UK: Sarah Paxman found guilty for protecting her son from COVID-infected schools

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Sarah Paxman, the courageous single mother who has fought to protect her vulnerable 9-year old son Stanley from COVID-19 infested schools, has been found guilty of "failing to ensure" his "regular school attendance" under Section 444 (1) of the Education Act. She intends to appeal.

Sarah appeared at Guildford Magistrate Court last Thursday on charges instigated by Surrey County Council. Stanley, who is autistic and suffers from several underlying health conditions including Cold Urticaria, has not attended his specialist school since the start of the pandemic. Sarah herself suffers from Long COVID, the debilitating effects of which have been exacerbated by her relentless persecution for safeguarding her son.

The day-long hearing heard evidence for the prosecution from Stanley's deputy head teacher and the paediatrician who manages his allergies and asthma.

Sarah was represented pro bono by distinguished barrister Mark McDonald, of Furnival Chambers, London. Speaking after the hearing, Mark asked pointedly, "What is the public interest in this prosecution"?

Expert testimony was provided on Sarah's behalf on COVID-19, especially the connection between school-aged children in community transmission and incidences of Long COVID.

Sarah's hearing took place the same day as the inquest into the death of 15-year-old schoolgirl Jorja Halliday from COVID-19. The inquest heard she died after deteriorating "astonishingly" quickly from a "rare" heart inflammation linked to COVID.

Sarah was supported in court by another mother and campaigner facing similar charges for keeping her vulnerable child out of school while it is unsafe.

She recounted the trial to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

"Sarah has a strong relationship with Stanley's school and wants to keep it that way. Stanley loves the school which is why she refuses to deregister him. She doesn't blame the school for what is happening because it is following government policy but feels she has no choice if she is to protect him, and the school understands that.

"Most of the school's evidence consisted of explaining the mitigations that had been put in place in the early stages of the pandemic based on government guidelines such as 'bubbles', isolating infected children and handwashing. A lot of emphasis was placed on handwashing, but we know that COVID-19 is an airborne virus.

"You could argue that at the start of the pandemic, little was understood about the virus. That's not the case now. And though we now know more, all mitigations have been abandoned.

"What struck me was that the school staff knew nothing about HEPA filters. That's not a surprise because none of this is in the government guidelines and there has been no development of those guidelines in line with the advance in scientific understanding: the fact that we need clean air and to isolate infected children and staff to stop transmission.

"Stanley's paediatrician said that, in her opinion, COVID did not present an extra-risk for him. But she also said that she hadn't read the scientific evidence relating to the effects of COVID on children.

"Two further things stood out for me: Stanley's asthma and autism are listed in the doctor's Green Book that prioritises conditions considered high risk. The effect of COVID-19 infection on individuals with these risks has not been considered.

"Stanley's autism was barely mentioned, which is incredibly important. These children respond differently to a neuro-typical child when faced with the disruption caused by the pandemic. If you consider what's happened in schools—constant infections of children and staff, upset routines, etc—these present additional challenges for an autistic child and all at a time when they already feel that they, or their families, are unsafe. This is very distressing.

"Given all Stanley's existing vulnerabilities, why on earth should Sarah expose him to another illness? It would be cruel.

"I thought the expert testimony on COVID-19 was excellent. Paediatricians deal with childhood illness as it presents in the individual at the time. So, they would not necessarily know the science behind COVID. An epidemiologist studies data as it applies to all children. Those with underlying health conditions will be at more risk.

"The expert explained that the government guidelines were based on research conducted in schools when the country was in lockdown and there was only 15 percent of children in attendance. It was also when mitigations such as isolating infectious cases were in place.

"In the early stages of the pandemic all those on the Green Book were told to shield. But after such 'research' many were told this

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was no longer necessary. There's no legitimate data or research to back that up. At one point, a child with asthma was considered vulnerable but one week later they were off the list.

"Department of Education guidance is not following the scientific data and the UK is an outlier in this respect. A list of countries was presented to the hearing where masks, HEPA filters, isolation and other measures are still employed. This showed that the UK has chosen to disregard the science and give schools a free pass.

"Attention was drawn to a note in the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) minutes that speaks explicitly of allowing children to be infected to 'boost' adult immunity!

"We had anti-vax, anti-mitigation groups like UsForThem promoting the so-called Great Barrington Declaration of 'herd immunity'. They threatened legal action to stop masks and other mitigation policies in schools. Their anti-scientific demands are being played out in schools especially.

"That's set the narrative for where we are now. There is no talk of Covid in schools. It's not mentioned in newsletters, Risk Assessments. Instead, it's all about being back to 'normal.'

"This is highly worrying for those children and families with clinical vulnerabilities. There are people with cancer who are being told their child must attend school, with no mitigations. Imagine the stress involved for those families.

"Sarah was last up and was only questioned briefly. The prosecution presented her as an 'irrational' mother. It argued that it is the 'government of the day' that sets out policy and sets the punitive measures against parents who do not follow that policy.

"But the 'government of the day' has killed tens of thousands of people and caused many others to suffer with Long COVID. So, the policy of the 'government of the day' should not be followed.

"The prosecution specifically mentioned that imprisonment is a penalty for the charge Sarah faced but as Mark [McDonald] pointed out, it's down to the judge to decide the penalty. We're now in a situation where sanctions to stop parents taking their children out of school for holidays are being used against parents protecting their children's health and wellbeing.

"Parents justifiably concerned about COVID are presented as troublemakers, making undue demands on schools. The truth is this is not a 'school' problem. It's a government problem. Schools have no money for heating, lighting. No money to give staff the pay rises they deserve. They are saying nine out of 10 schools will go bust next year. So, we know that schools are not going to fund HEPA filters and the necessary measures.

"This is just creating more problems in the future, and they affect the whole of society. Schools can't deal with the situation. The National Health Service can't deal with the situation, yet all those being infected with COVID or Long COVID are having to fight for treatment from a stretched health system.

"The Department for Education [DoE] narrative has become more entrenched, and it has removed any discretion from schools. It will not allow any leeway because that would mean acknowledging there is a real problem.

"A disproportionate amount of those being persecuted are vulnerable children and their families; those with ADHD, autism, mental health issues.

"More and more parents are ending up in court. It was reported in June that 1.8 million pupils regularly missed school in the first term of the academic year, just over 71,000 fines issued totalling £3.7 million. These won't all be for COVID, but it shows how it's going. The DoE is enforcing these punitive measures because it's the only tool it has. It is not prepared to put in support for the children that need it to keep them safe such as classes online.

"That's why it's so important to oppose what they are doing. Professor Van-Tam [former Deputy Chief Medical Officer] said we are in race against COVID, but they've removed the finishing line.

"I'm in a similar situation to Sarah and I felt I needed to be here to witness this. I want to be on the right side of history. I can't imagine knowing what I do about COVID and not doing anything about it. I also want to return to 'normal'. But that means 'normal' life expectancy, 'normal' hospital and ambulance waiting times. To have 'normal' back we must correct what is happening now. The 'government of the day' is not acting in the interests of society and that has to be changed."

Sarah told the WSWS, "I want to thank everyone that has supported me. I especially want to thank Mark McDonald, who is and has been fantastic and will be supporting me in my appeal. He is as formidable as his reputation and I am in awe of him, and so grateful.

"I am going to appeal on principle. Because this is not just about Stanley but all vulnerable children and families.

"Also, I have been found guilty of keeping Stanley out of school to this point, but he is still absent from school, and will continue to be, while it is unsafe. Government guidance is unsafe, unscientific and incorrect. It has to be changed and that's what I am trying to help bring about."

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