligation to be involved, informed, provide feedback and participate in key decisions concerning their child during their childcare journey;
- It is extremely important that the Centre's Manager and carers communicate with parents the centre's vision and goals and how they plan to achieve them. A clear vision will avoid misconceptions such as 'school readiness'. Adults might mistakenly view and expect quality childcare Centres to be a place for 'school readiness' (formal schooling) which is many times wrongly perceived as the ability to name shapes, letters or numbers without fully understanding the importance of the holistic development of the child that would include 21st century skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity, technology literacy, and social-emotional development which are key to successful lifelong learning.



## How do I keep in touch with what my child is learning at the Centre?

Carers work in close collaboration with parents to promote the welfare and development of children. Daily informal conversations are held during drop-off and pick-up times. In addition, some centres offer the possibility of a daily diary to keep parents updated of their child's daily progress. The Standards demand that planned communication between parents and carers are held at minimum of twice yearly. The aim of such meetings is to help parents keep in touch with what they child is learning at the Centre.

## How are parents involved?

The Standards stipulate that the service provider is to work closely with parents. Parents are encouraged to involve themselves in their children's progress at the centre. The presence of parents within the facility should also be encouraged and supported.

## How do I support my child's learning at home?

Child Day Care services are meant to complement the home environment and to help the child develop independence and social skills through play. Play within the age group 0 to 3 is the basic and most essential aspect of learning. It is the best thing a parent can do to support their learning also at home.

Homework is not assigned to children of this age. It is counterproductive, places them under unnecessary stress and makes the more formal learning approach at a later stage unattractive.



## How long can my child stay at the Centre?

Every facility is free to establish its own operating hours. You may have to contact a number of providers to find a service which suits your particular needs.

Childcare Centres offer quality service from 0 to 3 years of age. Children are then registered in schools to initiate Kindergarten when they become 2 years 9 months (at the earliest).

## How do I settle my child at a Childcare Centre?

Every parent wants his/her child to be happy, settled and ready to learn! It is therefore important that the transition from home to centre is carried out in a sensible and gentle way. The following are practical points to help you start your child in a new centre:

1. Prepare your child. You may wish to visit the centre beforehand, drive to the centre to help your child get accustomed to the place and talk about what he will find and do at the centre.
2. Be flexible in the first few weeks. You may need to start gradually until the child is happy and settled.
3. According to the *National Standards*, centres welcome the presence and involvement of parents especially during the initial stages when a child is introduced to a centre. You may need to communicate with the service provider or centre manager about your concerns and agree on the best way to support your child.
4. You may need to let go little by little....it is an exercise in trust. If separations are well-managed, they are learning opportunities that prepare children for more transitions in the future.

## What if my child has special needs?

Childcare centres support the inclusion of children with special educational needs. These may include children who have already been diagnosed with a disability, social and emotional difficulties as well as other difficulties that emerge once children start interacting with other children. Childcare centres ensure that these needs are addressed and catered for through the provision of adequate resources, regular communication with parents and collaboration with other professionals like Early Intervention Specialists, Speech and Language Pathologists, Physio Therapists and Psychologists.

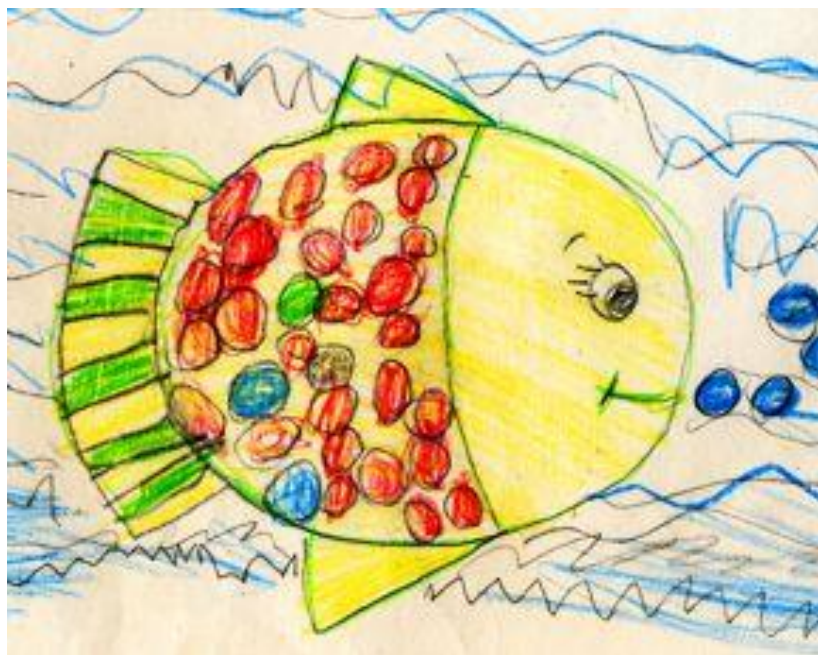


## Are carers qualified? How can a Service Provider reassure me that carers are responsible people with no criminal records?

