



Dear SA Montessori families,

We are approaching the 2022 school year against the backdrop of a sudden increase in Covid cases here in Adelaide. It is natural that some families may be feeling concerned about how we will protect children, support parents, and continue operating. We want to try to provide some clarity about the factors that are within our control. We also want to offer some uplifting perspectives to remind all of our families that even amidst these challenges there is still a lot to look forward to this year.

We are encouraging all of our families to consider a 'risk-benefit analysis' when preparing for the school year to begin. This means that we are acknowledging the risks of Covid transmission, and openly sharing our strategies for minimising and controlling these, but we are also encouraging people to remain aware of the many wonderful benefits awaiting their children in the classroom. Looking at these risks and benefits will help you feel empowered and assist you with making informed decisions.

This particular document focuses on the *benefits* that our classroom can offer your children this year. We encourage you to read it in conjunction with the document entitled ***Covid Protocols 2022***, which outlines the many strategies that our leaders and educators will be putting into place to minimise or avoid risks in the classroom. Those guidelines will hopefully reassure you that we are taking many steps to create a safe and secure environment.

Both documents look at three important themes that are fundamental to our decision-making:

- Protecting physical well-being,
- Empowering psychological well-being,
- Protecting continuity of care.

These are the three goals that guide us and we hope that they may help to give you a sense of clarity in a very complex situation.

The benefits of our Montessori environments

We could write an essay on the countless benefits of our Montessori environments, but the truth is that you already know many of them. They are the reasons that you chose us in the first place! You enrolled your child with us because you recognised how beneficial our nurturing early learning environments are. You know that we inspire your child's curious mind, spark their imagination, support their needs, scaffold their social success. You know that we build strong and meaningful relationships with them to help build their confidence, and that we empower them with practical skills to help them become capable and independent little people. You know that we help them learn how to coordinate their bodies and channel their energy into purposeful, productive tasks. You know that every day they spend with us they are learning and laughing as they experience the delight of discovery! All of these benefits were part of our program long before the pandemic arrived, and there is nothing that Covid can do to undermine them. All of these wonderful opportunities are still awaiting your child at Montessori, but since you are already aware of them we want to use the rest of this document to discuss some of the benefits that are *specific* to the pandemic.

Protecting physical well-being:

With cases of Covid spreading through South Australia, it is obviously a top priority to ensure that we do everything in our power to protect the physical health and safety of our children. Fortunately, our Montessori settings offer several advantages in achieving this.



- **Our classrooms offer a *controlled environment* compared to other common settings.**
The reality of the current situation is that Covid is so prevalent in our community that every environment your family encounters – including their own home – presents a potential risk of exposure. It is not possible for a household to maintain absolutely *zero* contact with the outside world, so there will always be a possibility of transmission. It is therefore worth considering the fact that our environments have the capacity for much more control than many other public settings. For instance, if a family decided to keep their child home from preschool then that child might have to accompany the parent to places like a supermarket, or your little one might need to burn off some energy at the local playground. Environments like that may not have the same strong focus on hygiene that we offer. We can also offer the reassurance of our educators being double vaccinated in accordance with the government mandate for early childhood services, whereas many other common settings have no control over whether the employees or attendees offer that protection.
- **We have highly effective in-house contact tracing.**
We are hopeful that our many robust health and safety procedures will help to avoid transmission in our centre and prevent a Covid-positive person from attending our site. However, we know it is so prevalent in the community that it is impossible for any person or environment to eliminate risk entirely. We are therefore reassured by the benefit of our robust systems for identifying who may have been exposed and informing them straight away. We are not dependent on SA Health to conduct contact tracing, and therefore we are not at risk of the same delays or oversights that many other settings might have to endure. We can guarantee that any contact tracing in our sites would be comprehensive and essentially immediate. As soon as we are made aware of a positive case, we can instantly access our attendance data to see exactly who was on site and notify them without delay. This reduces the risk of further transmission by making families aware of the need to isolate.

Empowering psychological well-being:

We should not underestimate the *psychological* impact that the pandemic is having on adults and children alike. Our Montessori classrooms are designed to be a supportive safe haven for our families, and to be empowering environments for children. Maintaining your contact with Montessori can offer many benefits to mental health.

- **Our educators specialise in emotional support.**
When a child maintains their attendance at Montessori, they are accessing the guidance of educators who are experts in being calm, reassuring 'guiding lights'. Learning to be the 'emotional leader' in the room, setting the tone for a peaceful and positive atmosphere, is part of our training as teachers. It is something that SA Montessori educators particularly excel at. That is no coincidence, because emotional literacy, self-regulation and sensitive empathy are qualities that we look for when employing our educators. Furthermore, our organisation has a strong focus on Positive Mental Well-being, and all of our team members recently participated in a project to deepen their understanding of how to support children, families and each other. It is natural and valid for children (and parents) to feel nervous right now, and our educators are an amazing resource for helping to refill their emotional cups during this challenging time.
- **Consistency and security can reduce anxiety.**
The last two years have been stressful for everyone. We might assume that our children are 'too young' to be impacted by Covid-related stress or anxiety, but the truth is that they are sensitively attuned to the emotional energy of the adults around them. Even infants pick up on subtle cues from their primary carers, so there is no child who is immune to the emotional and psychological harm that this pandemic is capable of causing. Children also respond



