sandbox
SOFTWARE

A Guide to Opening a

CHILD CARE CENTER

Special tips for starting a new center during COVID

runsandbox.com

IN THIS GUIDE

Introduction

First off, I want to say congratulations! Opening a new childcare center is no small task, and quality child care is something that is so needed in this world. People who take it upon themselves to care for young children are special and should be celebrated.

As you begin this adventure, I hope this eBook will be a helpful guide along the way. After assisting with opening three centers myself, I am here to make your process smoother and your life easier by sharing with you what I've gained from years of personal experience in the childcare field.

Much of this information I learned along the way through trial and error; so, it is my hope that these tips save you both energy and time, which are likely to be in limited supply as you prepare to crack open the doors of your new child care center!

Julia Erman
Customer Advocate
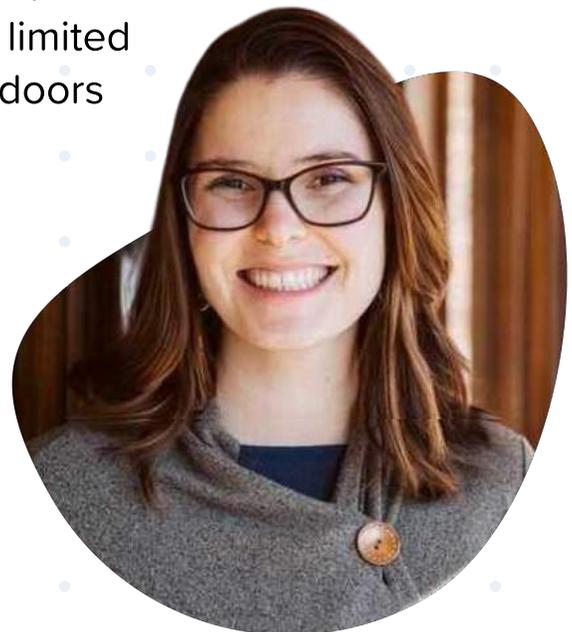
Childcare during a Pandemic
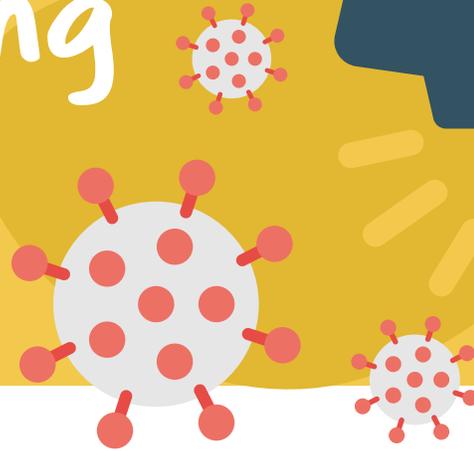
COVID has brought about many challenges in the business world, and childcare is no exception. Staying afloat among these challenges is no small feat as a business. With new rules and regulations, from group size, to sanitation practices, to contactless procedures, we have a whole new ball game in the childcare industry. Will opening a childcare center during a pandemic be a challenge? Yes. Can it be done? Absolutely!

More than ever many parents are in need of childcare. With both working from home and homeschooling children, trying to find a work-life balance has never been more challenging. As childcare providers, we get to partner with these families; lifting some of the burden they are experiencing and providing loving care for their children in the times when they are unable to.

