

Boris Johnson: failure to reopen schools is not an option

Chris Whitty and fellow chief medical officers say it will be harmful for children to remain at home and Covid risk is 'exceptionally small'

By Harry Yorke, Political Correspondent
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Boris Johnson is preparing to spearhead the Government's drive for all pupils to return to the classroom Credit: AFP

Boris Johnson has told allies that “failure to reopen schools is not an option” as the UK’s four chief medical officers issue a joint endorsement of the Government’s drive to get every pupil back into the classroom next week.

Prof Chris Whitty and his Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish counterparts will state that children are at far less risk of becoming seriously ill with Covid-19 and have an “exceptionally small risk of dying”.

In an interview due to be broadcast on Sunday, Prof Whitty says the threat posed by coronavirus to children pales in comparison with the “disparities” and “deep-rooted problems” that come with continuing to keep them at home.

“The balance of risk is very strongly in favour of children going to school because many more are likely to be harmed by not going than harmed by going, even during this pandemic,” Prof Whitty says.



Some children have not been taught for six months Credit: PA

It comes as Mr Johnson this week prepares to spearhead the Government's drive for all pupils to return to the classroom, as he attempts to get back on the front foot in the wake of the exams fiasco.

The Prime Minister is set to take a hands-on approach after returning from his holiday in Scotland, with a visit planned to a school later this week in a bid to boost confidence among parents that classrooms are Covid-secure.

On Saturday night, Carrie Symonds, Mr Johnson's fiancée, posted photographs of the couple's holiday on Instagram, showing them taking a stroll with their dog Dilyn and Wilfred, their baby son (below).



Boris Johnson and Carrie Symonds were on holiday in Scotland Credit: INSTAGRAM

According to a Whitehall source, Downing Street has made clear there can be “no ifs, no buts” in delivering on the national priority. “Schools not coming back is not an option,” they added. “Failure is not an option.”

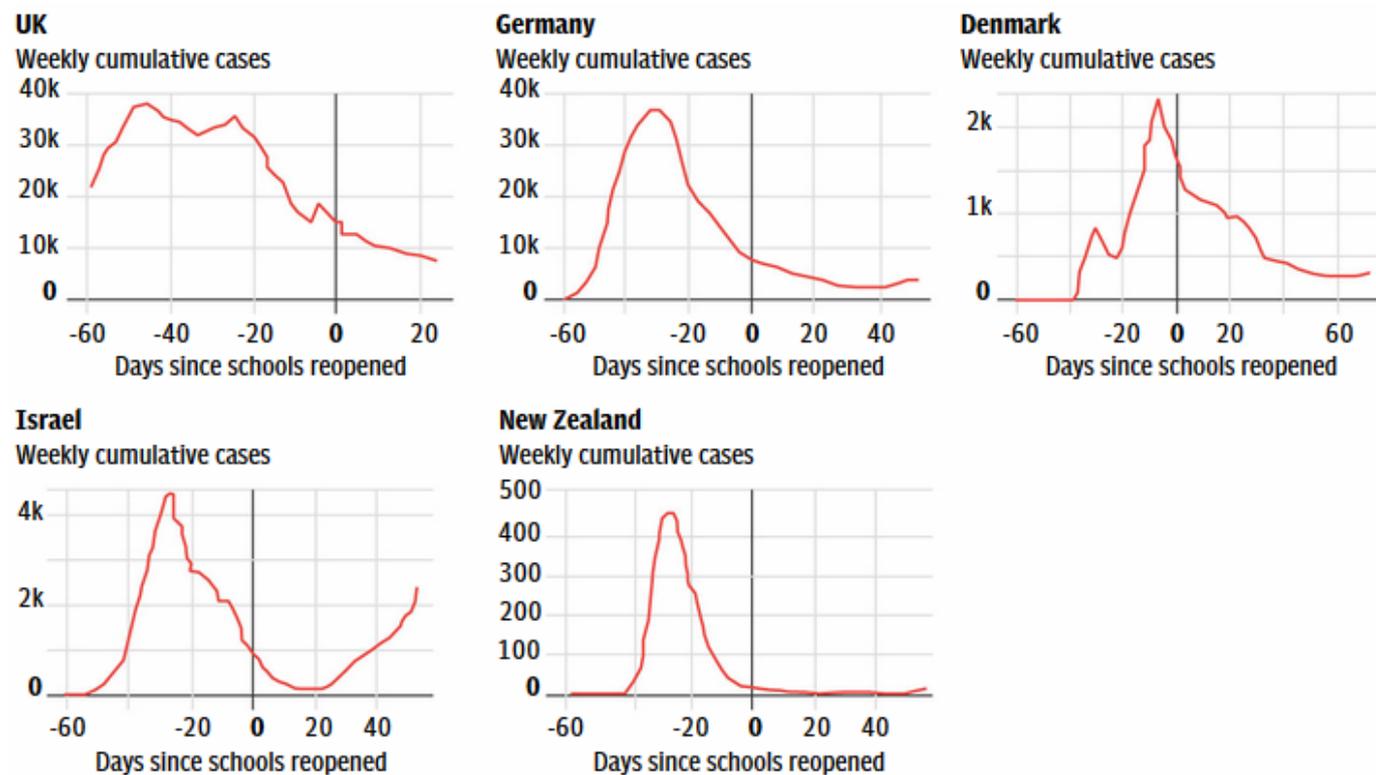
Senior Conservative MPs have called for Mr Johnson to take the lead on schools and sideline Mr Williamson, amid fears that widespread anger over this week’s exams about-turn has left him incapable of shaping public opinion positively.

