

Advisory note for the Independent SAGE group: reopening schools in England

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Purpose and context

This note was requested in the context of ongoing disagreement between education unions and the UK government on the re-opening of schools in England. The Covid crisis presents acute and unprecedented difficulties for policy, as the first serious pandemic in our times affecting Western Europe, the speed of global spread, and key differences between this and other viral infections. The scientific knowledge remains unclear concerning transmission involving children. Meanwhile children need support psychologically and socially as well as educationally, and there is an obvious danger of increasing disadvantage.

This note attempts to summarise the issues, in the context of statistical data, available medical knowledge, educational research and school norms in England. It has some relevance to other parts of the UK, but it is useful to consider England separately, given different infection patterns and school characteristics.

Data

Decisions about relaxing the lockdown have been made more difficult by disparities between government announcements and other data sources. It seems clear, however, that the situation in England is still critical, given that the number of excess deaths (EuroMOMO¹) compared with mainland Europe and other parts of the UK is still very high. ONS² data shows that deaths in weeks 16 and 17 in England and Wales were more than double the seasonal five-year average. EuroMOMO graphs show that deaths in England have reduced much less than in Spain, Italy or France. They also point to numerous deaths among 15-64 year olds as a problem unique to England, possibly resulting from pressure to attend non-essential work.

Sickness and deaths have been more serious in poorer neighbourhoods and among BAME adults. It is still unknown how many children have been infected, but hospital admissions and deaths are low.

¹ <https://www.euromomo.eu/graphs-and-maps/>

² <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/datasets/weeklyprovisionalfiguresondeathsregisteredinenglandandwales>

Scientific advice on transmission involving children

Whilst it is not the role of this paper to analyse the medical evidence in general, a summary of research relevant to the question of school closure and re-opening is unavoidable. The contradictory scientific advice on transmission affects not only children but those they come in contact with, including siblings and parents with health conditions and (in extended households) grandparents.

- i) There appears to be consensus that few infected children become seriously ill.
- ii) Some studies show that children are less likely to become infected; however, caveats are expressed about the danger of generalisation and a recent English pilot study³ suggests they are as likely to be infected as other age groups. Even if children are less likely than adults to be spreaders, the impact of placing them together in large numbers in schools could be serious. Schools could easily become institutional amplifiers, if asymptomatic children go unnoticed until an adult gets ill enough to be tested.
- iii) The key disagreement concerns whether children who have been infected are likely to transmit the virus to other children and adults. Whilst an Australian study involving only 18 children concluded not, a large community-based study in Germany led by Christian Drosten⁴ found that infected children had as high a viral load as infected adults. A Chinese study⁵, during lockdown, found that children were a third as likely to be infected, but still concluded that school closure could reduce the reproduction rate R by around 0.3, so was a significant issue. Some models suggest a limited impact of school closure on deaths, whereas Hunter et al⁶ concludes that closure of educational institutions is very important. Carsetti et al⁷ state that their empirical research has only just begun, and their report is full of conjecture and uncertainty. Matthew Snape (Oxford)⁸, initiating a new study of infection in children and teenagers, claims that the question of whether they are spreaders or not remains "one of the many unknowns... Understanding this is vital to understanding how to manage the outbreak response, including decisions about when to re-open schools."⁹ A similar study has recently begun in Stuttgart from the same concerns.¹⁰

The difficulties are confirmed by the carefully worded DfE summary of the available research:

There is no evidence to suggest that children transmit the virus any more than adults. Some studies suggest younger children may transmit less, but this evidence is mixed and provides a *low degree of confidence at best*.¹¹

The impact of school closure on children

The role of schools is wider than enabling exam success and the production of a skilled workforce. Schools develop children's social and cultural understandings both in the curriculum, the values of the school, and in the relationships between pupils and between staff and pupils. The closing of schools revealed highly positive attitudes of parents and children to schools. In terms of access of children to education what is known is that school practice has been highly varied including suggesting educational online resources, delivering teacher made worksheets, live on-line teaching, posting tasks and completed work on facebook, and zoom check-in sessions between teachers and classes and teachers contacting

