

Briefing

Putting children first in future lockdowns

August 2020

Given the risks of a second wave of Covid-19 infections leading to the need for further local lockdowns, or even a full national lockdown, this paper sets out the key actions needed to ensure that children's interests are at the heart of planning for future lockdowns.

Ten key principles

1. Compared to adults, children play a smaller role in spreading Covid-19 and are less likely to get ill from it. This is especially true for younger children, and less so for older children and teenagers.
2. Children's perspectives must be better reflected in scientific and public health advice. Any measures implemented must take into account children's needs and circumstances where they differ from those of adults.
3. Education should be prioritised over other sectors: first to open, last to close. When only a limited amount of social interaction is feasible, the amount accounted for by education must be protected – at the expense of other sectors/activities.
4. Reducing Covid-19 transmission in the community is very important, but it should not be automatically assumed that this requires closing schools – except as a last resort.
5. In response to a local outbreak, rapid tracing must distinguish between the *source* and the *location* of infections. Schools could be more likely to be the latter than the former – i.e. infections detected within schools could reflect outbreaks that originated in local workplaces.
6. With rapid testing of pupils and teachers, any confirmed Covid-19 cases and their close contacts can be isolated without necessarily having to send entire classes or year groups home.
7. Full lockdowns must balance the epidemiological benefit to children against the social and health costs to children of closures to schools, leisure/youth centres, etc.
8. Any rights extended to adults must also be given to children in ways that work for them (e.g. the right to exercise, do sports or play outside).
9. Communication about the lockdown must make clear that risk of infection should not prevent children and families seeking help they need, such as urgent healthcare which is not related to the virus or refuge from domestic abuse.
10. All public bodies should begin planning for the possibility of a local lockdown now, to ensure that they can respond as quickly and effectively as possible if one were to occur.

Evidence on children's role in spreading the virus and the impact on children

The school closures announced on 23 March took place before much of the evidence around Covid-19 and children had been gathered, and were informed by previous flu pandemic plans.^{1,2} Children are generally considered flu 'super-spreaders'^{3,4} and were disproportionately more likely to be affected by H1N1 (swine flu),⁵ hence school closures have been used in previous flu pandemics.^{6,7} However, we have since learned that children are generally not Covid-19 super-spreaders.⁸

While children can be affected by Covid-19, they generally face less risk from it than adults. A range of paediatric evidence indicates that children are less likely than adults to get Covid-19, and that when they do get it their illness is more likely to be milder. Critical illness among children is very rare. An increasing number of studies now suggest that children play a limited role in transmitting Covid-19 and are less likely than adults to bring infections into a household.

Children also have fewer contact points outside the home compared to adults, and therefore have fewer opportunities to contract or pass on the virus. This is especially true for very young children and less so for adolescents and teenagers.

The Department for Education is one of only five Government Departments not to appoint an independent expert to the role of Chief Scientific Adviser, instead combining the role with Chief Analyst. This means the department lacks its own scientific expertise as it relates to children or child health. It also means that of the 26 members of the Government's network of Chief Scientific Advisers, none is a specialist on children's issues. There is an urgent need for the Department of Education to de-couple the role of Chief Analyst and Chief Scientific Adviser and appoint a Chief Scientific Adviser with expertise in children's mental and physical health. This would enable both the Department for Education, and the wider Government, to benefit from this expertise in assessing children's needs during the pandemic.

Education

All children have a fundamental right to receive an education.⁹ Schools and early years settings should be kept open wherever possible. They should be the last places that are locked down, after pubs, restaurants and non-essential shops. Suppressing levels of infection in the wider community will allow schools to operate with lower risk.

Given what we know about how Covid-19 affects children, and how much children travel outside the home, the scientific argument for keeping educational settings open is strongest for nurseries, followed by primary schools, followed by secondary schools. Taking into account childcare implications for working parents further reinforces this. However, there are many other educational, health and social costs of school closures – detailed in our previous briefing¹⁰ – and once these are factored in, it is clear that all schools should be kept open as far as possible, and only closed as a last resort once other options have been exhausted.

