

Back to school – key messages for parents

Is it safe for children to return to school?

It's understandable that parents and carers may have some concerns about children returning to school in September.

But we would like to reassure parents and carers that all steps have been taken to ensure that schools are as safe as they can be.

And while some aspects of school life will have changed, it's really important that children do get back into the classroom to continue their education and also to see their friends and teachers.

The Chief Medical Officers for England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have said that children have a lower risk of being seriously ill from coronavirus and that there is no evidence that children transmit the disease any more than adults.

However, there will still be some risks while the virus remains in the community and therefore, in line with national guidance, schools are putting in place a number of procedures and making changes to how things will work.

We have supported schools in carrying out their own individual risk assessments to determine what safety measures they need and in putting those measures in place to help minimise risks for children and staff.

This has been done in line with national guidance and all key areas have been considered, including transport, cleaning programmes, handwashing and social distancing.

It's also worth remembering that schools have remained open throughout the pandemic to provide support for vulnerable pupils and children of key workers – so many practices and procedures are already very well-established.

Schools are looking forward to welcoming all pupils back in September and staff will support pupils as they get used to the new arrangements that are there to keep everyone safe.

We are confident that all steps have been taken to make schools as safe and Covid-secure as possible.

What safety measures will be in place?

There isn't a 'one size fits all' approach that will work for every school so the measures in place may differ from one school to another.

However, every school will have standard systems and procedures as well as those that will meet their own set of requirements based on their individual circumstances and following a school risk assessment.

This will take into account issues such as the size and layout of the building and the numbers and ages of pupils.

When children and staff arrive at school, they will be required to wash their hands with soap and water or hand sanitiser for at least 20 seconds. Handwashing will also be encouraged throughout the day.

Schools will be fully cleaned daily and areas in the school that are frequently touched, such as door handles, will be cleaned more often.

Measures could also include staggered start and finish times and different lunchtime and break time arrangements for different groups of children.

All schools are contacting parents to make them aware of the arrangements they will have in place from September.

If you have any questions please contact your child's school directly and they will be happy to provide further information.

How will social distancing work in schools?

To minimise the number of people children will come into contact with, children may be kept in smaller groups, or bubbles, based on their class or year group.

Schools will have procedures in place so that separation between groups, or bubbles, can be maintained during the school day.

It's recognised that it may not be appropriate to expect younger children to practise social distancing and therefore class bubbles are likely to be used mostly in primary schools to help to minimise wider contact between pupils.

Older students in secondary and middle schools may be required to observe the 2m social distancing where possible, particularly when moving between classrooms.

You can check with your school if you would like further information on how the arrangements for your children will work.

Do children have to wear face coverings in school?

The local public health advice is that secondary and middle school pupils should wear face coverings in corridors or communal (shared) areas where social distancing cannot be maintained, as set out in the government guidance.

This is advice rather than guidance and it is a matter for schools themselves to determine whether face coverings are required and to advise pupils and parents accordingly.

My child attends a special school – what arrangements are in place there?

Like all schools, special schools have carried out their own risk assessment to determine what measures are needed to protect and keep pupils safe.

Any measures that are put in place will also take into account the individual needs of each pupil. This includes a lot of work done over the summer break by the Special Educational Needs Disability (SEND) Team and our SEND transport providers to make sure children with SEND can travel safely to and from school each day.

Your child's school should have been in touch with you to discuss your child's needs and the arrangements that will be in place in school.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact your school and they will be happy to discuss this further.

Will my child still be able to attend before and after school clubs?

Schools can run breakfast and after school clubs but will need to take steps to ensure they are run in line with guidance on protective measures.

This may mean that some out of school clubs may have to operate differently so please check with your school for any changes in arrangements.

You can help to minimise any risk of infection by only using the same out of school activities or limiting the number of clubs that your child attends.

Will my child still be able to go to a childminder before and/or after school?

All childcare providers, including childminders, have been asked put in place measures to ensure the safety of the children they are looking after.

This includes ensuring children wash their hands more often, extra cleaning of frequently touched areas and may include using separate rooms for children of different ages.

You should speak directly to your childminder about the measures they have in place, including any changes to drop off and pick up procedures that you may need to follow.

What happens if there is an outbreak at my child's school?

If a child becomes ill while at school with suspected coronavirus symptoms the school will follow set procedures to keep them isolated from others until they can be collected safely and taken home.