³<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19infectionsurvey/pilot/england14may2020>

⁴https://zoonosen.charite.de/fileadmin/user_upload/microsites/m_cc05/virologie-ccm/dateien_upload/Weitere_Dateien/analysis-of-SARS-CoV-2-viral-load-by-patient-age.pdf

⁵<https://science.sciencemag.org/content/early/2020/05/04/science.abb8001.full>

⁶ Hunter PR, Colon-Gonzalez F, Brainard JS, Rushton S. Impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions against COVID-19 in Europe: a quasi-experimental study. medRxiv 2020: 2020.05.01.20088260.

⁷[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(20\)30135-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(20)30135-8/fulltext)

⁸<https://www.nihr.ac.uk/news/new-research-to-assess-extent-of-coronavirus-infection-in-children-and-teenagers/24653>

⁹<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-52003804>

¹⁰<https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/heute-sendungen/videos/corona-kinder-infektion-100.html>

¹¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/885631/Overview_of_scientific_advice_and_information_on_coronavirus_COVID19.pdf

children and parents by telephone. Children with different economic backgrounds vary in access to educational resources whether laptop/tablets and the internet or paper and pen¹².

Parental experience of lockdown has varied although there is little published data at present. The main issues for parents from early findings from a survey of 1000 parents and 400 children's experiences are money worries, access to resources (stationary as well as laptops) and emotional support. Child Poverty Action Group¹³ Newcastle university initial unpublished research, a survey of 200 local parents (including some who are also teachers) from a range of backgrounds (15% on means-tested benefits), finds that children find it hard not being at school (over half), parenting is more difficult (well over half), they are getting good support from school (almost two thirds), equal numbers enjoying and not enjoying helping children with school work (both around a quarter), children are finding it difficult not being at school (over half). Parents' main worries were their children's mental health (well over half), motivating their children (half), and juggling work and childcare/home-schooling (over half). The CPAG report found parents valued good communication from school (not necessarily the resources), children are missing their friends, that there was too much learning using online methods, and families needed cash payments rather than vouchers for free school meals.

Whilst there is little published data on impact of the closure, what is known is that impact is wider than academic progress, including the psychological effects of isolation and increased vulnerability to some children when they are never seen by adults outside their own household. Cuts in local government social services budgets have made it more difficult for professionals to maintain contact with vulnerable children, and few schools have staff or staff time dedicated to family liaison. The academic impact is likely to vary according to socio-economic background, so that children of low-income families are likely to benefit less from home learning.¹⁴ This is partly because schools serving more affluent families, and especially private schools, are better equipped for online learning; partly because some families do not have adequate ICT; and partly because less educated parents need more proactive support to help their children.

It should be noted, however, that socio-economic differences exist even when schools are open. Despite frequent government claims to be 'closing the gap', recent research found that 'at the current rate of progress it would take a full 50 years to reach an equitable education system where disadvantaged pupils did not fall behind their peers during formal education to age 16'¹⁵.

Children identified as vulnerable have also had the right, and in some cases the expectation that they will attend school with the children of keyworkers throughout the lockdown period.¹⁶ The fact that there is a concern that too few are doing so is an issue to address in and of itself, not connected to the debate about all children returning to school.¹⁷

Government policy and media emphasis

The discussion on re-opening schools is focussing on the health risks of covid-19 as if this was all about opening vs not opening. However, this is not the issue. During lockdown all (or almost all) schools have been open for key workers, vulnerable children and those on free school meals at the same time as providing educational support and resources for the majority of children to do at home. Therefore the question is not whether or not to open but when to start increasing education from school premises, how to do this, and what needs to focus on.

