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Covid-19: More young children are being infected in Israel and Italy, emerging data suggest

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Experts have warned that schools must be reopened with caution, amid emerging evidence from Israel and Italy that more young children are being infected with new variants of covid-19.

Paediatricians in Israel, which has surged ahead in vaccinating its adult population, reported a sharp rise in covid-19 infections among young people, with more than 50 000 children and teens testing positive in January—more than Israel saw in any month during the first and second waves.

Yuli Edelstein, health minister, told the *Jerusalem Post*, “We got a letter from the Israeli Association of Paediatrics that says they are very worried about the rate of disease in younger students.” Some experts in Israel said that the rise in child cases was due to the emergence of the more contagious UK variant, which has spread more easily among younger age groups.

Cyrille Cohen, head of the laboratory of Immunotherapy at Israel’s Bar-Ilan University and member of the country’s national covid-19 vaccine clinical trial advisory committee, told *The BMJ* that his figures indicated that, since the emergence of the UK variant B.1.1.7 in Israel in mid-December, the proportion of new daily cases accounted for by children aged under 10 had risen by nearly a quarter (23%).

Cohen urged caution over schools reopening. “Though I am convinced that education should be the first sector to open up because of its importance, it is my personal opinion that we should still reopen gradually . . . until we understand better the infection pattern of this new variant,” he said.

He said that no evidence yet showed the new variant to be more dangerous to children, but he noted that in January Israel had opened its first special covid-19 intensive care unit for children, admitting four or five children.

Greater precautions

Similar warnings are emerging from Italy after a spike in case in the village of Corzano, in the northern province of Brescia. On 3 February 10% of its total population of 1400 (140) were reported to have tested positive for the virus, 60% of whom were children of primary or infant school age. Many of these children are believed to have infected other family members.

Commenting on the findings, Roberto Burioni, professor of virology at San Raffaele Hospital in Milan, tweeted, “The much more contagious English variant calls for much greater precautions.”

On Friday 5 February the UK Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies called for safer schooling provision to be prioritised and launched a consultation document on the subject.¹ Stephen Reicher of the University of St Andrews, a member of the group, said, “For now, we must restrict all non-essential activities to bring down infections as fast as possible and reopen schools as soon as the level is low enough for us to start doing so without driving the pandemic back out of control.”

¹ Independent SAGE. The Independent SAGE Report 34. The return to school: a consultation document. 5 Feb 2021. <https://www.independentsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Schools-consultation-Feb-2021-2.pdf>.

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