

As UK governments reopen schools: educators and students speak about life with Long COVID

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Schools across the UK have all reopened—in England since March, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland since mid-April. The return to class is the centrepiece of the Johnson government’s bid to end lockdown restrictions, even as the virus spreads unchecked in Europe and across Asia and the Americas.

In London, the *R* (Reproduction) rate is above 1 and more lethal variants from India and Brazil have been detected. Schools have proven to be a major vector for the spread of a virus that has claimed more than 3.12 million deaths worldwide.

Survivors of COVID-19 spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) reporters last week about the debilitating effects of the post-viral syndrome known as Long COVID. Months after being infected, they are still suffering.

Rachel Shawe, 37, has a busy life, bringing up three children aged three, four and nine, while employed as a support worker at an independent school in North West England.

“I work in a grammar school, in an area with a huge diversity in terms of finances which has barely been out of tier 4 [stay at home rule where possible],” she said.

In March 2020, as the pandemic spread like wildfire across Britain, COVID struck her family.

“We hosted an Italian au pair who developed a bad cough, she was very sick,” explained Rachel. “She had travelled through northern Italy to Bergamo airport, which had 500 [coronavirus] cases.”

At this point the world watched in horror as hospital staff across Italy battled a wave of patients stricken by the new disease. “We weren’t responding,” continued Rachel. “There was no talk about symptoms or shutdown of travel. There was no recognition it could possibly be in the UK.”

Despite the World Health Organization alerting the

world’s governments on January 30 to the presence of a “global health emergency”, they took no action to protect lives.

“After the au pair left,” continued Rachel, “I developed symptoms, headaches for two weeks, before it developed into struggling for breath and a cough. After six or seven weeks, I phoned the GP (general practitioner). I was light-headed with coughing fits, but because it was not continuous, there was no testing. They did a swab, and my right lung was inflamed, basically pneumonia, I couldn’t walk far, and my heart rate was raised. I was put on antibiotics and steroids.

“At the same time, my three-year-old son was being seen by Manchester Children’s Hospital. He stopped being able to pee, he was struggling with motions, his stuttering was worse. I know it can cause further neurological problems besides loss of taste and smell.”

Rachel’s illness persisted, “I was sent to hospital for a CT scan. They said they thought I had COVID but refused to run an antibody test—it was very difficult to get a test then. They told me ‘your heart rate is 145, it’s through the roof.’”

“There will be a lot [of unrecorded cases], not just me,” said Rachel.

“All the family had symptoms during the first infection. In January, we had symptoms again. It exacerbated my asthma. I didn’t realise [the virus] was doing internal damage. Back at the GP, they measured my heart rate, and it was 150 beats per minute.

“Nine, ten months on, I have multiple inhalers, multiple times a day. My lungs and heart never recovered. I’m seeing a cardiologist. My son’s still struggling with urine, he’s not fully recovered. My daughter has a barking cough, three times a day. My husband still hasn’t got his sense of smell fully back.

“It’s been awful. I’m back at work. It’s a struggle.”

Asked where responsibility for the pandemic’s spread lies, Rachel said, “The advice from Public Health England was if you did test positive, ask a friend or neighbour to take your children to school! That’s an active decision to spread the virus. There was a decision to let this spread and see how we go with it. The government should be blamed for social murder.

“They want to protect businesses. There’s probably lobbying from the aviation industry. I’ve seen in the press about [Health Secretary] Matt Hancock and the organisation his sister has shares in; there’s too many fingers in pies. Their interest is to make money and not protect the public.”

Support and advocacy group, Long-COVID Kids UK (LCK), promotes studies of Long COVID in children. LCK cites recent Office for National Statistics figures showing 74,126 children with symptoms at five weeks post-infection and 45,618 after 12 weeks.

In January 2021, LCK conducted an online survey of 510 children, mean age 10.3 years, infected between January 2020 and January 2021. These included 351 from the UK and 94 from the United States. Most of the children were physically active before infection.

The survey, published last month, revealed the top 10 symptoms and their prevalence in order: gastrointestinal issues, chest pain, headaches, fatigue, joint muscle pain and weakness, sore throat, dizziness, rashes, mood changes and nausea.

The survey found neurological symptoms, including poor concentration, difficulty remembering and processing information and short-term memory problems.

Frances Simpson, a lecturer in psychiatry at Coventry University, Scarborough, and co-founder of LCK, has endured the effects of Long COVID for over a year, along with her two children. In an interview with *Deutsche Welle*, she explained the frustration parents face getting care for their children: “It’s a really difficult place to be in. Quite often parents are ill themselves, and to have children who are ill, and their illness is denied. Parents feel they are being gaslighted.”

Sixteen-year-old Claire told the WSWS she faces similar problems. Claire attends a high school in Manchester and suffers from Long COVID that she contracted when schools reopened last September.

“I got COVID twice when I was in school, and when I wasn’t in school, I didn’t get it. The first time I got it was in September, and the next time was in October. We do PE inside; we use the same equipment that isn’t washed

down. In the changing room there is a small window, but it’s never been opened, and we don’t have to wear masks.

“Every time he [Prime Minister Boris Johnson] opens the schools, the infection rate goes up. A third of my year was off self-isolating. We have classrooms with 20 to 30 pupils in it—it’s not a safe space. One of the lunch ladies got COVID and no one was sent home and yet they feed over a thousand people.

“I’m having a lot of heart problems, heart arrhythmias [irregular heart-beat], when I walk, I can’t breathe easily. I have to slow down. I am tired all the time, especially after heart arrhythmias. I usually feel really sick right before [an attack], it just doesn’t feel right. Everything’s out of rhythm. You feel really weak. It’s scary, you have to get down and not move or do anything.

“Afterwards, I get extremely tired. The rest of my day ruined!

“No matter how much I sleep, after a few hours I’m drained again. I have to have time off. They ask for a doctor’s note, but the GP won’t see you. You’re really isolated in general.

“I’m worried going back [to school]. I could get it again because it’s the only place I got it.”

Rebecca’s and Claire’s experience, like many families cited in the LCK study and on their website, shows the urgent need to protect students, parents and teachers from COVID-19 and its debilitating long-term impacts. For some children who develop Paediatric Inflammatory Multisystem Syndrome, the disease proves fatal.

In October, the government announced the opening of a network of Long-COVID clinics. A recent survey found 90 percent of people who tried to access the services were unable to do so.



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