

## **Covid risk and school**

### **Advice for parents of children with chronic health conditions/disabilities who attend mainstream or special schools**

Community Paediatrics Department, Oxfordshire, 28 August 2020

Many parents of children with disabilities and chronic health conditions are concerned about the risks related to their child returning to school this September. We expect that many of our families may be in contact to discuss these concerns. Please bear with us, as we expect to have a large number of queries.

The broad principles, on which we, as Community Paediatricians would base our advice, are as follows:

We know that this is an anxious time for the families of many children who have significant health vulnerabilities including those who have been shielding.

We also know that many children and families have suffered as a result of not being in school for so many months.

School brings significant benefits to many children including learning progress, social interaction and daily routine, and as a general rule, we would encourage attendance at school.

Research into Covid 19 and its impact on children is being actively pursued and we now know a lot more about the risks of Covid for children than we did even a few weeks ago, including on the risk to children with underlying health vulnerabilities. The risk for children who become infected with Covid of requiring hospital treatment is 0.1% and the risk of death is 0.01%, so very unlikely (see details below for some of the research on which these numbers are based). This is also true of children who have significant health vulnerabilities.

The risk of Covid 19 circulating among asymptomatic children in schools, and causing transmission to others is currently unknown, but is being actively monitored. There is ongoing research to understand this better. (<https://whatsthestory.web.ox.ac.uk/home>)

What we do know is that the risk of spreading Covid 19 is significantly reduced by ensuring that anyone who has symptoms (cough, fever, diarrhoea, vomiting) should not be coming into school, isolate and have a swab test. Hand-washing and other hygiene measures also reduce the risk (not just of Covid but also other infections).

The Department for Education has issued guidance for schools (which is primarily aimed at mainstream rather than special schools):

*Schools and settings can also reduce risk of cross infection further by:*

- *grouping children and young people together*
- *avoiding contact between groups*
- *arranging classrooms with forward facing desks*

- *staff maintaining distance from pupils and other staff as much as possible*

The second two of these are not likely to be applicable to many pupils in special school settings however the risks are also significantly reduced by the smaller class sizes.

Many people are concerned about the risk that children going to school might be exposed to Covid and then transmit it to adults in the household who are at high risk. If this is a particular concern in your household, please discuss this with the school. It is important in these circumstances to ensure that other factors which may pose a risk to the vulnerable adult are also reduced by following social distancing, mask-wearing and hygiene practices very strictly. These are likely to have as much or more impact on protecting the vulnerable adult than keeping the child or children out of school. The potential risk to the adult needs to be carefully balanced with the potential harm to the child of not being in school for a prolonged period of time.

If you have questions or concerns about the risk reduction measures which will be in place in schools, please discuss these with the school.

If you would like to talk things through with your child's consultant, then we will do our best to respond to you as soon as we can.

Dr Sarah Haden

Clinical Lead in Community Paediatrics

Details of recent research/guidance:

For those who are interested in the details of the research evidence, there is a summary on the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health website, which is updated regularly. <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/covid-19-research-evidence-summaries#epidemiology>

A study of the proportion of children who have antibodies to Covid (which gives us an idea of how many children have been infected with the virus so far) showed that about 4% of children under the age of 16 years tested positive

(<https://whatsthestory.web.ox.ac.uk/files/storyresultsummary17thaug1pdf>), which would be equivalent to about 500,000 children in the whole country (based on a child population around of around 13 million).

Based on a very large study of 260 hospitals across the UK, by July 2020, 651 children had been admitted to hospital who tested positive for Covid (as compared to over 134,000 adults admitted). There have been 6 deaths, 3 of which were of very unwell premature babies. This is tragic for the families involved. It does show that in children this disease carries a similar risk of serious illness or death as seasonal influenza (risk of being admitted to hospital for children with Covid is 0.1% and risk of death is 0.01%). <https://www.bmj.com/content/370/bmj.m3249>

\*Ref: Department for Education – Guidance July 2020