

Children are unlikely to be the main drivers of the COVID-19 pandemic ^[1]

A systematic literature review

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Abstract

Aim

Many countries have closed schools and kindergartens to minimise COVID-19, but the role that children play in disease transmission is unclear.

Methods

A systematic literature review of the MEDLINE and EMBASE databases and medRxiv/bioRxiv preprint servers to 11 May 2020 identified published and unpublished papers on COVID-19 transmission by children.

Results

We identified 700 scientific papers and letters and 47 full texts were studied in detail. Children accounted for a small fraction of COVID-19 cases and mostly had social contacts with peers or parents, rather than older people at risk of severe disease. Data on viral loads were scarce, but indicated that children may have lower levels than adults, partly because they often have fewer symptoms, and this should decrease the transmission risk. Household transmission studies showed that children were rarely the index case and case studies suggested that children with COVID-19 seldom caused outbreaks. However, it is highly likely that children can transmit the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes COVID-19, and even asymptomatic children can have viral loads.

Conclusion

Children are unlikely to be the main drivers of the pandemic. Opening up schools and kindergartens is unlikely to impact COVID-19 mortality rates in older people.

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