



Supporting a Safe Return to School for Canada's Children and Youth

The unprecedented global health crisis caused by the spread of COVID-19 necessitated the widespread implementation of physical distancing measures and the closure of almost all public spaces, including schools and most daycares. As the weeks of school closures have turned into months, the immediate and short-term effects on children and youth are becoming more apparent, and the potential for significant long-term consequences is growing. While the physical, social, emotional, developmental and academic consequences of school closures affect all children and youth, those most vulnerable before the pandemic are being disproportionately impacted.

Schools are not just places of learning. Millions of children and youth in Canada rely on schools for physical and mental health services, nutritious food, safety, security and support. Children and youth with special needs, from low-income households, or for whom home is not a safe place, are facing some of the most significant consequences of school closures.¹ Facilitating a safe return to school by this September is therefore crucial not only for development and academic achievement, but for the health and well-being of Canada's children and youth.

The knowledge we have gained over the last few months on the effects of COVID-19 on children provides further support for a return to school in September. Evidence from multiple studies conducted around the world have shown that the burden of COVID-19 is higher in adults than in children and youth.² As of June 21, 2020, those ≤ 19 years of age represented only 1% of total hospitalizations from COVID-19 in Canada, with no associated deaths in this age group.³ While an unparalleled closure of public spaces was appropriate at the start of this health crisis, we now have enough evidence to justify reopening schools and daycares in line with public health measures. School districts in British Columbia, Manitoba, Québec, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island have already begun this gradual process, as have several other countries that Canada can learn from.

To facilitate a safe return to school in September, we call on Ministries of Education to ensure that:

1. Policies and protocols are informed by meaningful and multi-point consultation with experts in child and adolescent mental health and development, in addition to public health and infectious disease specialists. Effective solutions should reflect the knowledge of paediatricians, paediatric mental health experts (including child and adolescent psychiatrists and psychologists), provincial and territorial medical associations, children's healthcare centres, as well as physical and occupational therapists. Safe and creative solutions must take into account the age and stage of all children and youth served by the education system, as well as the needs of children with medical and mental health conditions.
2. Policies and protocols are designed in consultation with teachers, school administrators, parents and youth. Ministries must also ensure that the resources necessary to support teachers and administrators responsible for implementing back-to-school policies are provided.

3. Decisions around the reopening of schools and daycares responsibly balance public health risks with the harms of social isolation and the need for all children and youth to be able to play and interact with each other in ways that support healthy emotional and psychological development.
4. Policy and practice are flexible, adaptable, and reflect the unique circumstances of each region, recognizing that the risk of outbreak can vary significantly between school districts and will likely fluctuate until a vaccine becomes widely available.

The negative consequences of school closures on the health and well-being of Canada's children and youth must not be overlooked. Policy and practice should reflect the fact that children and youth have very different needs from those of adults. A safe return to school, guided by evidence-based policy that meets the unique physical, social, emotional and developmental needs of children and youth is essential.

¹ UNICEF Canada. The Impact of COVID-19 on Children in Canada: Short, Medium and Long-Term Mitigation Strategies: <https://www.unicef.ca/en/press-release/impact-covid-19-children-canada-short-medium-and-long-term-mitigation-strategies> (Accessed June 16, 2020).

² Zhang Juanjuan, Maria Litvinova, Yuxia Liang, et al. Changes in contact patterns shape the dynamics of the COVID-19 outbreak in China. *Science* 2020;29:eabb8001.

³ Government of Canada. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): Epidemiology update: <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/covid-19/epidemiological-summary-covid-19-cases.html> (Accessed June 22, 2020).