Their concerns have been echoed by several Cabinet ministers, with one saying: “We’ve got to get schools back. That’s the test for him.”

Throughout the pandemic, the prolonged closure of schools has been among the greatest concerns weighing on the minds of Mr Johnson and his most senior aides and ministers.

What happened when schools reopened either partially or completely around the world?

Most did not see a rise in cases



The decision to shut schools in March has meant some pupils have not received face-to-face teaching for nearly six months, with teachers warning of a widening attainment gap between the rich and poor.

Some primary school year groups began returning from June, with secondary years 10 and 12 allowed limited face-to-face contact, but a lack of confidence among parents was blamed for relatively low attendance rates.

In a bid to reassure parents, the four CMOs and their deputies have released a 21-point statement which suggests the risks to children can be contained (see letter below).

Key points: What the UK Chief Medical Officers said

Long-term inequality

They were “confident” in evidence that has shown that a lack of schooling can exacerbate inequalities and reduce a child’s life chances overall.

They note that home-based education in lockdown has not reduced societal inequalities.

Low risk to children

They highlighted an “exceptionally small” risk of school children of primary age dying from the virus.

Statistics indicate that the infection rate for children aged between five and 14 is estimated at 14 per million.

Teachers at no higher risk

ONS data indicate that teaching is a lower-risk profession.

The officers said that while transmission within schools does occur, data from studies suggest that it may largely be passed between adult staff rather than pupils to staff.

Local outbreaks

They stressed that early identification and timely management of outbreaks within schools will be key to containing the virus.

Children and young people should be engaged in establishing Covid-secure working environments, by paying close attention to advice.

Economy

They say that while opening schools may put some upward pressure on transmission, current evidence indicates other work and social environments have proven more important in transmission.

The officers cite “international real-world evidence”, which suggests that reopening of schools has usually not been followed by a surge of infections.

Names on the letter

Prof Chris Whitty: Chief Medical Officer, England; Dr Frank Atherton: CMO, Wales; Dr Gregor Smith: CMO, Scotland; Dr Michael McBride: CMO, N Ireland; Dr Jenny Harries, Prof Jonathan Van Tam and Dr Aidan Fowler: Deputy CMOs, England; Prof Chris Jones: Deputy CMO, Wales; Dr Nicola Steedman, Prof Marion Bain: Deputy CMOs, Scotland; Dr Naresh Chada, Dr Lourda Geoghegan: Deputy CMOs, N Ireland.

They point to “extensive evidence” showing there is an “exceptionally small risk” of primary and secondary school children dying from Covid-19, with fatalities among five- to 14-year-olds estimated at 14 per million, lower than most flu seasons.

The CMOs say they are confident there is a “very low rate of severe disease” among children compared to adults, with the percentage of symptomatic cases requiring hospital treatment believed to be 0.1 per cent for one- to nine-year-olds, rising slightly to 0.3 per cent aged 10-19. “Most of these children make a rapid recovery,” they note.

However, in contrast, the experts warn that a lack of schooling increases inequalities, reduces the life chances of children and can “exacerbate physical and mental health issues”. These problems cannot be resolved through “home-based education alone”.



Scientists say the risk of children passing the virus to their parents is low Credit: PA

There is “reasonable”, albeit not conclusive, evidence that primary age children have a “significantly” lower chance of catching Covid-19, while at worst older children and teenagers are less likely or have the same chance of contracting the disease as adults.

Transmission does occur in schools, but is “probably not a common route”, they note and can be reduced through the measures introduced by Government including better hand and surface hygiene, creating social bubbles of students, and rearranging classrooms.

The CMOs suggest teachers are no more at risk of dying than the general workforce, with transmission likely to be mainly “staff to staff” rather than from pupils, underlining the need for social distancing to be observed.

International evidence suggests children passing the disease onto their parents or relatives is “relatively rare”, although they point out this is more likely for teenagers and the evidence remains “weak”.

While schools reopening is likely to lead to an increase in the R number, the CMOs believe that the impact will be less than initially feared, although it could be enough to push it above one, the point at which cases begin rising exponentially.

In that event, they suggest the priority will be tackling outbreaks at a local level, although Prof Whitty warns it is “certainly possible” that societal trade-offs, such as the closure of shops, pubs or restaurants, will be needed.

“What we’re trying to do at all points is do things that keep transmission rates low that do the least social and economic damage to achieve that,” he adds. “It’s a balance and there is not a perfect solution to this.”

Is September too soon for schools to reopen? Are you looking forward to the kids going back? Tell us in the comments section below