Parents and carers will be advised to arrange for their child to be tested and you must inform the school of the result.

If the test is positive you will be required to follow the public health guidance for your child to self-isolate at home for 10 days from the start of symptoms.

Schools will notify the local health protection team of any positive cases and action will be taken to identify those in close contact and determine what further action is needed.

This could include sending people home to self-isolate if they have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive.

All schools are aware of the procedures that must be followed and action will be taken quickly, managed by the health protection team, to minimise the risk of further infection.

To help prevent any outbreak, it is vital that you do not send your child to school if they have tested positive in the last 10 days or have suspected coronavirus symptoms, which include a high temperature, a new and continuous cough and a loss of sense of taste or smell.

Will I be fined if I don't send my child back to school?

The government has made it clear that attendance in school from September will be mandatory and parents have a legal duty to ensure their children attend.

Councils do have legal powers to take action against parents who fail to ensure their child's attendance without a valid reason.

Please speak to your school if you have any concerns about your child returning to school.

What is the safest way to travel to school?

Wherever possible people are encouraged to walk or cycle to school.

We are continuing to develop new temporary cycling and walking routes as part of the emergency Covid recovery measures that were put in place following the easing of lockdown restrictions.

We're also committed to developing low traffic neighbourhoods and will be seeking feedback from families and schools about which areas and streets that are used as part of people's journeys to school could benefit from this.

We strongly encourage people to avoid driving to school as this creates congestion, leads to poor air quality and potential road safety issues.

However, if you do need to use the car please try to drive for part of the journey and drop off or park away from the school gates before walking the remaining distance.

Is it safe to travel by bus?

Nexus and bus operators have been working hard to ensure they can offer safe and secure bus transport for pupils and the wider travelling public from September.

This includes having extra vehicles available and measures in place to allow for social distancing.

On busy routes additional buses will be used so that pupils can travel separately to other members of the public.

Members of the public are also advised to avoid travelling at times when school services are operating where possible.

Parents are urged to plan their journeys in advance and pupils over the age of 11 are reminded that they must wear a face covering while travelling on the bus unless they are exempt on medical grounds.

Pupils using public transport must also have the correct change for their fare.

Seating arrangements on dedicated school transport will mean pupils will be sitting in groups that mirror their year group bubbles in school wherever possible.

For further details and advice visit www.nexus.org.uk/covid-secure.

Is it ok to use the Metro?

Metro services are operating to a normal weekday timetable so trains are running frequently during the day.

There is enhanced cleaning of carriages and in Metro stations, as well as hand sanitiser points at the busiest stations.

Passengers are asked to maintain social distancing while using the services and are advised to use contactless payment or Pop smart travel cards instead of cash.

Pupils travelling to school using the Metro who are aged 11 or older are also required to wear a face covering unless they are exempt on medical grounds.

You can find more advice on travelling by Metro at www.nexus.org.uk/covid-secure.

My child normally travels to school or college by train. Will they still be able to use rail services?

Local train operators are working to a reduced timetable but the number of services is expected to increase from September so it is best to double check when services are running.

Anyone aged 11 or older is required to wear a face covering on trains and other public transport unless they are exempt on medical grounds.

You can find further information, including advice on travelling by train and links to local operators, at www.nexus.org.uk/covid-secure/rail.

What transport arrangements are in place for children who attend special schools?

Children who attend special schools will continue to receive transport that meets their needs and requirements.

In many cases, the number of children travelling together will be reduced to ensure there is appropriate social distancing.

This means children may make separate journeys to school, with additional vehicles provided to support this where needed.

There are very rigorous cleaning processes in place to ensure that the vehicles used are as safe as they can be when carrying children.

Information and guidance about our Covid-secure SEND transport has been updated and is available at

<https://www.newcastlesupportdirectory.org.uk/kb5/newcastle/fsd/advice.page?id=TcZGIYJcZco>.

Where can I find out more?

Your school will be able to provide more information about the arrangements that will be in place to help keep your child safe.

You can find the government advice and information for parents here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-parents-and-carers-need-to-know-about-early-years-providers-schools-and-colleges-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/what-parents-and-carers-need-to-know-about-early-years-providers-schools-and-colleges-in-the-autumn-term>

For information and advice on using public or school transport visit

www.nexus.org.uk/covid-secure.