As we walk through the process of opening your center, be aware that situations and government regulations will likely change rapidly. So, make sure that you stay up to date on all of the policies that are required for your location. Keep in touch with the local public health authority so that you can ensure you are planning and operating with the most up to date information available.
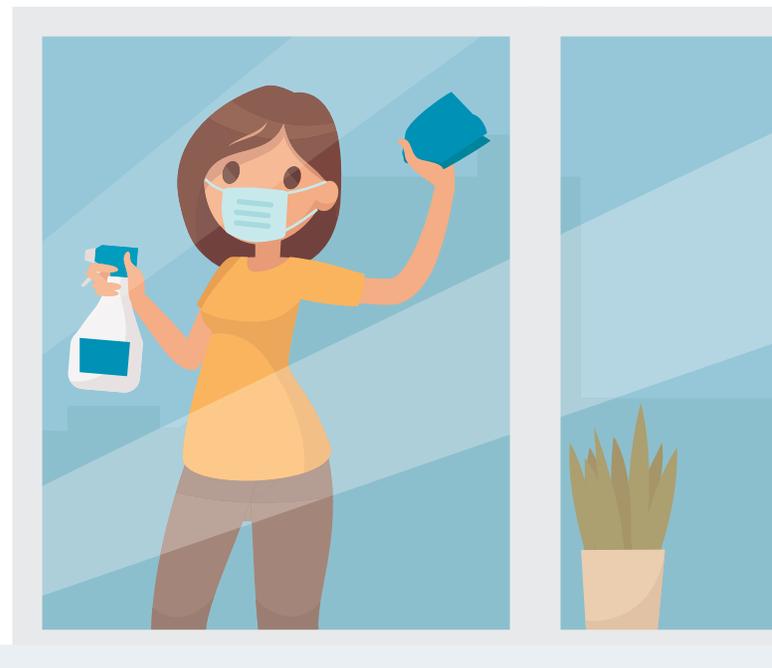
The Business Plan

Having a business plan is crucial when getting started with opening your child care center. When beginning your plan, you will want to think of the basics such as, where you should be located, who your customers will be, what will set your center (business) apart from the others and how you will make money. Although each business plan is different, the major items in a business plan are relatively the same. As you get started on your plan, consider each of the following topics to include:

- ☐ **Mission/Vision**
- ☐ **Summary of your Business**
- ☐ **Hours of Operation**
- ☐ **The Customer (who is your target market)**
- ☐ **The Competition Market**
- ☐ **Market Strategies**
- ☐ **Design and Development Plan**
- ☐ **Keys to Success**
- ☐ **Ownership/Management**
- ☐ **Personnel**
- ☐ **Financial Data - Source and Application of Funding**
- ☐ **Start up Summary**
- ☐ **Monthly Fees**

This is not an all-inclusive list, but it's enough to get you started. As you begin to expand each of these topics into a plan it, will ignite the creative process as well. My biggest advice is do your research. Spend time on competitor research to see who and what you are going up against. Find out what they are charging, what they offer, what they do well, and what you think you could do better. Think to yourself, "how can I set my center apart?" Then, include this in the "Summary of your Business" section.

Financing

The key to getting your business plan into action is financing. You can have the best ideas and the best location, but without money to get the center off the ground, you will be stuck spinning your tires no matter how great your passion.

As you begin to plan for the financing of your center there are a few things you should look into. Government grants, commercial financing, and private financing might be options for you. Although it is rare, sometimes you can gain government assistance if you follow the structure of programming that they are looking for.

Another thing to consider as you plan the financing piece is franchising. There are several options for this when it comes to child care.

If you would like to consider this option do some research on the following franchises:
✅ Goddard School
✅ Kiddie Academy
✅ Primrose
✅ Lightbridge
✅ Discovery Point.

There are quite a few franchise options available, each with its own pros and cons.

The benefit to franchising is that much of the setup work is done for you. The franchise will include things like a business plan, order lists and even help you find a good location. Depending on how much experience you have and your skill (and interest) in the business side of childcare, this may be a great option for you.

Forecasting Budget and Finances

Once your initial financing is out of the way, it is time to work on a forecasting budget. This will give you an idea of operating expenses, tuition and income revenue, and staffing costs. As you begin to break it all down, it will give you an idea of where your break even point is, how many kids you need to enroll in order to not lose money. This is a great way to project your enrollment goals as well and test whether your plan is reasonable.

