



Correspondence

Children returning to schools following COVID-19: A balance of probabilities – Letter to the Editor



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Dear Editor,

The review by Nicola et al. discusses a wide variety of socio-economic consequences as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, including its impact on education [1]. As governments look beyond virus containment to rebooting economies and easing lockdown measures, the topic of schools has now taken centre-stage. This letter aims to analyse key arguments surrounding the reinstatement of schools in the United Kingdom (UK), including highlights of possible flaws.

The phased return of Reception, Year 1, and Year 6 pupils from June 1st was announced by the UK government on May 10th, 2020, with the possibility that Year 10 and Year 12 students may have ‘some contact’ with their teachers from June 15th. This is conditional upon the British public maintaining social-distancing measures and a virus reproduction rate (R) below 1. This unexpected announcement resulted in enormous backlash from the media, parents and teachers’ unions alike, concerned over a perceived lack of safety. This was illustrated in an Opinion poll for The Observer; results showed that approximately half of parents feel anxious about the prospects of schools returning [2].

The government has attempted to alleviate concerns by referencing an unpublished and non peer-reviewed meta-analysis of children’s and adults’ susceptibility to SARS-CoV-2 infection, led by researchers at University College London. This study concluded that - for unknown reasons - children are 56% less likely than adults to catch COVID-19 when exposed to an infected person [3]. Once infected, children are also more likely to be asymptomatic or show milder symptoms. Thus, while children themselves may have reduced risk of catching the virus, the role they play in transmitting the virus (i.e. their ‘infectiousness’) is uncertain. As some studies have shown that children aged 5–18 years old have the highest number of social contacts in a population, early return to school remains a major concern given the limited data on their potential for viral spread [4].

The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), which advises the government, published statistical modelling of school reopening and their potential effects on the R value [5]. These scenarios ranged from the current policy of only providing school services to children of key workers, to a full return of all students. The objective of

the model was to identify a solution that maximises students’ return to school whilst keeping R as low as possible. The main conclusion is that reopening schools offers a much milder impact on the R value than relaxing population-wide social distancing and lockdown measures.

While we must question the role children play epidemiologically within a pandemic, we must not forget the wider impact this pandemic has had on children’s mental, physical and educational wellbeing. At-risk children (e.g. “early years”, vulnerable, special educational needs and disabilities) benefit significantly from attending school and the socialisation it brings. The full extent of the long-term consequences of this pandemic remain to be seen, but it has been suggested that children may have had increased exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences, known to be associated with poorer long-term health and social outcomes [4].

In addition, discrepancies in the quality of distant learning resources may widen social inequalities as a result of differing levels of internet access and technological provisions. The potential inability to access the internet in lower socio-economic households will result in consequences for those children’s learning and future attainment. This is especially pronounced if the children are in their early years when they are just beginning to learn the essentials of literacy and numeracy.

A major caveat to the SAGE report is that it only considers in-school transmission; it does not take into account transport to and from schools or transmission within households [5]. It is also expected that children will have difficulty adhering to social distancing measures inside and outside of classrooms, especially for those in the youngest age groups. Furthermore, considerations around the transport of children are needed once parents begin returning to work, as many will rely on public transport.

As students around the world begin to successfully return back to schools with new safety measures, lessons must be learned to ensure the smooth transition of easing lockdown while mitigating any mistakes. During this process, we must question the limited learning or social benefits of children returning to schools for short periods of time given the considerable risks highlighted in this letter. Extreme caution is needed; suggestions that countries with newly reopened schools may have begun to see local outbreaks emphasises the importance for on-going review.

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