

Schools essential for health

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ONE word has become a common theme in all the discussions around face-to-face teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic: confusion. As a country, we are largely heading in the same direction in relation to how best to school our children while we battle coronavirus. However, different states and territories are moving at different pace and this has led to a sense of confusion.

To address this confusion, which is so frustrating for parents, teachers and students, we need to go back to the evidence. Then we need to go beyond that, and build our community's trust in our schooling recommendations.

When school closures were initially proposed to control an epidemic, planners had influenza in mind. Flu spreading within schools and children are the main source for transmission in the community. But COVID-19 is not the flu. Far fewer children are affected by COVID-19, and the number of transmissions from children to children and children to adults is far less. Some have said the evidence on this is not clear. In any health debate, evidence can be cherry-picked to support a particular view.

As an infectious diseases specialist, I have examined all of the available evidence from Australia and around the world and, as it stands, it does not support avoiding classroom learning as a means to control COVID-19.

The national position remains that face-to-face teaching is safe, particularly given the current very low

rates of community transmission.

By contrast, there is plenty of public health evidence that stopping face-to-face teaching can damage society. It is clear this intervention (school closures) can cause harm, but the benefits (on disease transmission) are unknown, and likely to be marginal when the disease burden is low.

I would like to touch on a couple of the more negative public health effects school closures can have. Firstly, the disruption to routine and socialisation, while temporary, tends to have a disproportionate effect on our more vulnerable children, including those with a disability or particular learning needs. School is a critical element of good health across all age ranges.

Secondly, it increases stress within the family environment, with parents having to juggle home schooling and work. Sixty-two per cent of Australian families have two working parents. Parents extend their working day into the evening to compensate for the need to home school.

The main risk of going back to school is it increases the movement and interaction of adults in the community and puts staff back in contact with each other. This can be managed. Staff and parents must maintain their distance from each other in the school environment, avoid the school if unwell, and keep children at home when they are not well.

So how do we get face-to-face teaching for all our kids started again? It's a matter of trust. Trust is such an important commodity in society.

Every day when we drop our children off at school we demonstrate trust. We trust the school to keep our kids safe. And we trust our teachers to care and nurture them. We need to trust the evidence that says it is safe for our children to be taught at school.

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