Marketing

Branding and Building your Online Presence

Building your online presence

Having a strong online presence is very important in running a successful business, especially in childcare. When getting started, this can feel overwhelming, but if you just take it one step at a time you can build a brand in no time and you will be so glad you did.

Before you get started, consider defining your company's branding first. Branding is the way you present your company's story via your logo (usually a few words with a simple image) and your overall online presence. Keep in mind the following tips when developing your branding strategy:

Branding

Be Specific

In a market that is so saturated with noise, being specific with your branding is key. What I mean by this is speaking the right message to the right audience. Know who you are marketing to and develop content that provides value and entertainment for them.

Consistency

Being consistent with your brand is so important. Making sure that all of your messaging is cohesive and flows together. This will help create a recognizable brand for your business. When we think about the top brands, you will see this. With one glance at a photo, you can tell what brand the photo is representing.

Stand out

When thinking about your brand make sure that you stand out. Think of a few ways that your center is different from others, the things that make you unique. These are things that will help you stand out from the crowd. This could be a color you always use or a preset on all your photos. Standing out from the crowd is the key to successful branding in childcare.

Once you have a plan and logo for your brand, then you can start developing your online presence. Your online presence determines how easy it is for potential customers to find you and is a great way to build your reputation as well. With Google, a simple search can locate so much. By having quality content that encourages customer interaction, you create a web presence that causes your center to pop up at the top of the list when someone is looking for child care in the area.

Let's walk through a few ways to build your brand and presence online.

Branding and Building your Online Presence

Website

Having a quality website is the first step in developing your web presence. Your website is the primary channel where parents can learn about your brand and take actions that directly contribute to the growth of your business. Make sure it is clean, professional, and easy to navigate. People will simply skip over your business if your website is cluttered, unprofessional, or isn't user friendly.

Instagram

Next create an Instagram account. Instagram is a great tool for connecting with both your current customers and potential customers. Instagram has a great platform that allows you to personally connect with your target audience and develop your brand through stories and posts.

Facebook

Facebook is the most common social media platform for businesses and I'm guessing if you have been around awhile you already have one. Facebook is a great way to connect and advertise. On Facebook, you can set up a business page with details about your center. This is often a potential customer first stop in exploring your center. Make sure you feature photos of your center on your page, and include links to your website and Instagram page.

Business Ads

Working with a marketing team and developing a plan to have a presence in the way of business ads is a great way to market your business. Facebook Ads, Instagram business, and Google ads are all great ways to get started with business ads. Over time, you will see what works best for your business and customers as well as your budget.

By developing your brand and online presence you will grow your center's reputation organically by increasing your exposure online to prospective customers. Your brand and online presence both take time to develop. Be patient, take it step by step, and be consistent (rather than worrying about being perfect).

Handbooks

When thinking about writing a handbook, you might feel a little overwhelmed. My best advice is: don't do it alone. Find another center that is willing to help you or even share theirs with you to get started. You'd be surprised at how many Owners and Directors are happy to share resources. If you don't know any other child care Directors, join a Facebook group! Social media groups are a great source of information. Also, consider hiring a lawyer to review your policies. This may sound overdone, however, it could end up saving you a lot of time and money down the road.

"I'll be honest, I've never written a handbook from scratch. Not only is it difficult and time consuming, for most centers it simply isn't necessary. I have, however, spent many hours editing policies and updating procedures. After much review, I have learned that there are certain essential items that shouldn't be missed as you develop your own handbook.

