

# UK is 'international outlier' in its approach to COVID in children, argue experts

February 9 2022

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A colorized scanning electron micrograph of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Credit: NIAID

The UK is an 'international outlier' in its approach to protecting children from COVID, argue experts in *The BMJ* today.

Simon Williams, a lecturer in psychology at Swansea University, and colleagues John Drury, Susan Michie, Christina Pagel and Adam Squires point out that over a third of a million UK children are currently missing [school](#), nearly 1 in 10 teachers and [school leaders](#) are absent, and increased reinfection rates mean some children have had to isolate multiple times.

Yet despite a much better understanding of what works to keep schools open and transmission lower, some protections are still not properly in place for children, they argue.

For example, they note that while the list of countries offering vaccines to children aged 5 and above is growing rapidly, the UK is still to offer advice as to whether the vaccine should be offered to all 5-11 year olds.

"More transparency over when advice is likely to be provided is necessary and urgent to explain why the UK is an international outlier by not giving parents the choice of whether to vaccinate their child," they write.

They also point to growing evidence that air cleaning measures can help reduce the spread of COVID-19 in schools, especially when combined with mask use amongst teachers and staff.

Yet whereas a growing number of countries are making substantial investment in ventilation as part of a longer-term strategy to provide cleaner indoor air, the UK currently has focused only on "quick fixes to improve ventilation .. such as being able to open a window," recently providing 7,000 additional air cleaning units to schools, despite the fact there are more than 300,000 classrooms in England alone.

"It's clear that classroom ventilation is not not enough to stop omicron tearing through schools," they say.

They acknowledge that children are at much lower risk of severe illness from COVID compared to (particularly older) adults, but say there are still a number of harms that come from attempting to "live with" high rates of infection in schools.

These include record numbers of hospital admissions in children with COVID, increasing rates of long COVID in children, and educational disruption due to very high pupil and teacher absenteeism related to infection.

They also argue that facemasks should be considered a protection rather than a restriction, keeping children in school learning and teachers in school teaching, and say "we could get further protection by upgrading from cloth or disposable surgical to filtering masks, which should be provided for free as in other countries."

They conclude: "The UK government's claim to 'keep children in the classroom' is disingenuous and overlays a laissez faire approach that in effect leaves [children](#) to get infected and miss out on the education and social and other development that school attendance brings."

**More information:** UK is 'international outlier' in its approach to covid in children, argue experts, *The BMJ*, [DOI: 10.1136/bmj.o327](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o327)

Provided by British Medical Journal

Citation: UK is 'international outlier' in its approach to COVID in children, argue experts (2022, February 9) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-02-uk-international-outlier-approach-covid.html>

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