Government and media seem to be focusing on the importance for children of continuing their education and now wanting the attainment gap to widen further. However, there are a range of broad needs for children that are important to consider. Prime are children's social, emotional and wider development

¹² <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-Impact-Brief-School-Shutdown.pdf>

¹³ <https://cpag.org.uk/file/4912/download?token=ytkETSII>

¹⁴ <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief/>

¹⁵ Andrews, J, Robinson, D and Hutchinson, J (2017) Closing the gap? trends in educational attainment and disadvantage. <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/closing-gap-trends-educational-attainment-disadvantage/>.

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-school-closures/guidance-for-schools-about-temporarily-closing>

¹⁷ <https://neu.org.uk/press-releases/children-risk-during-lockdown>

needs. One could imagine a completely social distancing school that ends up creating an environment that could be emotionally harmful for children. Stories of nurseries and reception classes removing all toys prior to re-opening are unlikely to create a rich learning environment and might otherwise create harm. CPAG's survey found parent's needs to help children settle back to school include: emotional support, a phased return, extra help to catch up, support with transition, support with routines and structure again; and lots of contact and information in advance to help parents prepare.

One of the key questions to ask is why schools have been instructed to open with the youngest children as the first 'test case' when it is clear that they will pose many more logistical problems with reference to the physical care they require exposing staff to body fluids (raising many questions around PPE)¹⁸ and the fact that they will have difficulties understanding the reasons for social distancing, and remembering relevant instructions. On 17th May 2020, Michael Gove appeared on the Andrew Marr Show and suggested that what would be expected from schools is to create groups of 15 children, supervised by one member of staff, with the children sitting at socially distanced desks, with the adult teaching from the front. If he is expecting this to happen with children between 3 and 6- the age group that the government requires to attend school from 1st June- it is clear that he has no understanding of early years practice. Children of this age are too young to sit at desks and be lectured from the front of the class, and the practice would be unsuitable and quite alien to them¹⁹. The classrooms they normally inhabit are also not equipped for such practice. If this is the expectation of the government, the unsuitability of the practice is such that it would be better for the children's mental health to continue to remain at home. It should also be remembered, that in most nations in the world, the school starting age is 6 or 7 so very few children of this age are actually in school²⁰. As such, it seems highly illogical to insist that there is a greater urgency for them to return to school than for older age groups.

BBC news sites have used examples of the practice in Danish schools as a model. However, Danish children do not start school until they are 6, and the films used in the broadcast appear to be children in the 7+ age group²¹

The difficulties of re-opening schools in England

Countries with low infection rates and which have already re-opened schools have had to take special measures, generally a combination of only admitting some age groups and dividing classes into two. This is clearly more difficult in England, given large classes and a poorer teacher : pupil ratio, than in many other northern European countries. Some schools will find it impossible to double the number of teaching groups while some staff are unable to work.

One particular difficulty is the lack of local authority capacity in England, now that almost all secondary schools and a large percentage of primary schools are academies or free schools. It is significant that the DfE presents itself as "asking" schools to welcome back children in particular years. The burden is placed on individual schools to carry out a risk assessment.²² This contrasts with Denmark, for example, where local authority agreement is needed that a school is indeed ready to open. This would have implications if parents were to sue a headteacher or chair of governors for making an incorrect judgement.

Children begin school in England much younger than in mainland Europe. It is more difficult to maintain physical distancing among 4 and 5 year olds.

A further difficulty lies in the structure of English state secondary schools. Firstly the average school size tends to be much larger than in other countries, in some cases three times as large. Secondly, it is more common to divide up children into different ability levels for specific subjects (setting). Finally, 14-16 year olds have significant choice over the subjects they are studying. Consequently, under normal curricular

¹⁸ <https://yorkshirebylines.co.uk/section/yorkshire/>

¹⁹ <https://www.tes.com/news/coronavirus-return-school-reopen-reception-young-children-history>

²⁰ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.AGES>

²¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-52550470>

²² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-educational-and-childcare-settings-to-prepare-for-wider-opening-from-1-june-2020/actions-for-education-and-childcare-settings-to-prepare-for-wider-opening-from-1-june-2020>

arrangements, each child is in proximity to many different children during the day. It should be noted, in this context, that medical advice relating to children already in school (key workers etc.) is that groups should be fixed and not just small.²³

Finally, the curriculum is now more formal than in some other countries, and particularly Scandinavia. It would be difficult for English headteachers to follow the advice given to their Danish colleagues, to spend a lot of time in outdoor learning.