The purpose of a **Staff or Parent Handbook** is to communicate any expectations, policies or procedures that you have for the staff and/or families in your center.
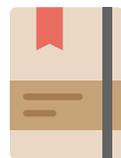
A handbook is often your first written communication for both staff and parents. It is essential that you take time and pay careful attention to both of these documents.
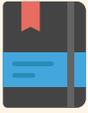
What to Include:

5 Items to Include in the Parent Handbook

1. Withdrawal Policy
2. Discipline
3. Arrival and Departure
4. Food Policies
5. Anything Pertaining to Licensing

5 Items to Include in the Staff Handbook

1. Expectation of Staff Behavior
2. Mandatory Attendance Events
3. Child Behavioral Policies
4. PTO/Sick/Vacation Time Policy
5. Private Childcare

What to Include in The Parent Handbook

1. Withdrawal Policy

Make sure that it is clear to families what you expect from them if they decide to take their business elsewhere. At my center we required 30 days notice when a child was leaving. After the 30 days they were free and clear, no extra fees were charged. At times, we had families who would want to leave overnight, so having a policy written in the handbook saved me multiple times by simply allowing me to point to the handbook rather than have a difficult discussion.

2. Discipline

I can't count how many times we had discipline issues in our school that ended up leading to expulsion. Well, okay, it seemed like a lot but maybe it was only three or four. Still, when the time came, it was very important that I had our policy in writing so that I could show the family that we followed proper procedures. At our center we had a strict 3-strike policy. If a child had three write-ups, we had the freedom to ask them to leave. Now we didn't always do that, but the important thing is that we had a policy in place for times when we needed it.

3. Arrival & Departure

Ensure you let the families in your center know your policies around drop-off and pick-up times. This would include school start times, late pick up fees and any other policies you have around pick-up or drop-off. At our center we had some parents who would allow their three year-olds to run into the classroom in the morning without the teacher even seeing the parents. This created a disconnect that was unsafe. We then decided to create a policy requiring parents or guardians to hold on to their child's hand and walk them into the classroom each day for safety purposes. This is an example of a policy created later in the game due to experience, and is another reason to get feedback from other centers when creating your own handbook.

4. Food Policies

In the day and age of nut and other allergies, it is important to let families know your policies around food, especially for birthdays. If you let parents bring in a special treat, make sure they know what's approved and what is not as this can cause some big issues not to mention potentially dangerous for children with allergies. Communicate this to parents upfront and you will prevent issues down the road.

5. Anything Pertaining to Licensing

Lastly, have all policies in place that are required by licensing. This would include child abuse reporting, discrimination policies, and anything else your agency requires. It is important to bring the parents into the conversation from the beginning and to ensure that your policies meet their requirements.

What to Include in The Staff Handbook

1. Expectation of Staff Behavior

It's always a good idea to clearly communicate expectations for staff behavior. This will help you if you end up having to write someone up. In my experience, I always based my write-ups off of items in the handbook. It's clear and easy, they've already read it, hopefully several times. Potential expectations could include areas, such as company values, child discipline, and cell phone use policies.

2. Mandatory Attendance Events

If you have any mandatory events throughout the year, include them in your handbook. This way staff know at the beginning of the year and the expectations are set from the get go so there are no surprises.

3. Child Behavioral Documentation Policies

It is very important to include a set of your child behavioral documentation policies in the staff handbook. This would explain the process of documenting any behavioral issues and what the expectations are of the staff. Do not miss this because if you have an issue with a child and your staff isn't documenting it, then for all intents and purposes it never happened.

4. PTO/Sick/Vacation Time Policy

Creating expectations regarding staff being absent from the center is essential. Clearly state when time-off can be given and what is expected of staff when they are gone. This will save you and the rest of your team much frustration in the future.

5. Private Childcare

In the childcare world, it is a regular occurrence for families to request their child's teacher to babysit. My recommendation is to decide what you are okay with and communicate it clearly to your team from the start.

At my center, we did allow teachers to babysit but they had to have the families and themselves sign a waiver in advance. If you allow this, you have a waiver to protect the rights of your center and prevent any liability issues from these types of activities.