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<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-action-plan/coronavirus-action-plan-a-guide-to-what-you-can-expect-across-the-uk>

² <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/02/10/british-government-would-do-coronavirus-spreads/>

³ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2017/11/super-spreader-children-should-get-flu-vaccination-to-protect-grandparents-at-christmas/>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/dec/15/doctors-urge-parents-vaccinate-children-against-flu>

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009_swine_flu_pandemic_in_the_United_Kingdom

⁶ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7106429/>

⁷ <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/3/2/e002149>

⁸ <https://adc.bmj.com/content/105/7/618>

⁹ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/06/15/how-the-covid-19-crisis-has-affected-childrens-right-to-an-education/>

¹⁰ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/cco-we-dont-need-no-education.pdf>

Regular, widespread testing and tracing for both pupils and teachers is essential for keeping schools safe; providing assurance that they are safe; and preventing entire 'bubbles' or year groups from having to be sent home after a case of Covid-19 is confirmed. This will be particularly important in the 2020/21 winter flu season when clusters of flu could be mistaken for a Covid-19 outbreak and result in unnecessary closure or interruption. The recent *Lancet* study by Viner et al.¹¹ provides useful estimates of the improvements in test and trace effectiveness that should be sought over the summer holidays, in order to ensure that a full reopening of schools from September onwards is safe and successful.

Continuing to improve our understanding of how the virus is transmitted will allow better, more targeted use of restrictive measures and minimise costly disruption to children's lives. Results of testing on teachers and students should be pooled with attendance data to model risks of transmission and test effective strategies for minimising risk. Any outbreak in a school should be thoroughly investigated so that potential links in the chain of transmission can be pre-emptively broken in future.

As the recent Royal Society report¹² states, keeping schools open should be the absolute priority, and this can be ensured during subsequent waves of Covid-19 by focussing on suppression of the virus within the wider community; giving schools extra help (both guidance and resources) to reduce transmission; and scaling up surveillance and monitoring of infections within schools.

If schools do have to close, they must remain open for children of keyworkers and vulnerable children. This latter group of children should be renamed 'priority children' and a concerted effort must be made through the Department for Education's Regional Education and Children's Teams (REACTs) to work with these families to dramatically increase attendance. The Government should consult on the type of children covered by the priority list and allow more flexibility for teachers to identify children as a priority where they have concerns. Where other children need to work online, the Department for Education must expand its laptop programme so that children in all year groups who need them can receive devices and 4G Wi-Fi routers quickly, in order for them to undertake home working. Work should be undertaken now through REACTs to assess the real level of need and ensure more flexibility for headteachers to get laptops to the children who need them. The Government should also work with broadcasters to ensure more educational content is available on television.

Clearer guidance is needed for schools to ensure a broad and balanced curriculum is offered to children online and those attending schools. Consideration should be given to the impact on those children expected to take exams next summer so that these children are not disadvantaged, especially in the case of extended local lockdowns.

The Coronavirus Act should be amended so that if further flexibilities to the provision of Education, Health and Care Plans are needed then local authorities need to take all practical steps to secure or arrange what is in an EHCP. The Department for Education should publish clear guidance for local authorities and schools on expectations about maintaining EHCPs and proactively monitor where support has been withdrawn.

There is a risk that some children will struggle to transition back to school after a period away. This could manifest in a number of ways, including failing to attend (or low attendance) and challenging behaviour. Schools should make pastoral care a clear priority and identify reasons for non-attendance

¹¹ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(20\)30095-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(20)30095-X/fulltext)

¹² <https://rs-delve.github.io/reports/2020/07/24/balancing-the-risk-of-pupils-returning-to-schools.html>

or challenging behaviour and what support children need. The Department for Education should closely monitor attendance and exclusion figures within areas which have experienced local lockdown to identify any spikes.

Babies and toddlers

Just as we must keep schools open wherever possible, we must also have a proactive approach to maintaining services for children in the early years. Lockdown has made many thousands of babies less visible to services due to reductions in health visitor attendance and birth registrations.¹³ Midwifery and health visitor visits should be maintained wherever possible, and guidance should set out how Children's Centres could continue to operate safely. Birth registrations should not be stopped as they were during the previous lockdown. Funding arrangements for early years provision should ensure that flexibilities in funding private providers are available beyond 2020 to prevent nurseries in local lockdown areas facing financial crisis.

Mental health

There is evidence of a rise in mental health issues among certain children because of the lockdown.^{14,15,16} Local NHS mental health teams must work with schools to provide advice and support to prevent problems escalating and local health commissioners should consider what more can be done to provide online or telephone support to children who need it during any future lockdown. Local authorities and health partners must work together to prioritise support for children with specialist needs, such as those with ASD or a learning disability to avoid problems escalating into crisis with specialist residential placements or hospital admissions which could have been avoided.

Play and activity

Government guidance on permitted activity should explicitly recognise the need for children to be able to play and make clear that this is allowed, as play is the way in which children exercise. Local authorities should not be instructed to close parks. Advice for families should take account of this, explicitly setting out that outdoor play is permitted (for example ball games within a household unit). If pubs can be opened, then so should playgrounds. This advice should be clearly communicated to the public so that families are confident in their rights. The police should adopt a child friendly approach to the enforcement of lockdown rules, particularly in the case of teenagers who are at risk of criminalisation where they struggle to meet strict lockdown rules.

