

UK government report reveals COVID disruption has produced developmental delays in younger children

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A report by the UK government's education inspectorate Ofsted describes a worrying regression in the development of younger children during the past two years.

This developmental delay is not surprising, considering the disruption caused to education by the Johnson government's failure to respond to the pandemic scientifically with a zero-COVID strategy. Its "let it rip" policy has instead led to the development of new, more transmissible variants of SARS-CoV 2, and wave upon wave of infections, causing chaos in schools with COVID-related staff shortages and pupil absences.

The disruption is robbing children, particularly those who attend state schools and pre-school settings, of their basic right to learn in a safe environment.

Ofsted's report, "Education recovery in early years providers: spring 2022", is based on interviews with 70 early years providers, including 38 childminders and 32 nurseries, as well as discussions with early years inspectors, between January 17 and February 4, 2022. The authors state the report is neither "conclusive" nor "representative" as it was based on a small sample, but it nevertheless raises serious concerns.

Those interviewed reported, "babies have struggled to respond to basic facial expressions," due to reduced contact time with adults. Some noticed delays in physical development and motor skills, especially if children lived in homes without a garden for outside play. Delays in crawling and walking were observed, as well as obesity.

"[D]elays in speech and language progress" were also noted. Children's vocabulary was more limited than would be expected, and this adversely affected socialising. Some providers noticed toddlers and pre-school children needed extra support with sharing and taking turns. "Some children had regressed in

independence and in self-care skills," such as putting on their own coat, going to the toilet or blowing their nose.

More children were referred for speech therapy. Ofsted said, "... parents who could do so had paid for private speech and language therapists... Those who could not afford this have faced longer waiting times, of up to 9 months in some local authorities."

Prevalence of the virus among staff or child minders disrupted provision, compounding insecurity felt by children, many of whom may have tragically lost a caregiver or grandparent.

The report concludes that "more children may not be ready for school by age 4."

Over the years, privatisation pursued by successive Conservative and Labour governments encroached heavily on Early Years provision, leaving these services fragile and expensive outside of a school setting. The report notes, "Some providers are concerned about their long-term sustainability given the fluctuations in the number of children on roll".

Ofsted is employed by the government to promote its policies in education. The report therefore places no blame for this state of affairs where it belongs, with the Tory government and its Labour and trade union backers. Neither does it use the findings to condemn the insane lifting of all mitigations measures to curb the spread of the virus.

Speaking to the BBC, Ofsted's chief inspector of schools, Amanda Spielman, said, "We found a number of concerning things—still knock on from the pandemic and lockdown more generally." For Spielman, public health lockdowns, demanded by teachers, parents and the working class, are part of the problem, not the fact that the government lifted them prematurely before the virus was suppressed.

Latest government advice will maximise the spread of the virus. Since twice weekly mandatory tests for school children ended February 21, the government writes, “Children and young people with mild symptoms such as a runny nose, sore throat or slight cough, who are otherwise well can continue to attend their education setting.” Only if they have a high temperature should they stay home.

The availability of free lateral flow tests ended April 1. Their purchase will be an added burden on working class families, who over the next months will have to choose whether to heat or eat as energy and food prices soar. Free testing in special schools also ended on that date, leaving the clinically vulnerable with absolutely no protection. Children are not advised to take a test unless directed by a health professional.

Those who do manage to test and find that they are positive are advised to stay off school and self-isolate at home for just three days “if they can”, while adults should try to self-isolate for five days, avoiding the clinically vulnerable for 10 days. Employees with symptoms should work at home “if at all possible”—not possible for most workers. Anyone living with someone who has tested positive is advised to go to work or school, but to avoid older and vulnerable people, who will become permanent prisoners in their own home with the virus prevalence sky high.

In response, joint general secretary of the National Education Union Mary Bousted said, “This confusing guidance is a recipe for even more chaos and will make managing cases and preventing disruption even harder than it already is... We have repeatedly urged the Government to continue with free testing... including in all education settings... these calls have been ignored.”

Throughout the pandemic, the education unions have been in lockstep with government policy of herding children into unsafe classrooms, promoting the fiction that schools could be made safe before the virus is suppressed, if only the government would listen and provide mitigation measures. They have allowed schools to become major vectors for viral spread during the pandemic.

Professor Paul Elliot, of Imperial College London’s soon-to-be-axed REACT-1 COVID study told BBC Radio 4’s *Today* the highest case rates are currently among primary school children, at nine percent—almost one in 10 infected. At the same time, vaccines are only now being rolled out for 5-11-year-olds, and that at a slow pace.

The National Association of Headteachers and

Association of College and School Leaders unions recently wrote to Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi requesting the government immediately reinstate testing in schools. The letter condemned the government’s “lack of concern and support” as schools were suffering a higher rate of staff absenteeism “than at any previous point during the pandemic.”

But the unions, as they have done from day one of the pandemic, raise such concerns from the standpoint that schools must stay open no matter what, so as not to disrupt the economy. The letter continued, “Failing to control the transmission of Covid in schools and colleges is making it increasingly difficult for leaders to keep their settings open, and to ensure pupils receive a high-quality education when they are there.”

Latest attendance figures estimate 179,000 absences for COVID related reasons on March 31, 23,000 less than on March 17 since schools stopped testing on-site. However, on the same date, attendance actually fell to 88.6 percent. The number of schools in England self-reporting COVID cases from March 28 to April 4 were 488 primary schools, 132 secondary schools, 12 combined schools, and seven early years settings nurseries (figures compiled by SafeEdForAll member Daniella Modos -Cutter).

The government has responded to this mayhem by ending its collection and bi-monthly publication of schools’ data on the number of pupil absences due to COVID!

Ofsted’s report will be cynically used to blackmail the public into accepting that children must attend packed schools, regardless of the dangers. The real conclusion to be drawn is that the policy of “herd immunity” and mass infection has been a disaster on all fronts, killing 169 children (according to figures compiled by SafeEdForAll member @tigresseleanor, April 6) and at least 570 staff, debilitating thousands more, and setting back millions with the inevitable disruption caused by waves of infection and illness. The only solution is a democratically and scientifically implemented policy of Zero-COVID.

To join fight for fully funded education in a safe environment, join the Educators Rank-and File Safety Committee today.



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