Center Technology
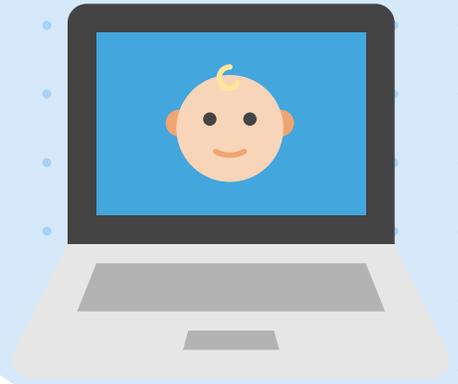
T echnology has changed the way that centers are the way centers operate all over the world. It has decreased time required for many tasks and also increased value for both students and parents. If we are intentional as we open our center, we can use technology to help grow our centers and increase the learning opportunities of the children in our care

Webcam Access

Many centers are hesitant to set up webcams in their center due to various concerns including fears of a security breach or parents seeing something they shouldn't. Although some of these concerns are warranted, there are actually many benefits to classroom webcams and many of your concerns, can be alleviated by webcam service providers. Most companies that provide webcam services are well aware of the security concerns and go above and beyond to ensure the little ones are safe.

Although a common concern is parents seeing something they shouldn't, I have found as a director that this increased accountability. If a staff member is mistreating a child at your center, this is putting the child at risk and the livelihood of your business in jeopardy, the quicker you find out, the better for everyone involved!

Classroom cameras can help you monitor how situations are dealt with in the classroom and hold your staff accountable. It will also provide transparency that your parents will really appreciate and also help build credibility for your center. Let's be honest, if we're providing great care, why wouldn't we want to let parents witness it? In addition, in today's busy society this is increasingly a selling feature, because parents love to see their kids during the day, even if they can't be with them.

Here are some reputable webcam service providers that many daycares successfully use:
✅ Daycare Webwatch
✅ WatchMeGrow
✅ KidsVision
✅ PB&J TV
While we're on the topic of security, let's take a look at sign in/out technology.

Child Check-in

hen providing care for young children, security is of the utmost importance. A safe and secure sign in/out process will provide peace of mind to you, your staff, and the parents who have entrusted their children to your care.

As opposed to using archaic and cumbersome paper sign in/out sheets, many companies offer sign in/out kiosks that allow parents to securely sign children in and out while simultaneously storing a record of this information for licensing purposes.

New restrictions during the pandemic also add an extra layer of difficulty when managing the sign in/out process. Thankfully systems like Sandbox have helped make this easier with options like contactless sign in/out and built-in prescreening questionnaires

This will not only make sign in/out easier for you and your clients, but also show them that you're serious about maintaining a secure sign in process while preventing the spread of germs at your center. The best part of these systems is that they can come bundled in childcare management software, which we'll look at next.
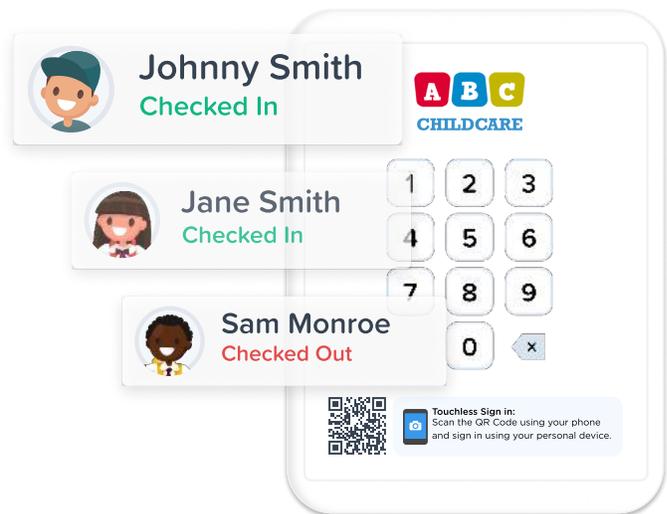
Childcare Management Software

Thousands of childcare owners manage their entire business with tedious processes that include pen, paper and excel spreadsheets. Although this is something that has worked for many years, new technology has made business operations much easier and there are now solutions in childcare software that can make all aspects of managing childcare a breeze!

