

Kids are not major source of COVID-19 spread, McMaster research review finds ^[1]

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Author:

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EXCERPTS

A new McMaster University review of COVID-19 research says children will not become super spreaders or cause a spike in infections if they return to school.

It comes school boards and the Ontario government plan for the re-opening of schools in the fall.

The review looked at 33 studies from around the world to understand the role of daycares and schools in COVID-19 transmission.

Sarah Neil-Sztramko, an assistant professor at McMaster who helped lead the review, said while more research needs to be done on schools and daycares, young children are not a major source of the virus' spread.

"In [reports] prior to lockdown and in jurisdictions that have reopened following lockdown, we see cases where a symptomatic child had gone to school and interacted with other students and teachers and we see really low rates of transmission" she told CBC News.

"It gives us confidence to know ... it doesn't seem to result in massive super-spreader events like we see in churches or concerts ... with adults."

Neil-Sztramko said outbreaks in schools have normally been attributed to the adults, not kids.

"One of the things we really need to focus on is minimizing contact between the adults in the school setting."

She said it's good news, since kids will struggle to follow pandemic protocol.

The review has some limitations.

Neil-Sztramko admits many of the studies in the review are low quality, but says there is consistency among the studies, even despite the variance in quality. The review also only includes evidence available up to July 20.

Another review by McMaster also shows COVID-19 is creating more mental health strains, like anxiety and depression, within families.

Neil-Sztramko said kids going to school and daycares is one way to alleviate that.

Local schools planning for fall

Both the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board and the Catholic board both didn't comment on the research findings but said they are working closely with public health as they try to juggle three different plans for September.

One option is a full return with students in school for a full day every day. The second plan is a mix of online learning and in-class learning. The last approach is fully online.

Pat Daly, Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board chairperson, said one of the keys in back-to-school planning is the cohorting of students — smaller, assigned groups of students and teachers that rotate for class time.

"There's as few staff members as possible in contact with each other and students," he said.

Daly said student transportation will be another challenge schools face.

Alex Johnstone, HWDSB chair, agreed, saying boards may need more money to adapt.

She also told CBC News a lack of direction from the ministry has forced boards to make assumptions when buying personal protective equipment so that it all arrives in time for the start of the school year.

"We went ahead and purchased Plexiglas and we've made arrangements in our ventilation systems to ensure top quality airflow in our school," she said, listing off other precautions like shutting off water fountains.

Johnstone added the board will likely need more money from the government as it has spent \$2 million in COVID-19 precautions. It will also need hire more staff.

In the last week of July HWDSB said its three plans and cohorts will be finalized.

From there, it will prepare for school and have a review in the last week of July.

From Aug. 4 and onward, it will wait for advice from the ministry.

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