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Begin again primary schools during the pandemic

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Abstract

For the past 6 months, policymakers have weighed economic against public health considerations in debating what limits to set on individual and collective behaviors in attempting to control the Covid-19 pandemic. As fall approaches, attention has turned to a third pillar of a pandemic-resilient society: schools. Under ordinary circumstances, about 40 million children would be entering classrooms this year, including nearly 27 million students in higher grades. Until these children physically return to school full time, many will lose out on essential educational, social, and developmental benefits. We believe that safely reopening schools full-time for all elementary school children should therefore be a top national priority.

Keywords: Begin, primary, schools, schools, during, pandemic

Introduction

Many parents and educators are reasonably concerned, however, about whether any large scale reopening plan can ensure safety for students, school staff, and household members, as per given high level of community transmission in India. Contagion is a particular concern in schools that serve predominantly low income communities, given that such schools are often overcrowded and understaffed and that the families whose children attend them are at especially high risk from Covid-19. Even under conditions of moderate transmission (<10 cases per 100,000 people), however, we believe that primary schools should be recognized as essential services - and school personnel as essential workers - and that school reopening plans should be developed and financed accordingly. (We also believe that fully reopening schools for middle and high school students should be a national priority, but given the more challenging transmission dynamics at older ages, we confine ourselves here to elementary schools.)

Why in-person schooling matters

Children miss out on essential academic and social- emotional learning, formative relationships with children's and adults, opportunities for play, and other developmental necessities when they are kept at home. Children living in poverty, English language learners, children with diagnosed disabilities, and young children face especially severe losses.

Moreover, schools provide numerous additional in-person benefits. School-provided social welfare services support the health, school-age children rely on their schools for free or reduced-price daily meals. Despite efforts by school districts to maintain these services even when school was conducted remotely, a majority of children have been unable to access the full nutritional benefits to which they're entitled. Schools also provide physical, mental health, and therapeutic services to millions of students per year. Many of these services have proved inaccessible to children - particularly low-income children and children with noncitizen family members - when schools are physically closed. Finally, safe and consistently open schools are essential for many parents and guardians (particularly women) to be able to reenter the workforce - including the health care sector.

In light of these concerns, some school districts are developing hybrid learning plans for the fall that would bring alternating groups of students back into school buildings under conditions of strict social distancing.¹⁵ Although some in-person schooling is preferable to none, for primary schools in particular these plans may achieve few gains over completely remote learning. Millions of children will remain excluded from learning on the days when they're assigned to virtual school, owing to digital access challenges, developmental inappropriateness, or lack of real-time adult support.

Clinical and epidemiologic perspectives

From a clinical standpoint, most children 1 to 18 years old experience mild or no illness from Covid-19 and are much less likely than adults to face severe consequences from the infection. Although a small number of children worldwide have been hospitalized with multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) after SARS, Cov- 19 infection, so far this appears to be a rare syndrome and with early recognition and treatment, clinical outcomes in the short term have been good against Cov-19. In contrast, adults, especially those who are over 60 or have underlying health conditions, are at higher risk for severe illness, hospitalization, and poor outcomes.

Limited emerging evidence suggests that susceptibility to infection also generally increases with age. Given the same exposure to infected household members, children under the age of 10 seem to become infected less frequently than adults and older adolescents; studies of both household and community transmission find that children 9 or younger are also less susceptible than 10-to-14-year-olds., At the other end of the spectrum, adults over 60 have higher susceptibility to infection even than middle-aged adults.

Conclusions

Whether (and how) to reopen primary schools is not just a scientific and technical question. It is also an emotional and moral one. Our sense of responsibility toward children - at the very least, to protect them from the visibility of life, including the poor decision making of adults who allow deadly infections to spiral out of control - is core to our humanity. Our expectations of school personnel are equally emotionally and morally high. It is not incidental that the majority of primary school teachers are undercompensated women who are expected to sacrifice themselves "for the sake of the children." School closures have also brought social, economic, and racial injustice into sharp relief, with historically children and families - and the educators who serve them - suffering the most and being offered the least. For all these reasons, decisions about school re openings will remain complex and contested. But the fundamental argument that children, families, educators, and society deserve to have safe and reliable primary schools should not be controversial. If we all agree on that principle, then it is inexcusable to open nonessential services for adults this winter if it forces students to remain at home even part-time this fall.

Reference

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