Thousands of childcare centers are using software like this to streamline the management of their center freeing up time for more important things like growing your business and spending time with the children.

Managing your child care business has never been easier due to increases in childcare management technology. Now it is not only affordable to use a childcare management system but will save you so much time and (and in this industry, we all know time is at a premium!) Look for a system that will automate and simplify things such as billing, child files, staff management, immunizations, and daily communication

Computer Access for School-Age Children

Whether we love technology or not, it is clear that most school-aged students will have online homework from time to time, especially with the hybrid models many schools are running due to Covid. This means that if your center has school-aged programming then having computers with student access is key. Especially in a time where full time teaching in school is no longer a guarantee, being prepared for every outcome is more important than ever.

If you are building a program around your customers, then meeting their needs is a must. This means you need to take a close look at increasing access to computers and other technology despite your potential reservations.

With this increased access, however, it is important to have strict policies to limit access and moderate use. It is essential, and possible, to protect children from the dangers of the internet world, while allowing them to benefit from its vast potential.

Enrolling Children in your Center

As you begin to plan and prepare for your center to open, enrolling students should be at the forefront of your mind. Here is a simple checklist to help you get started with enrollment for your new center.

Advertise

Advertising is the key to enrollment for your center. Advertisements can include several different methods and will change depending on where you are in the process. For online advertising ideas see the section on creating your online presence.

Build an Information Packet

No matter how much we moved our business online, our parents always seem to want something in hand. During the early enrollment period make sure to have an updated enrollment packet. This packet should include details on how to enroll, tuition and pricing information, the school calendar, and any other important documents that parents would want to see.

Prepare Your Team

As your teachers are getting their classrooms ready for the start of the school year, make sure to brief them on any important enrollment information. As you tour families around your center make sure that anyone they come in contact with is ready to answer any questions or concerns a prospective parent may have.

Host an Event

Hosting an open house event for your center is a great way to get started with your enrollment process. An open house is an event where prospective parents can tour your facility, meet the teachers, and enroll. Hosting an event like this can help boost enrollment and doesn't have to be complicated. Although these can be planned for any time of year, it is best to plan an open house during new registration and enrollment periods.

Offer an Early Bird Incentive

As you prepare for your center to open, having a good idea of how many children will be attending can be extremely helpful for budgeting and planning purposes. Sometimes offering an incentive for parents to sign up early can help. Think about waiving the enrollment fee for a specific period of time around the open house event to reward early customers and help you get a handle on the staffing and other needs.

Hiring

Where to find Quality Teachers

Finding high quality, qualified teachers for your childcare center is an important step as you prepare to launch your center, but where and how to find them can be difficult depending on where your center is located. Here are four ways to help you hire your team!

Indeed www.indeed.com

I almost always had an ad running on Indeed, and it helped me find many great employees. What I love about Indeed is that you can just set a budget, and they will do the marketing for you. It is a great way to put your center out there and hire quality candidates that you might not otherwise find.

Word of Mouth

We all know that "Word of Mouth hires" are always the best. Having someone who already knows the person is a major benefit. As director I would take this to a whole new level, asking EVERYONE I knew multiple times. I found that very often, on the second or third time I asked, they would finally think of someone. To clarify, I am not advising you to harass people, just be determined and don't be afraid to ask more than once.

Local Colleges

There are two major ways to utilize local colleges for hiring. First, you can simply attend a college job fair. This is a great way to get your name out there and meet some students looking for work after graduation. Second, you can post ads around the college. Usually, these ads are free and depending on schools near you, often you can reach students who are studying Early Childhood Education, which is a huge win. This may not be available at all colleges, but I would definitely reach out and see if this is an opportunity in your area.

Social Media

Another great way to find quality staff is to run **Facebook** or **Instagram** ads. Better yet, have your current team share the add or create a post of their own! We've already mentioned how useful social media is for connecting with clients and building a brand, but remember to use the power of social media when you are seeking new staff as well.

