

# School carries no greater risk for staff and students than home, major survey concludes

Public Health England's study of 131 primary and preschools will give a boost to ministers calling for children's return to school this week

By Henry Bodkin, HEALTH AND SCIENCE CORRESPONDENT

4 September 2020 1:55pm



Credit: Pupils stand in line at St Luke's Church of England Primary School in East London on September 3.

Turning up to primary or pre-school presents no greater risk to children or staff than staying at home, a Public Health England (PHE) study has found.

More than 12,000 tests carried out over June and July yielded only three positive results. Antibody blood test - looking for evidence of past infection - also identified that rates were no higher than in the general population.

Gavin Williamson, the Education Secretary, described the results as “hugely encouraging” and evidence that the wider harm to children from missing school is greater than that from coronavirus.

From the 0.02 per cent of positive results, there was “no evidence” of onwards transmission either to household contacts or the wider educational setting, said PHE.

The government scientists also found that children and staff who attended school more frequently were not more likely to test positive for antibodies than those who did not attend school at all or went less often.

Surveillance revealed similar levels of antibodies in both staff and pupils, suggesting that children are as likely to get infected as adults.

PHE said the low numbers of confirmed infections in children nationally could be due to children experiencing asymptomatic coronavirus or mild symptoms going undetected, rather than them being less susceptible than adults.

But they added that the scarcity of positive cases and the extremely low number of outbreaks suggests that children are less likely to pass the infection on.

The results, which come from surveillance of 131 primary and preschools, will give a boost for ministers as they call for all children to return to school this week.

### **A warning for secondary schools**

However, PHE said the findings cannot be extrapolated to secondary school pupils, and follow warnings from some experts that adolescents have a higher risk of catching and spreading the virus.

Dr Shamez Ladhani, Consultant Epidemiologist, Public Health England said: “This is the largest study of its kind in the country and suggests attending preschool and primary school brings no additional risk to either staff or students.

“Although these results are preliminary, they should be very reassuring to parents who may be anxious about their children returning to school.

“As has been found in previous research, infection within educational settings is extremely low, and while it appears that children do contract Covid-19, the overwhelming majority experience mild or no symptoms, and are unlikely to pass it on.”

Mr Williamson said: “I am hugely encouraged by the findings of this report, which support what the UK’s Chief Medical Officers have already made clear - that the risk of catching coronavirus at school is low, meaning that the risk to children being out of school is, in fact, far greater.

“This week has seen thousands of children reunited with classmates and teachers as schools across the country begin to reopen for full-time education for all pupils at the start of the autumn term.

“Parents can be reassured that schools have in place protective measures to reduce the risk of transmission and these findings add to the assurance that the return to school has been based on the best scientific and medical advice.”