

Open letter from UK paediatricians about the return of children to schools

17 June 2020

As paediatricians we are increasingly concerned by the continued absence of millions of children from schools. This interruption is without precedent and risks scarring the life chances of a generation of young people.

Clinically, most young people have been spared the worst effects of COVID-19 but the health and social impact will be severe.

The brunt of the impact of COVID-19 is and will continue to be borne by children and families who have the fewest resources and need the most support. The attainment gap was significant long before the pandemic. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are twice as likely to leave school without national qualifications in English and maths compared with better off peers. Left unchecked, COVID-19 will exacerbate existing problems and deepen structural social and health inequalities.

School is about much more than learning. It is a vital point of contact for public health services, safeguarding and other initiatives. This includes access to mental health support, vaccinations, special therapies, free school meals, physical activity and early years services that help children get the best. We note that plans have been published for children to begin returning to school in Scotland and Wales. We call on the UK government and the Northern Ireland Executive to urgently publish clear plans for getting children back to school; and for all UK governments to deliver recovery plans for children and young people.

Without such action, the effects of COVID-19 will linger far beyond the pandemic itself and will limit the life chances of children and young people for years to come.

Signed,

1,500 members of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health

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Reference: The Attainment Gap, Education Endowment Foundation (2018) Available at:
https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Annual_Reports/EEF_Attainment_Gap_Report_2018.pdf