How to use contactless procedures
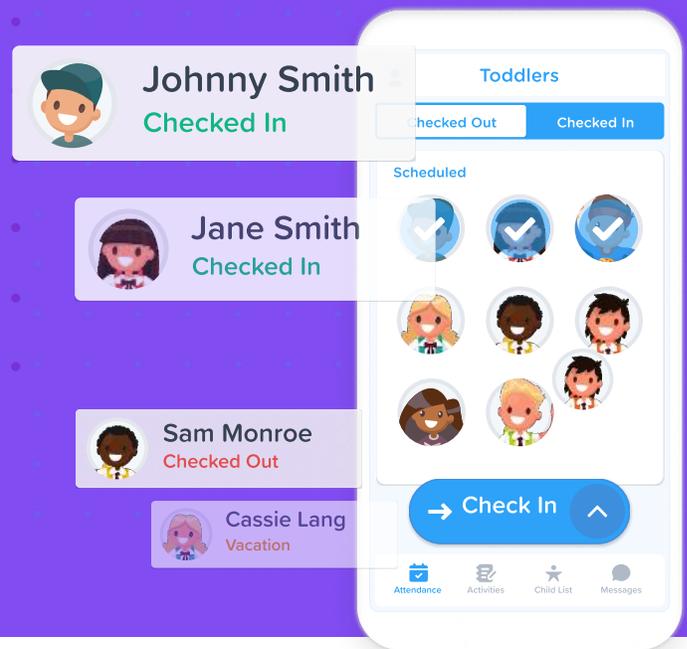
Over the past few months, COVID has forced many childcare, daycare, and preschool centers to reduce their capacity or even close their doors. Thankfully, as social distancing and other policies have showed success in preventing spread, many centers have been given the green light to re-open. However, these reopenings are dependent on minimizing COVID spread and come with new regulations and restrictions, creating new hoops for centers to jump through in order to remain open.

As you prepare to open your center you'll want to look for ways to put your customers at ease and stay open for the long-term, no matter what continues to happen with COVID. These are unpredictable times, so plan ahead by starting off with procedures that limit contact as much as you can.

What is Contactless Sign In/Out?

Contactless Sign in/out uses the camera on a phone or other device to scan a QR code, which allows parents and staff to sign in/out on their own device without having to touch a common device or keypad. With Contactless Sign In/Out enabled, you will notice a QR code showing up on your timeclock.

How does Contactless Sign In/Out work?

When parents or staff come to your center, they will simply be able to scan the QR code on your timeclock with their personal device. This will prompt them to open the timeclock web page on their personal device. They will then be able to operate the timeclock as normal on their own device by entering their 4-digit code and initials to complete the sign-in process.

To learn more about contactless sign in and out with Sandbox take a look at our **User Guide**, or **download and print the instructions**.

Guide to Opening a Child Care Center

by sandbox SOFTWARE

Keeping Families Safe- Maintaining a Clean & Sanitized Center

As directors and owners, we have an obligation to maintain clean and sanitized centers at any time, but during the COVID-19 pandemic, our obligation is even higher.

Here are 5 ways that we can help keep our centers clean and sanitized:

1. The three-step process

Esure that your team is familiar with the three step cleaning process. This is the process recommended by most licensors, but please double check your regulations before enacting a new process.

The three-step process includes:

a. **Clean**: Clean the surface with soapy water and wipe with a paper towel

b. **Rinse**: Rinse with water and dry with a clean paper towel

c. **Sanitize/Disinfect**: Sanitize and disinfect with a bleach water solution. Allow the solution to remain on the surface for 2 minutes before wiping clean with a paper towel.

> Make sure that your team is doing this process between each activity to ensure the surfaces stay clean and sanitized at all times.

