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TAKING STOCK

Rammya Mathew: “Back to school” must be backed by a functioning covid-19 testing programme

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Children in England and Wales have been back at school for just over a week now, and in Scotland for a few weeks longer. GPs are already seeing a surge in cases of viral illness among school age children. From around the country I’m hearing reports of GP surgeries being inundated with calls from parents: they’re not generally seeking medical advice because they’re worried that their child needs to see a GP, but they’re confused about whether their child meets the criteria for self-isolation and covid testing.

At first, I struggled to understand their confusion. After all, just three symptoms meet Public Health England’s criteria for covid testing—a new, continuous cough; a fever of >38°C; and a loss of, or change to, your sense of taste or smell. But does this correlate with the evidence? The Covid Symptom Study app (by ZOE)¹ reports that 52% of children who tested positive hadn’t logged any of those “classic” symptoms, which are typically seen in adults. The app highlights the most common symptoms in children as fatigue (55%), headache (53%), fever (49%), sore throat (38%), and loss of appetite (35%).

To add to the uncertainty, schools often have their own policies about when a child can or can’t attend, and social media forums are rife with “hearsay” about what is and isn’t covid. It’s no wonder that parents, caught in the middle of all this noise, are turning to their GPs for some gentle advice and reassurance.

But having clear, pragmatic, evidence based advice on when a test is indicated in school age children is only the first part of the puzzle. It’s no good if we don’t have the testing capacity to match the increase in viral illness—a problem that should have been predicted, with schools reopening and winter approaching.

As it stands, if parents can’t get a test within the first five days of their child’s illness, the entire household needs to self-isolate for two weeks. We can’t underestimate the pressure this will put on families. After several months of home schooling and juggling multiple commitments, parents are understandably desperate for their children to have some uninterrupted time at school—even more so, now that the government’s keen for everyone to get back to work and operate at full capacity. This pressure is even more acute in low income households, whose wages are often not protected if they have to self-isolate.

In my local area, six schools have already reported confirmed cases of covid-19. Every time a child tests positive, their entire bubble (usually a class group) must isolate for two weeks from the onset of

symptoms in the index case. If we don’t urgently get our public health messaging right, and if we don’t have the testing capacity to back up what we’re asking of parents, we’ll very quickly see this situation spiral out of control, with parents forced to send their children back into school without a test.

We need to make it easy for parents to do the right thing. If not, we have months of chaos ahead of us.

Competing interests: I co-lead Islington GP Federation’s Quality Improvement Team.

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1 Covid Symptom Study. Back to school: the real symptoms to look out for in children. 7 Sep 2020. <https://covid.joinzoe.com/post/back-to-school>.

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