Online harms

During lockdown children have been spending more time on screens, watching YouTube, scrolling through social media or gaming online. While the digital world has offered great relief to many children stuck at home, there are concerns that some may have experienced harm. Early evidence suggests a possible increase in online grooming^{17,18} and there are reports of children being more exposed to gambling-like products.¹⁹ The Government has promised to respond to its White Paper consultation

¹³ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/lockdown-babies/>

¹⁴ <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2020-06-16-children-show-increase-mental-health-difficulties-over-covid-19-lockdown>

¹⁵ <https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/>

¹⁶ <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/life-on-hold-childrens-well-being-and-covid-19.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-52473664>

¹⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-52999552/coronavirus-fears-over-online-grooming-of-children-in-lockdown>

¹⁹ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/you/article-8455927/Is-child-addicted-gambling.html>

only by the end of the year, by which time many more children could have come to harm. It should work to progress its statutory duty of care proposal as quickly as possible and work with the technology sector to encourage them to crack down on online harms during any future lockdown.

Housing

During the initial lockdown there was a concerted effort to support rough sleepers into hotels and other accommodation. Nothing was done at a national level to move homeless families and children out of poor-quality temporary accommodation, including B&Bs, which are frequently small and lacking private kitchen and bathroom facilities. Other families will have spent lockdown in cramped or overcrowded accommodation, possibly sofa-surfing with friends and family, struggling with home schooling for months. There should be a concerted national effort to stop families living in B&Bs under any future lockdown. Furthermore, The Government should put greater welfare support in place to help families at risk of becoming homeless, especially in August when the eviction ban ends and in October when the furlough scheme draws to a close.

Children's social care

The flexibilities to children's rights introduced under the Coronavirus Act are expected to be repealed in September and this should be the case even if future lockdowns occur. The need for these flexibilities has not been demonstrated and the lockdown period is a time when children's rights need to be strengthened, not reduced. If regulations allowing for virtual visits remains in place, guidance should make clear this cannot become a default option and monitoring must be in place to prevent this, but that more research with children should be undertaken to understand where children find this valuable.

More specific guidance is also needed for children's homes as in previous guidance these were included with schools and care homes—none of which operate in similar ways to children's homes. Further guidance should be issued to local authorities to prioritise the safeguarding of vulnerable children during any future lockdown, including those who do not currently have a social worker. Local authorities should also be working with local partners to proactively identify children who become vulnerable during the lockdown, including in families where domestic abuse may have arisen or increased or where parental substance misuse or mental health problems have escalated.

Children in care in unregulated settings and care leavers are particularly vulnerable at this time and there should be clear guidance to local authorities on their responsibilities to protect this group. The Children's Commissioner's [CHILDREN](#) app allows local authorities and other partners to quickly identify the numbers of vulnerable children in their area; this data should be used to plan further support for these groups. Moreover, local authorities and their partners should be planning now for the need for any data sharing agreements in order to safeguard children, for example health visitors being able to access safeguarding data from other parts of the NHS.

Due to the lockdown and the impact of Covid-19 on the pressures families are under, including the rise in domestic abuse, demand for children's services and the Troubled Families programme is expected to rise sharply. Emergency funding is likely to be needed to boost this support in the short term. In the longer term, the spending review should consider increasing investment in Troubled Families style earlier and longer-term help for families to reduce pressure on children's social care. This should include early help services provided in partnership between local authorities and local health commissioners. More funding and support are required for voluntary sector services which support victims of domestic abuse and the experience of children as victims must be taken into account in planning of this support.

Secure settings

The Youth Custody Service (YCS) should be separated out from the wider prison estate, and Public Health England should work closely with the YCS to ensure that wider considerations of children's wellbeing are given higher priority during any future lockdown. During the last few months, children in Young Offender Institutions and Secure Training Centres have been spending over 20 hours in their cells, family visits have been banned and face to face education has stopped.²⁰ Conditions are in the process of being relaxed: virtual family visits are available on a monthly basis and time out of cell is increased with wider access to face to face education. But these measures should be further relaxed to give children access to better provision and quality of life in future lockdowns.

Children in secure settings should not be forced to isolate for 14 days when entering a unit (or returning to a unit from external appointments), and better access to testing should be used to prevent the need for isolation. Good practice should be shared across different secure settings, including mental health units, secure children's homes and custodial settings. Socially distanced physical visits with families should continue wherever possible and if not, virtual visits should be facilitated in all settings, with support for families to access these.

Children's voices

The Government should hold a press conference aimed at children and children should be allowed and encouraged to submit questions to any press briefings, just as adults were in the previous daily press briefings.

²⁰ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/children-in-custody/>