Play in smaller groups, for example, five pupils outside and or three pupils inside.

The school day is organized so that teaching takes place outdoors when it is possible. Teaching can take place indoors, for example, if the weather does not allow. As far as possible, meetings between employees must be done outdoors, via VC / phone or with good distance to one another. (Denmark)

What would need to happen to enable schools to re-open

Given the scientific uncertainty about children spreading the disease, there is a strong argument that schools should not open beyond children of key workers and vulnerable children until infection and mortality rates are substantially lower. This will require more effective government than hitherto to prevent transmission: we should resist the temptation to open schools in anticipation of better public health arrangements.

The following thoughts relate to that later stage when this primary condition is achieved. However, it is not too early to begin thinking about this. The Spanish government, for example, are already discussing a 'mixed economy' alternating attendance and distance learning for the autumn term. It is important to balance transmission risks against the potential harm to children of prolonging school closures (see page 1, WHO advice, 10 May), but there are different ways of doing this, including increased support to parents and children and enhancing school resources.

- 1) There needs to be close cooperation between public authorities (not just central government) and schools. Local assessments need to be made with regard to infection levels and more vulnerable groups. The government must ensure that local authorities have appropriate supervisory powers over all the schools and nurseries in their area.
- 2) Schools and nurseries will either need to be sufficiently well staffed for small classes and groups, or pupils alternate between on-site attendance and home learning. It is likely that home learning will continue for some children in all age groups.
- 3) Careful thought needs to be given to the main purpose of re-opening. The needs of the child should be at the centre of concern. This could mean, for example, that physical activity, exploring the natural environment, dance or drama has higher priority than academic learning. The facility for children to play and learn with a small group of friends may outweigh the desirability of strict physical distancing.
- 4) Similarly, when engaged in academic learning, it will be crucial to engage children's interest and avoid undue pressures. National testing should be halted to prevent that pressure filtering down to individual teachers and their pupils.
- 5) In secondary schools, different curricular arrangements may be needed to keep children within the same group of 10-15 throughout the week rather than shuffling between multiple teachers and classes. For example, a week's curriculum (perhaps mornings only) could be focused on a single major subject or an interdisciplinary project, complemented by distance learning provided by other subject specialists.
- 6) The quality of home learning support, including ICT, needs substantial improvement. There should be less reliance on commercial provision which is sometimes of poor quality.
- 7) Deliberate measures should be taken to overcome disadvantage. The foundation is to improve the amount and reliability of family benefits, including food, and to remove financial pressures affecting many

²³ Flasche et al. (2020) <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/05/01/schools-out-balancing-childcare-needs-of-key-workers-with-covid-infection-control/>

families. Secondly, all children must have good access to technology: the government should ensure that every child has access to a laptop/tablet and free broadband. Thirdly, children in need of tutorial support should receive that help. Additional advice and support should be given to parents. Where not all pupils can attend full time, priority offers should be made to more disadvantaged families.

8) Apart from families who can afford holiday schemes and longer holidays away, there is very little provision for children during the long summer holidays in many parts of England. Priority should be given to planning holiday schemes which combine recreational activity with interesting academic learning, particularly in disadvantaged areas. This could be of far greater benefit than bringing all children back to school during July. The Best Summer Ever funding should be increased this year and extended to make sure national coverage. Children should be given free school meals during the summer and it should be delivered in cash rather than vouchers.

9) Careful planning is needed to trace and prevent transmission, using a variety of interventions and intelligent contact tracing. We cannot assume, for example, that children should be expected to undergo painful testing with nasal swabs. Before children are re-admitted to a school, risk assessment must include various kinds of vulnerability among families of pupils and staff.