2. Requirements for Handwashing

Now is also a great time to review your center's policy around handwashing and perhaps revise this policy as well. To ensure the health of your center in times of seasonal sickness here are some handwashing guidelines you can follow:

a. All must wash their hands when they enter and before they exit the building.

b. All must wash their hands before and after outside or indoor recess play time.

c. All must wash their hands before meal or snack time.

d. All must wash their hands anytime they touch their face or blow their nose.

> By following these handwashing rules you will limit the passing of germs and prevent the spread of infectious diseases including COVID.

3. Limit or Eliminate Center-Served Food

If your center serves food for children, it might be wise to consider limiting or eliminating center-served food during times of sickness such as the current pandemic, and having children bring food from home instead. Although safer, this may be a hardship for families . If you do make this move, even for the short-term, try to still offer a pre-packaged option for parents who are unable to pack a lunch or snack for their child.

4. Front Door Drop Off and Pick Up and No Guests

Aneasy way to limit the germ exposure in your center is simply to limit the number of people who enter the building. This is a great time to enact a pick-up or drop off line for your center. This will keep the parents in their cars and out of your center.

Also, consider a no-guest policy. This would mean no one comes in the center except for paid personnel and children. I would only enact this policy for a specific season of sickness, but when illnesses are really bad this is a great move to make to reduce spread.

5. Daily Building Cleaning and Sanitizing

This is likely something that you already do regularly, but if not it is a great habit to start especially during seasonal illnesses such as flu season. It is important to not only sanitize the surfaces, bathrooms, and common areas but all the toys and manipulatives as well.

Pull out all the toys that the children played with that day and spread them onto the table. Once they are all laid out spray them with an approved bleach water solution and leave them to dry overnight. Follow this procedure with all items that the children are touching each day.

> Unless you plan to hand wash fabric daily, I would recommend eliminating all fabric dolls, stuffed animals, and toys during these seasons as much as possible.

By being proactive about keeping our centers clean, we can keep our children safe and help prevent the spread of germs both inside our center and in the greater community.

Engagement

How to engage families with limited face to face contact

Amidst these crazy times it is more important than ever to expand your communication efforts with families in your center. With limited face to face contact utilizing an online communication tool can be very effective.

Share Updates

While parents are away at work, many feel like they are missing out on the development of their child. A great way to keep them connected is to share updates throughout the day. This can be done through social media platforms like Facebook or Instagram, however, it can also be done securely through childcare platforms such as Sandbox.

When using something like the Parent Engagement portion of Sandbox, you can share a note, photo or attachment with the families at your center. Parents can then sign into their app to view all their billing, attendance, and updates in one place.

Create a Time Clock Note

If you need to leave a quick reminder or update for parents at the beginning or end of the day, a quick note during the sign in process is a great option. If you are using manual attendance methods like paper sheets, I would recommend posting a note or paper for them to see.

In Sandbox you can actually create Timeclock notes and assign them to an individual or a group of parents. This would then display the message for parents during the sign in/out process, and you as a center will be able to see if they have viewed it or not.

Instant Messaging

When looking to communicate with parents on an individual level, you are likely to choose messaging options like text messaging. However, this can become difficult to manage when using a personal device with both center messages and personal messages.

With Sandbox, you have access to in-app messaging which allows you to send mass messages and communication individually with parents. This being integrated into our platform and our apps, makes this form of communication very efficient and easy to use.

Email

Are you wondering if you should continue to send emails? Yes, continue to send emails, but keep it short and sweet. Many parents spend their work lives on email and the last thing they want to do when they get home is check their email. Make sure you limit the number of emails you send to your parents, so when they receive an email they will be more likely to open it.

Grow your business with Sandbox

To stay up to date with the lates child care business tips and news, subscribe to our blog. It is our desire to come alongside and help you navigate the craziness of the child care world."

"Child care centers help provide an amazing service to their communities and its considered an essential service in today's world. We wish you all the best as you continue to develop and grow your childcare business!

GET STARTED FOR FREE!

Connect with us on social