Babies and children up to the age of three are particularly vulnerable and require the best possible care for their well-being and development. It is important that persons entrusted with the care of children, give the best alternative care possible, and that standards are maintained to ensure the safety and well-being of these children.

In view of this, all staff, irrespective of age, has to have basic qualification in childcare. The mix and match of energy and maturity in staff members provides for supervision and promotes a good quality service for children.

The Ministry for Education requires that all persons employed within Child Day Care Facilities are of good conduct and all employees have to supply detailed police conduct and POMA (Protection of Minors Act) clearance to support this requirement. Furthermore, in compliance with the Standards, the employees have to provide two referees to attest to their good character and moral conduct.





## What are the types of Childcare Centres in Malta?

Privately run Childcare Centres are currently the most common type of centres. In addition, there are a number of Centres which are run by the state through the Foundation for Educational Services (FES) and a few other Childcare Centres that operate through a private public partnership. All these different Centres are solely equipped and used for ECEC provision.

In those cases where Centres form part or are adjacent to a school, these need to have a separate entrance. Work-based centres<sup>5</sup> (ie. Childcare Service provided within the building/premises occupied by an employer/group of employers and where employees actually work) need not have a separate main entrance but must be situated within the building/premises where employees actually work.

To reflect recent developments in the ECEC (0-3 years) field, standards related to night ECEC service provision (0-3 years) are currently being reviewed.



## Does this include payment?

Children whose parents are either both employed or pursuing their education can benefit from the Free Childcare Scheme (FCS). The scheme applies for children ages 3 months to 3 years. The scheme is terminated once the child is enrolled into Kindergarten.

Children whose parents are not working or in education can still attend childcare however payment will have to be settled by the parent/s themselves. Fees are set by the centres.

For more information and frequently asked questions refer to Free Childcare Scheme Leaflet:

<https://education.gov.mt/freechildcare/Documents/FCS%20leaflet%202020.pdf>

Parents/guardians can also follow the Facebook page:

**Free Childcare Scheme** for more information.



## What if I have concerns about the Childcare Centre?

Service providers, service users and all stakeholders can forward any complaints that they may encounter in the provision of Child Day Care (CDC) Services to ensure the best interests of all concerned, above all, the best interest of the children. A complainant should initially level his/her complaint with the Child Care Centre management in order to seek direction therefrom and aim for a joint resolution. If the complainant is still not satisfied by the action taken by the Child Care Centre management he/she can proceed to lodge a formal complaint to the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education.

A complaint can be defined as a form of dissatisfaction with a service provided by a Child Day Care Facility or its staff. The Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) will only follow-up complaints that are related to non-compliance with the National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities, issued in July 2006 and subsequently the new Standards which will be issued in the coming months.

The Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) receives complaints from complainants through the following channels:

E-mail on [customercare.dqse@gov.mt](mailto:customercare.dqse@gov.mt)  
Telephone numbers: (356) 2598 1424.

or by filling in the [MFED e-Complaint Form](#) available .

Personal information provided on the Complaint Form is protected and used in accordance with the Data Protection Act (Cap.440)

All complaints received by the DQSE will be processed accordingly.

Should a complainant wish to remain anonymous, his/her anonymity will be respected.

All complaints will be dealt with in the most confidential manner.

# Frequently Asked Questions

## What is ECEC?

**ECEC** refers to Early Childhood Education and Care (0 – 7 years).

## How do I get more information about a childcare centre?

We advise that you contact the centre management asking for an appointment for a visit. Following this visit make a shortlist based on your specific needs. You may also want to ask other parents for advice.

The following are some basic steps that will help you to make an appropriate choice:

- Access the list of Registered Childcare Centres<sup>6</sup> and make initial enquiries to ensure that they meet your particular needs;
- Make arrangements to visit the facilities of your choice, accompanied by your child and spend at least one hour in each facility;
- Try to visit each facility on more than one occasion to see what is happening at different times of the day;
- It is advisable that you take your spouse/partner or a friend to help you decide;
- Try to discuss the service provision with parents who are using or have used the service.