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significantly to unexpected changes in circumstance, as they thrive on the sense of security that a predictable routine offers them. We have seen this firsthand over the past two years, with families who chose to stay home due to health concerns often finding quickly that their child was exhibiting signs of distress (and 'cabin fever'). It can be incredibly reassuring for your child if important elements of their routine, such as their time with their friends at Montessori, remain consistent. It gives them something to rely on, to look forward to, and to feel a sense of control over. This can be very powerful in terms of maintaining your child's psychological well-being. It can also be healthy for parents to maintain regular contact with their trusted allies. You are going through a challenging time, it is understandable that you may feel anxious, overwhelmed or exhausted. Our SA Montessori team members care for *you* too, and you may find it helpful to talk to someone who will treat your feelings with respect and compassion.

Protecting continuity of care:

As we've outlined above, there are many benefits for your child when they attend Montessori, even during this challenging time. Of course, ensuring that our centres stay open and provide continuous care also offers major benefits for parents too, as your child's time in the classroom gives you the opportunity to work, study, volunteer or attend to other important tasks. We understand that our existence facilitates a great deal of meaningful activity for the adults in our community. We therefore know it is highly beneficial for our whole community if our doors stay open and our children keep attending.

- **Supporting us to support you.**

Healthy relationships are always reciprocal. Whether it is between two friends, a parent and child, or even a relationship between a family and an early learning setting. We care for your children and offer you the opportunity to attend to your other commitments, but you also reciprocate by giving our educators your trust, the privilege of being part of your child's life, and by contributing to their livelihoods. Maintaining your enrolment therefore helps to support the teachers who are such an important part of your child's life. SA Montessori is not a franchise, we are a family. We are a group of seven centres owned by five individuals who are friends and relatives. We aren't a big chain with faceless investors looking for a return. We are a little community of passionate professionals who feel that Montessori is our purpose in life. We have been supporting the children and families of Adelaide for more than three decades, since our first little classroom opened back in 1989, and we hope to keep doing this for many years to come. We are incredibly grateful for the continued support of our families. We appreciate that you support the well-being of our educators by showing compassion and respect towards them, even during these difficult times.

We are also thankful to the families who might choose to keep their children home temporarily, but also help to keep our centres open for others who need it. You can do this by ensuring that you choose to maintain your enrolment but utilise your 'absences' so that your child can stay home but the centre can still access the government's contribution of your Child Care Subsidy entitlements. This solution is a mutually beneficial alternative to withdrawing, as it ensures your child's position is still available as soon as you feel ready for them to return to the classroom, it maintains the employment of the educators you know and love, and it ensures that the centre can afford to remain open for the families who rely upon our care.



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Accessing reliable sources of information:

We know that one of the biggest challenges that parents face is trying to get reliable information so that you can make informed decisions. It can be difficult to know what to think when media reports sensationalise details, or when government officials put their own political spin on their messages. It can also be confusing when we hear conflicting opinions from our friends and relatives, or hear stories about a 'friend of a friend' that may have lost some clarity along the way. We encourage parents to try to get their information from *Australian medical sources*, as we believe this is the most reliable way to get trustworthy and relevant insights into the reality of the local situation.

One resource that we found particularly helpful was the following video which was developed by the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne with a panel of expert paediatricians who have direct experience supporting children who are positive with Covid. Please note that the discussion primarily applies to the Delta variant, which was the dominant strain at the time of the production of the video. All medical indications suggest the Omicron is *milder in its physical impact* than Delta, so the information in this video can still be useful but you may wish to remember that the effects of Omicron may be even milder. <https://youtu.be/5c7M7xawVxo>

We hope that using reliable resources helps you to make an informed decision from a position of understanding rather than fear.

Planning for the start of the 2022 school year:

We hope that the majority of our families will feel reassured by the information we have provided, including that:

- There are many benefits associated with maintaining your child's usual attendance,
- The risks of exposure to Covid are not unique to our setting (meaning that avoiding Preschool does not actually eliminate risk) and that we are actually an environment that is particularly well-equipped to put protocols in place to minimise risk and support the safety of our children,
- Covid is, in most cases for otherwise healthy individuals, likely to be a relatively mild illness.

We are sure that many of you will decide that these benefits outweigh the risks and we therefore look forward to seeing you as planned in the coming weeks!

If you feel confident that you want your child to continue accessing the benefits of Montessori, but you are still feeling uncomfortable about potential risks, you might like to think about creative options like temporarily reducing your child's attendance (such as coming one day a week rather than two or three) or making their days shorter (such as arranging for your child to attend only during the outdoor periods of the day).

If you have reason to believe that the risks associated with attendance outweigh the benefits (for instance if someone in your child's household is immunocompromised) please contact your centre Director to discuss your situation directly and decide upon a strategy and timeframe together.

Please get in touch with your centre Director to discuss fee relief if your child is required to isolate due to a positive test, or as a close contact.

If you have any further questions you can contact your centre via email.

Kind regards,
Jessica Langford
On behalf of SA Montessori