

UK parent speaks out about catastrophic “herd immunity” policy of Johnson government

Our reporter
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Sally participated in a previous Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee meeting organised by the Socialist Equality Party. Her husband, Ian, has cerebral palsy and, although he is otherwise healthy, the family are concerned that service rationing might mean no treatment would be available for him should he contract COVID-19. They took the decision to deregister their two children from their primary and secondary schools in September.

Sally explained their situation:

“In many ways, we are by no means the worst off due to this pandemic. There are many people with far less. Ian was already unable to work before the pandemic hit, and I am his full-time carer, so we have not lost jobs. Because we don’t go to work, we were able to deregister the children from school without worrying about childcare. But even though Ian is not clinically vulnerable, he is very vulnerable to the herd immunity policy.”

Sally recounted a “socially distanced” conversation Ian had with an ambulance worker. “He told Ian the ambulance service is very stretched. They are having to get the old ambulances out—those that haven’t been in service for some time... The ambulance worker said to Ian, ‘make sure you don’t catch COVID.’ He said they had been told not to take any elderly or disabled people suspected with COVID into hospital, no matter how bad they are—even if it were a possibility they would die in the next hour. This man told Ian he feels like an executioner...”

“I’m not saying this is a blanket policy. But we already know that there were blanket Do Not Resuscitate [DNR] orders in some care homes during lockdown. There’s now an investigation into it. Relatives were not told that their loved ones had DNRs...”

“Hospitals are filling up and if there’s a queue, how are they going to decide who will be treated? They have a clinical frailty scale. Even though Ian is in his early 40s

and has no underlying health problems and is not on medication, his cerebral palsy puts him at Stage 7 out of 9. It classifies him as severely frail because he is personally dependent for his care, he is actually higher on the scale than an elderly person would be if they could dress and feed themselves...”

Sally said she was “ill myself in April with something we thought might have been pleurisy. I started to get a scraping feeling in my lungs and by May, I was getting out of breath just helping Ian. Since then I have had a racing heart, the scratchy feeling in my lungs, and tiredness. The doctor thinks I have probably had mild COVID...”

“Before lockdown, we had a disabled friend to stay and after they went home, they were rushed to A&E and diagnosed with pneumonia and ‘suspected Covid’ although she wasn’t tested. They sent her straight out of hospital into her sheltered accommodation, but it took her some time to recover, and her symptoms were similar to mine but much worse.”

Sally has kept her children, in Year 5 and Year 7, off school since the week before they closed during the spring lockdown. “We are lucky because both schools were very understanding but we were told that they couldn’t stay on unauthorised absence forever, as we could face fines and prosecution.” Her children have since been deregistered and home schooled. “They say it takes some six months to find your feet when you are home educating, and I am a full-time carer. We would have much preferred some kind of distance learning but we appreciate schools are very stretched so we will find our own way.

“One thing I have noticed though, is that the children’s mental health has improved since the lockdown. We are very fortunate to live in a rural setting so there is outdoor space for them. But from what I have seen online we have

had a very different experience to many other parents. I have read some real horror stories and in fact I know of a human rights barrister who is helping three families, who are facing prosecution for non-attendance. He said this is the tip of the iceberg and he is being contacted daily. This is shocking. Surely a fair society would ban all fines for non-attendance of school during a pandemic?

Sally said she and Ian were initially “feeling guilty about keeping our children off. But now, watching the cases rise and the hospitals starting to fill up, we know we have done the right thing. The actual trade-off is that our kids are so much more relaxed and happier. There’s so much stress on kids in school right now, even for those whose parents aren’t vulnerable.

“I am reading comments on a local councillors Facebook page. There have been confirmed cases in both our schools and other local schools. One person asked how children can be moving between classes, when they are meant to be staying in their bubbles? Another asked about their child who is autistic and is suffering from anxiety. What are they doing for children like this? Another had a child with depression and anxiety, which has been exacerbated by what is going on in the schools. There are a lot of children suffering—this could be prevented.

“No one knows where exactly the cases are, or how many are involved. If a child tests positive, then only the children that sat next to that child are asked to isolate. But the children are mixing at lunch and out of school time. There is a fingerprint machine that is used, where parents pay into a child’s account for lunch, etc and the child uses the machine to authorise the account. Someone has asked how safe the machine is? We just don’t know.

“I know someone who is clinically extremely vulnerable, but she can’t go into hospital for treatment because of the potential cases of COVID. She can’t home school, so her child is going in. The schools are like merry-go-rounds and she says it’s only a matter of time before her child brings it home. This school sends parents an email to inform them that a case has been recorded but that is all you know. Through the emails she has received, she knows there are at least ten cases so far. There are reports that teachers are testing positive, but we just don’t know.

“Now, at one school, there are reports that children want to take action. Some children are saying they should refuse to go in. I’m trying to find out more about it.”

Sally criticised the Tory government and Labour opposition: “Nothing the government says make sense.

[Prime Minister] Boris Johnson has set out a three-tier system but it’s very difficult to understand. Without mass testing, you are never going to know how it’s spreading. And then they say grandparents can provide childcare. So, they throw around these rules, graphics, and numbers at people and no one knows what to believe. It’s not because people are stupid. So many people don’t trust government. Some never did before the pandemic and it’s more the case now...

“[Labour leader Sir] Kier Starmer speaks about a short ‘circuit breaker’. But schools and workplaces will remain open. You don’t break a circuit by keeping it open—ask any electrician.

“It’s all very well saying that you can’t shut down the economy but it’s spreading. Nothing they are saying makes sense. I think it’s all lip service. My gut tells me that really this is the policy of herd immunity. But achieving herd immunity properly means protecting people through vaccination. It has never been shown that herd immunity can be achieved by allowing people to catch a virus and die. It won’t be long before the situation will be worse than it was in March and they are saying it will be 10 times as bad for the NHS.

“I think the tide is turning. Even those parents who weren’t worried before, or who dismissed the danger, or who thought schools were safe are changing their minds. It should not be a matter of choosing between education and safety. Our children, our teachers and all of us should be kept safe.”

The SEP calls on all educators, parents and students to join the Educators Rank and File Safety Committee and attend its next meeting on Saturday, October 31 from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m.



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