When visiting the facility, it is also suggested that you ask the following questions and observe the activities taking place and the interaction between carers and children:

- Enquire about staff training; qualifications and experience;
- Check whether the facility has been granted Provisional Registration by the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education. A Certificate of Provisional Registration should be prominently displayed within the facility;
- Does your provider welcome your presence as a prospective service user and encourage your interest and questions? Does the provider respond openly and sincerely to any concerns you may have?
- Observe the interactions between the carers and the children, whether they are friendly, warm, affectionate and respectful to all children;

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<sup>6</sup> Link to registered Childcare Centres:

<https://education.gov.mt/en/childcareservices/Pages/Registered-Facilities.aspx>

- Observe and ask about the staff (carer)-to-child ratio<sup>7</sup>;
- Enquire about their manual of policies and procedures and whether it is available for viewing;
- Enquire about, and request a copy of, their service description and their daily programme of activities for children;
- Observe the surroundings to see whether the children's arts and crafts are displayed, and if such displays look fresh signifying that they are changed frequently in line with the children's activities;
- Does the environment appear to you to be stimulating and safe for the child?
- Check whether there is enough natural light;
- Is there adequate space for the children to carry out different activities?
- Check whether there is ample equipment and play material to allow the children to participate fully in the activities without having to wait to use the equipment or toys;
- View the outdoor play area to ensure that it is adequately equipped with play materials and that it is safe and secure;
- Discuss, and when possible, observe staff interaction with children, especially their manner of approach when children are manifesting difficult behaviour, such as having a tantrum, smacking, hitting or throwing objects that could endanger other children;
- Ask about any policies regarding reports on children's progress. Enquire about the frequency of such reports and whether the information is conveyed on formal and informal basis;
- Check whether the toilet facilities are maintained in a good standard of hygiene, that potties are safely and hygienically stored and that the toilets and basins are child-sized, to encourage independence;
- Enquire about policies and practices with regard to potty training and nappy changing;
- Enquire about cleaning regimes;
- Enquire about procedures and record keeping in cases of emergency or accident;
- Enquire about safety and evacuation procedures and whether adequate arrangements are in place;

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<sup>7</sup> Carer-to-child ratios as follows:

0 – 12 months – 3 children per carer

13 – 24 months – 5 children per carer

25 – 36 months – 6 children per carer

- Check that staff is qualified in Paediatric First Aid;
- Enquire about the operational hours and fees of the facility to ensure that it meets your and your child's particular needs.

### What if my child gets sick from illnesses that other children might have while attending the Childcare Centre?

All facility should follow a clear Sick Child Policy. Prior to registering your child with a facility, it is important that you inquire whether such a policy is in place. If you are still concerned that adequate precautions are not being taken, discuss this with the service provider. If still unconvinced, it is important to shop around to find the most suitable facility which follows a satisfactory Sick Child Policy.

### What is play based learning?

Play can take different forms: sensory, physical, creative, symbolic. All forms are important and make up for learning and development. Through play children learn about themselves and about others, they learn how to express themselves, they develop literacy skills and how to be leaders in their own learning. Play gives children the opportunity to socialize with others, take turns, be fair, negotiate and resolve conflicts. They learn to be confident and innovative while they embark onto exploratory and symbolic play.

It is therefore understood that activities carried out in childcare centres are based on play, as apart from giving them the tools to grow and develop it helps them acquire the skills they need when they start attending formal education. The environment also plays an important role. An equal balance of time spent indoors and outdoors should be created. Adults can facilitate play, support and engage with children whilst at play even at home.

### What is my child is suffering from an infectious disease? How does the Centre handle it?

Should a Child Day Care Facility suspect or be notified that one of the children under its care is/has been suffering from an infectious illness, the Manager of that facility shall report the case to the Infectious Disease Prevention and Control Unit within the Health Department. The Infectious Disease Prevention and Control Unit will provide further guidance on precautionary measures to be taken by the Child Day Care Facility to prevent the spread of infection. The Infectious Disease and Control Unit can be contacted on the following contact numbers and email address:

Office Hours (+356)23266109/ 122/ 119/ 111/ 117/ 145/ 146

Out of Office Hours (+356)21332235/ 21324086

Email address [disease.surveillance@gov.mt](mailto:disease.surveillance@gov.mt)

## Contact us

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For more information regarding Childcare Centres in Malta, you may visit the Ministry for Education website on: **Free Childcare**



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