

Review of COVID-19 spread by kids offers comfort about schools reopening, prof says ^[1]

Research continues into why children under 10 do not spread the disease

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EXCERPTS

As students and families across New Brunswick get ready to head back to school in a month's time, a new Canadian study has found children under the age of 10 are not driving outbreaks of COVID-19.

"What we see from the reports that have been published to date up to July 20th from around the world is that children are not a major source of COVID-19 transmission," said Sarah Neil-Sztramko, an assistant professor at McMaster University.

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

When clusters of outbreaks are seen in schools and daycare settings, most transmission is tracked back to adults within those settings or adults in the household transmitting to children rather than children transmitting to each other.

Neil-Sztramko said information like this provides confidence and comfort as more daycares and schools in various jurisdictions across the country are being reopened.

Children can usually be ruled out as the spreaders of COVID-19 through contact tracing or because their symptoms appear much sooner, and those who are symptomatic and then confirmed positive don't spread the virus to other children and adults at the rate an adult does when symptomatic.

"Right now, we don't know why," said Neil-Sztramko. "There's some hypothesis it's the way the children shed the virus but I think that's still a major question mark."

Transmission increases with older children

Research shows children typically have less serious cases of COVID-19 although there are some cases of children being seriously ill.

"At this point we don't really know why."

Neil-Sztramko said the research also shows that as children get older, they tend to transmit the virus the way adults do.

As schools reopen, other measures are also being put in place to help stop the spread of COVID-19, she said.

"When we think about some of the cases that have had a lot of media attention, like in Israel, that have seen huge outbreaks and spikes in cases after reopening schools, those were high schools where they were not, from what we read, a lot of other public health measures in place."

Neil-Sztramko said knowing younger children are going to have a harder time following the two-metre distance rule, be less effective with hand hygiene and less likely to wear a mask properly the information in the study helps.

"This gives us a little bit of comfort that might be OK, knowing that they spread less than older children."

She added staff might want to be more diligent with enforcement of those measures for students in middle school and high school.

Neil-Sztramko said while there was little data from Canada to look at, they did receive good data from Scandinavia and Australia. She added that they will be watching for the new data from across Canada as schools reopen next month.

"We will be updating as more evidence becomes available."

Increased stress

In other studies, Neil-Sztramko said, researchers looked at the impact COVID-19 had on families and found that stress had increased for families especially for women with young children.

"There's a lot of fear that comes with it."

Neil-Sztramko said many have been balancing working at home with children, or having no jobs and the financial implications of that.

She added data shows the gender employment gap has grown.

"Women are more likely to have lost jobs than men are and are also more likely to reduce their work hours even if they are able to keep their job than men in the same position particularly women with young children."

Neil-Sztramko said the overall impact on society and how it will effect the economy has yet to be seen but she says it's something that has to have close attention paid to it.

"We see some of those preliminary impacts in the economic data, but I think we're just really starting to see the tip of the iceberg here."

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