

Transmission and children

What are the risks?

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Here's what we know about the spread of coronavirus in students:

How much is Covid-19 spreading among school-age children?

The most recent estimates from the Office for National Statistics show the prevalence of infection is highest among secondary schoolage children. Dr Stefan Flasche of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine said this suggested they were a considerable source of community transmission.

Susan Michie, a professor of health psychology at University College London and member of the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, said the increase in cases among school-age children was a concern because transmission inevitably amplified into staff and the wider community.

Are children becoming seriously ill?

In general, children are at much lower risk compared with adults. In a study published in August that looked at patients admitted to hospitals across England, Scotland and Wales with Covid-19, fewer than 1% were under 19 and of them, fewer than 1% died, all whom had severe underlying health conditions.

What are the rules about maskwearing in schools?

Pupils in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have to wear face masks in corridors and communal areas. In England, the government has not recommended face masks as necessary for educational settings in general, but leaves it to the institutions to decide.

Michie said: "We need to look at the evidence – anything where it suggests this will help reduce transmission, we should try to get those measures adopted – while being sensitive to different children's needs and situations."

Stephen Reicher, a professor of social psychology at the University of St Andrews and a Sage member, said: "In a classroom, where maskwearing is not recommended, conditions are far from ideal. The [social] bubbles are far too big, kids are far too close together. In lots of old schools you can't open the windows properly, in some there are teaching rooms without them. That needs to be addressed."

Should schools be closed in the run-up to the holidays?

Wales has announced it will switch to online learning, but the UK government is using emergency powers to threaten legal action against headteachers in England who want to follow suit.

Where community rates of transmission are very high, the most responsible thing was to shift teaching online, Michie said, but added: "Just as schools are staying open for key workers ... they should also do so for those who haven't got the wherewithal to have those children looked after." Natalie Grover