

Data informing the return of students to classrooms and measures to keep schools COVID safe

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The data informing the return of students to classrooms in Victoria and measures to keep schools COVID safe have been outlined in a new brief

by the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI).

The MCRI COVID-19 research brief details how during the Delta wave in Australia most COVID-19 transmission in schools and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centers were between staff or from staff to [children](#). Child to child transmission also occurred but this was less common.

The brief looked at data from June 16 to July 31, 2021, when the Delta variant was prevalent in NSW. During this period 34 students and 25 staff had COVID-19 across 51 educational settings. In NSW, ECEC centers remained opened throughout the entire Delta outbreak period.

MCRI Professor Fiona Russell said the research team also analyzed global data from England, Scotland, Canada, U.S. and Singapore, where the rise in childhood cases reflected the increase in Delta's transmissibility.

"Many schools in the northern hemisphere have re-opened despite significant levels of COVID-19 transmission within the community, due to the negative physical, mental and educational impact closures have had on children," she said.

"To balance the higher transmissibility of Delta with the importance of face-to-face learning, many countries have implemented a series of mitigation strategies, including vaccination of staff and children over 12 years of age, rapid testing and mask wearing. It's important that these strategies are age-appropriate and strike a balance between infection control and enabling learning and social interactions."

The brief found Delta was about five times more transmissible than previous variants but most children and adolescents continue to have no, or only mild symptoms. In NSW the highest transmission risks were

between staff members and from staff to children. Child to [child transmission](#) occurred at a lesser degree. However, household transmission was very high. The majority of COVID-19 outbreaks in schools ECEC centers occurred when attendance was restricted, suggesting cases in these settings may have been driven by essential workers and unvaccinated adults.

Subsequently, infections have declined in NSW despite ECEC centers being open, which suggests that despite outbreaks occurring in these settings, young children contribute little to community transmission.

MCRI Associate Professor Margie Danchin said comprehensive mitigation measures announced by the State Government needed to be put in place by schools and ECECs as soon as possible to reduce the risk of COVID-9 transmission into the community and households, as well as the subsequent strain on hospitals.

"The measures outlined in the Government's "three-V's" plan, ventilation, vaccination and vital COVID-safe steps, are essential to further minimize the risk of infection and help prevent further school closures," Associate Professor Danchin said.

"It's really important that as well as vaccinating teachers, early learning educators and school staff, parents and carers do their best to protect their children and book their vaccinations urgently, especially parents or carers of children who are among the first to start back at school such as VCE students."

Associate Professor Danchin said, given the low levels of vaccination uptake among 12-16 year olds in Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania, she also urged parents and carers not to delay booking vaccine appointments for their children.

The researchers commended the Government's actions to improve ventilation, stagger school days and arrival/finish times and enable outdoor meetings and classes where possible through outdoor shelter grants.

They noted that rapid antigen testing of students who were close contacts of COVID-19 cases was just as effective at preventing secondary infections as a 10-day isolation period. This could be rolled out for staff and students in high community transmission areas and special schools with additional PCR testing of asymptomatic staff in hotspots and at special needs schools.

Associate Professor Danchin said [face mask](#) wearing at schools for Grade 3 students and above would also help reduce [transmission](#) and keep classrooms open.

Face masks for Prep to Grade 2 children were recommended but not considered mandatory due to compliance challenges for some in this age group. Children under five years and those with developmental disabilities should not be required to wear masks under World Health Organization recommendations.

MCRI Professor Sharon Goldfeld said the harms of [school](#) and ECEC center closures on children have been substantial.

"Although Delta does not seem to cause more severe disease in children and COVID-19 is very rarely life threatening in young people, the indirect effects of the pandemic are having immediate and probably also long-term negative impacts on children's mental health and education," Professor Goldfeld said.

"ECEC centers and schools provide social, physical, behavioral, and mental health benefits and services. School closures disrupt the delivery

of these services and impact learning. Closures also place economic and psychological stress on families, which can increase the risk for family conflict and violence. Off-site learning should only be a last resort, even as cases inevitably spike in the lead-up to the Christmas holidays."

More information: MCRI COVID-19 research brief:
www.mcri.edu.au/sites/default/..._care_and_schools.pdf

Provided by Murdoch Children's Research Institute

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