

# Applying sunscreen in an early childhood setting

**Supporting children to apply and wear sunscreen can sometimes be challenging. Understanding how sunscreen works can make applying it easier for staff and families.**

## What is sunscreen?

Sunscreen is typically a cream or lotion used to help protect your skin from the damaging effects of ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun. Sunscreens are usually formulas containing water and oil. When you apply sunscreen to skin, some of it will evaporate or absorb, leaving a protective layer on top of the skin. It usually takes 20 minutes for this protective layer to form, after which the skin will have the full level of protection—stated as the sun protection factor (SPF) on the label.

## How does sunscreen work?

Sunscreen ingredients work in two ways; by reflecting and scattering, and/or absorbing UV radiation to stop it reaching the skin. Because sunscreen helps prevent UV radiation from reaching the skin, it helps prevent DNA damage which leads to skin cancer.

## Why do we wait 20 minutes after applying sunscreen?

The protective sunscreen layer on top of the skin takes 20 minutes to form. If children go outside before this layer has developed, you risk them having no or reduced protection from the sun and their skin may get damaged.

We must also be careful children do not rub the sunscreen off and allow it to dry during these 20 minutes. Putting clothes on or off, and activities which cause sweating or something rubbing against the skin before the protective layer of sunscreen has formed, will cause uneven and inadequate sunscreen coverage.

Trying to get children to keep still and not to touch their face or skin for 20 minutes can be difficult. We encourage you to have an application process which includes a fun distraction while they wait before going outside. Morning stretching, singing songs, reading a story, or a game of musical freeze can be good ways to keep them occupied.

## Do you have to wait 20 minutes before going outside after every application?

Waiting 20 minutes after the first application is important to form the protective layer. Any subsequent applications reinforce this protective layer and it isn't necessary to wait another 20 minutes.

When products that wash or rub off the sunscreen are used, such as baby wipes, soap, oil-based cleansers, or using face washers, you will need to reapply sunscreen and wait 20 minutes before going outside. This gives the protective layer time to form again.

## Why do I need to re-apply sunscreen after two hours?

Sunscreen can break down after extended sun exposure. Sunscreen can also be wiped off by children or lost through perspiration and may have been unevenly applied in the first place.

Re-applying sunscreen every two hours helps keep the protective sunscreen layer in place to keep children protected.

### **The sunscreen label says it's water resistant for up to four hours.**

Sunscreen is tested in laboratory conditions, not outside on children where there are real life factors which can reduce the effectiveness of the sunscreen.

Even if the label says the sunscreen is *four-hour water resistant*, sunscreen only maintains its full SPF for a maximum of two hours. Additionally, the activities children engage in during the day mean the sunscreen is very likely to be rubbed off, so it is recommended that you reapply every two hours and always reapply after swimming or water play and after towel drying.

### **How do I know when to re-apply?**

Reapplication is about maintaining the effectiveness of sunscreen, when remaining or returning outdoors. Sunscreen should be re-applied every two hours. If children are engaged in water activities, then you should dry them and reapply sunscreen immediately after they finish in the water (as the water will reduce the effectiveness of the sunscreen).

If children go between indoor and outdoor activities throughout the day at your site, it may be easier to have set times (every two hours) to reapply sunscreen to all children such as morning tea and lunch. Set times eliminate the need to monitor individual reapplication times for each child, making it easier to maintain protection.

### **Can sunscreen be applied while in the sun?**

We recommend applying the first application of sunscreen when indoors or in the shade and waiting 20 minutes for the protective sunscreen layer to form before going out in the

sun. Subsequent applications of sunscreen do not require you to wait 20 minutes and can even be reapplied while children are outside, if it is being reapplied every two hours.

### **Is it ok to use gloves or tissues when applying sunscreen to children.**

It's generally recommended to apply sunscreen directly with clean, dry hands to ensure even coverage, washing and drying your hands after each application. Using a tissue or cotton wool ball to apply sunscreen can save time when applying to multiple children. Ensure a new tissue/cotton wool ball is used for each child.

Using gloves can help to maintain hygiene, especially if you or a child has a visible skin condition or an open wound. Use a new pair of gloves for each child to prevent cross-contamination.

### **What if a child refuses to wear sunscreen?**

Inform the family and discuss strategies with them to encourage sunscreen use. Keep outdoor activities to shaded areas and ensure the child is wearing their hat and sun protective clothing.

### **Can we still use SPF30+ sunscreen?**

SPF relates to the amount of time it takes for redness to appear on the skin compared to when no product is used at all (in a laboratory setting). A higher SPF means greater protection is provided.

While Cancer Council SA recommends choosing an SPF50 or SPF50+ sunscreen, it is safe to continue to use an SPF30+ sunscreen, as it still provides a high level of protection.



SLIP



SLOP



SLAP



SEEK



SLIDE

### Tips for your sunscreen application routine:

- Encourage families to apply sunscreen before they drop their child off. This reinforces positive sun protection practices at home and familiarises the child with the application of sunscreen.
- If families aren't required to apply sunscreen prior to arrival, create a fun application routine for children which helps them to stay inside for 20 minutes after applying their first application for the day. Activities such as learning the alphabet, reading or singing songs, colouring-in, morning stretching or a game of musical statues can be good ways to keep them actively occupied.
- Have set times (across the centre/service) every day for sunscreen to be reapplied to all children. On arrival, morning tea and lunch are easy times to remember.
- Incorporate sunscreen application into your centre's—or service's—daily routine. For example, children apply sunscreen, wash hands and put their hat on before going outside.
- Having a sunscreen station with a mirror can help support young children (when age appropriate) to apply their own sunscreen. This should always be under adult supervision.
- Have a way to record each sunscreen application, such as a chart, form or via the communication app used at your site. This maintains transparency with families.

### More information and resources:

We recommend reading this resource in conjunction with [Sunscreen Fact Sheet](#) and [Sun protection babies and toddlers](#).

More information is available at [www.sunsmart.org.au](http://www.sunsmart.org.au)