

Using cots, highchairs and change tables in early childhood education and care.

Early childhood workers risk injury when they bend, reach or twist when lifting young children into and out of highchairs and cots and when using change tables. This guidance can help PCBU's reduce the risk of injury to early childhood workers.

Reducing the risk of injury

Early childhood workers operate in demanding and fast-paced environments and can face situations which may compromise their health and safety. Persons conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU's) have an obligation under the Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (WHS Act) to provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risks to health. This obligation requires PCBU's to eliminate risks to health and safety, so far as is reasonably practicable. If it is not reasonably practicable to eliminate those risks, PCBU's must reduce those risks, so far as is reasonably practicable.

Hazardous manual tasks and musculoskeletal disorders

PCBU's also have additional duties under the Work Health and Safety Regulations 2017 (WHS Regs) relating to the elimination and control of risks associated with hazardous manual tasks and musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs).

A hazardous manual task requires a person to lift, lower, push, pull, carry or otherwise move, hold or restrain any person, animal or thing involving one or more of the following:

- repetitive or sustained force
- high or sudden force
- repetitive movement
- sustained or awkward posture
- exposure to vibration.

Handling children can be a hazardous manual task and can put workers at risk of an MSD.

Part 4.2 of the WHS Regs has details of PCBU's' specific duties relating to the control of risks from hazardous manual tasks.

To reduce the risk of MSDs, PCBU's must:

- have a process to identify hazardous manual tasks and eliminate them where possible

- ensure that where it is not possible to eliminate the risk, the risk is reduced so far as reasonably practicable through the use of higher-order controls such as, for example, changing the workplace layout and engineering controls
- ensure the workplace has adequate room and facilities for workers to safely perform their tasks
- ensure workers are provided and using the correct equipment
- ensure workers receive appropriate information, instruction, training or supervision so they fully understand the safest ways to perform their tasks

PCBU's and workers should work together to identify and control risks, making sure that controls meet the needs of both workers and children and that any risk controls do not create new hazards.

The following guidelines may help eliminate or reduce, so far as reasonably practicable, the risk of an MSD when using furniture such as cots, highchairs and change tables.

Equipment

Using cots

PCBU's should make sure workplaces use cots which minimise the distance workers need to bend and reach.

- Cots should be of a height that will enable workers to lift and lower children into and out of the cots with minimal forward bending of the workers back.
- If cots have two base positions, set the base to the higher position for infants unable to stand. The higher base position will reduce the need for workers to reach into cots.
- Cots should have sides that drop to reduce the need for workers to bend and reach over the cot side to lift and lower children. At its dropped level, the top of the cot's lowered side should be no less than 250mm above the top of the mattress base, to ensure children cannot roll out of the cot.
- Ensure there is enough clearance under cots for workers to stand with their feet under the edge of the cot to minimise reaching distance.

- Prepare cots in advance so sides are down before workers lift children in or out.
- If cots have wheels, ensure the wheels have locks and keep wheels in the locked position when the cot is not being moved.
- Regularly check and maintain cot wheels, wheel locks and drop-down sides to ensure cots are safe and secure.
- Assess floor surfaces to ensure minimal friction and resistance when wheeling cots. Change floor surfaces so workers can easily move cots.
- Ensure cots meet all relevant structural safety Standards and requirements.
- Make sure workers have sufficient access around the change table so they can change the child from a front position with the child's feet facing the employee's stomach.
- Make sure changing supplies and waste disposal facilities are within easy reach, reducing the need for workers to repeatedly twist, bend or use an extended reach.
- Avoid change tables that require children to be left unrestrained or require the worker to use force, bend, twist or reach when assisting children onto and off the change table.

Using highchairs

PCBU's should make sure workplaces use highchairs which minimise bending, reaching and twisting when lowering or lifting children in the chairs.

- Use highchairs with removable or adjustable trays so workers can lower or lift children before putting the tray in place.
- Use highchairs which do not have obstructions at floor level so workers can stand with their feet under the edge of the seat to minimise reaching distances when lifting children into or out of the chair.
- Use highchairs of a height that allows workers to lift and lower children into and out of the chair with minimal forward bending of the employee's back.
- If highchairs have wheels, ensure the wheels have locks and keep wheels in the locked position when the chair is not being moved.
- Assess floor surfaces to ensure minimal friction and resistance when wheeling highchairs. Change floor surfaces so workers can easily move highchairs.
- Consider alternative feeding arrangements for children who are able.

Using change tables

PCBU's should make sure workplaces use change tables which minimise bending, reaching and twisting when workers are using change tables. The list below provides suggestions on how to reduce the risk of injury.

- Use change tables with steps so children who are able can walk up and down to the change table surface, removing the need for workers to lift children. The step size and number of steps should be suitable for the smallest child using the change table.
- Moveable and portable steps should be made from lightweight and strong materials.
- Use change tables with a handrail to aid the child to climb the steps.
- Use change table steps that protect the child from a fall from an unprotected edge.
- Children should be prevented from accessing the steps unsupervised or when the steps are not in use.
- Use change tables with space underneath for workers' feet so they can stand close to the child being changed.
- Use height-adjustable change tables so workers can adjust tables to waist height.

Systems for safely lifting and helping children

PCBU's should have systems in place which reduce bending, reaching and twisting when lifting and helping children. To reduce the risk of injury, PCBU's should:

- assess if, when and how workers lift children onto, into or from equipment and eliminate lifting tasks where possible
- assess each part of the task to identify hazardous manual handling tasks
- train, inform, instruct and supervise workers in work procedures and the use of equipment
- provide straightforward processes to identify and report safety issues and to have safety issues fixed as soon as possible
- schedule and record regular inspections and maintenance of the workplace and equipment
- rotate manual handling tasks among workers to reduce risks associated with MSDs.

In consultation with workers PCBU's must review and revise risk control measures if, for any reason, risk control measures relating to the tasks of helping children do not adequately control the risks of hazardous manual tasks. PCBU's must also review risk control measures:

- if new or additional information about hazardous manual tasks becomes available
- after any incident occurs to which Part 5 of the WHS Act 2017 applies that involves hazardous manual tasks
- after receiving a request from a health and safety representative

Further Information

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SafeWork NSW Publications

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