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## Schools are open during the coronavirus outbreak but should I voluntarily keep my kids home anyway, if I can? We asked 5 experts

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## Schools are open during the coronavirus outbreak but should I voluntarily keep my kids home anyway, if I can? We asked 5 experts

### Abstract

We asked five experts to answer the question: schools are staying open but should I voluntarily keep my kids home anyway, if I can?

### Keywords

if, can?, we, asked, 5, experts, during, coronavirus, outbreak, schools, but, open, should, i, voluntarily, keep, my, kids, home, anyway

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## Schools are open during the coronavirus outbreak but should I voluntarily keep my kids home anyway, if I can? We asked 5 experts

March 19, 2020 2.18pm AEDT

*Editor's note: This article is based on the coronavirus situation in Australia as of March 19. The situation may change over time.*

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has said government schools across Australia will remain open for the foreseeable future as the COVID-19 pandemic spreads. He added that:

### Author



**Sunanda Creagh**  

Sunanda Creagh is a Friend of The Conversation.

Head of Digital Storytelling

### Interviewed



**Allen Cheng**

Professor in Infectious Diseases Epidemiology, Monash University



**Christopher Blyth**

Paediatrician, Infectious Diseases Physician and Clinical Microbiologist, University of Western Australia



**Claire Hooker**



**Paul Kidson**

Lecturer in Educational Leadership, University of Wollongong



**Peter Collignon**

Professor of Infectious Diseases and Microbiology, Australian National University

*as a father, I'm happy for my kids to go to school. There's only one reason your kids shouldn't be going to school and that is if they are unwell.*

However, many parents are already voluntarily keeping their children home in an effort to “flatten the curve” – or are considering doing so.

We asked five experts to answer the question: schools are staying open but should I voluntarily keep my kids home anyway, if I can?

### Four of the five experts said no



Allen Cheng

No -

At this stage no, although I do recognise that parents have a right to choose and each family's circumstances are different.

From the perspective of you and your child's health, there is no evidence that children can spread the infection widely - I'm not aware of any large outbreaks linked to transmission in a school setting. This is in contrast to the many outbreaks linked to gatherings of adults such as churches, conventions, nursing homes and large family occasions. To date, teachers who have acquired infection in Australia are thought to have acquired infection [during overseas travel](#) or from colleagues, rather than from students.

Strikingly, no deaths have been [reported](#) in children under 10 years (despite presumably widespread exposure) and Italy recently

[reported](#) no deaths in people under 30 years of age.

However, the usual rules apply - monitor your child's health and don't send them to school if unwell. Teach them how to wash their hands properly and cough into their elbow. There may be a need for schools to have reduced capacity later in the outbreak if there are significant numbers of teachers absent.

At this time, it isn't thought that taking kids out of school would help "[flatten the curve](#)". Short term closures may be warranted for cleaning and contact tracing, or longer closures may still be recommended in anticipation of intense community transmission. If children are withdrawn from school, it is important that they should avoid contact with vulnerable older adults as adherence with personal hygiene is often more difficult in young children.

The other consideration is the impact on the child - while I can't comment with authority on the psychological and educational impacts of home schooling, it should be noted that we may be in this situation for many months.

From a personal perspective as a parent, I don't think I could do anywhere near as well in teaching my children as their current teachers.

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Chris Blyth

No

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No. There is clear evidence that children are [less severely affected](#) than adults and a lack of data to suggest that children are major contributors to the spread of coronavirus in the community. Voluntarily pulling children out of school will pose a major disruption to their lives at a time when community anxiety continues to climb. My three children are at school today.

I have had this discussion with many parents, including parents of children with high-risk medical conditions. There is clear data that adults with some underlying conditions are at increased risk but little data for children. My advice for parents of these higher-risk children, with conditions such as cancer or chronic heart and lung disease, is to have a discussion about the simple things that they can do to reduce the risk of acquiring infections including coronavirus – handwashing and cough etiquette. We also need to stress that, during these times, unwell children and unwell adults should stay at home, rather than going to school and work.

On a slightly different but related question, there is much debate about the benefit and risks of school closures. Although instituted in many countries, I believe the evidence to support school closures with coronavirus is lacking – there are more effective [strategies](#).

Ultimately, if parents are choosing to remove their children voluntarily, I respect that. I would encourage these parents to contact the school, talk to teachers, work out ways to keep their children engaged in learning and connected with their community.

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Peter Collignon

No

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No. If you voluntarily keep children home from school, you are talking about doing that possibly some time past winter. And I think doing this will not have much of an impact on stopping the spread.

A much better idea is: don't go to school if you're sick. Don't go to work if you're sick and don't go near anyone if you're sick.

That's not to say there's zero risk. Unless you're becoming a hermit, there's a risk. But for people under the age of 40, all the data shows the risk of death is low.

I can see why parents are concerned but unless your family adopts a hermit existence for the six months, it may not make much overall difference.

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Claire Hooker

Yes

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Yes. Parents who have the means and who want to remove their kids from school should not be regarded as panicking unduly. Some will feel especially concerned to protect vulnerable family members. Their decisions are reasonable and valid; many people prefer more conservative strategies while the evidence is uncertain and conflicting.

At best the current evidence on the role of children in the spread of COVID-19 is equivocal. On the basis of the evidence available, the [Australian Health Protection Principal Committee](#) (AHPPC) has recommended that 'pre-emptive closures are not proportionate or effective as a public health intervention to prevent community transmission of COVID-19 at this time'. But many parents and teachers will also have seen reports, such as the recent [report released](#)

[by the Imperial College London](#), and be responding to the possibility that schools or [children](#) may play a role in the transmission of COVID-19.

Removing children from school voluntarily is mostly a fairly low-consequence action that can be reviewed as new evidence emerges. Parents who feel supported are more likely to engage with advice and evidence as it emerges.

Teachers' views on school removals matter too. Many teachers at present feel they are being treated as expendable resources in often unhygienic and often crowded environments. While at present the [risk to teachers in Australia](#) is low, it is also reasonable that teachers feel concerned right now. Teachers may feel more able to manage hygiene practices at school with a smaller staff-student ratio.

Parents who are continuing to send their children to school in accordance with current state and federal government policy are also doing the right thing. The current policy has a strong rationale and is recommended by the experts on the AHPPC for thoughtful reasons.

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Paul Kidson

No

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No. It is not something I would recommend based on the current health advice, and any parent or caregiver should be very realistic about how challenging it can be.

It is always the prerogative of a parent or caregiver to make decisions in the best interests of their child. You may well take preemptive action and find within the next period of time that closures are enforced anyway. It could turn into a much longer period of time than you anticipated. You may jump early without being fully aware of the consequences.

In the short term, it might be great for kids to have a break, but as time wears on, what positive learning experiences are they going to engage in? How equipped might you feel to support this?

It will vary, depending on your child's age. Young children might love doing some reading, painting, cleaning, playing in the yard. If you have children in senior secondary school, pressures on their studies are much more acute. Supporting their learning is a very different consideration than that of a primary school student.

It will be challenging for kids socially. We naturally like being around our friends, and to limit this voluntarily is a brave call.

If I do this for two weeks and then the government says there's going to be a shutdown, then there's a shutdown after school holidays, that could be six weeks that your kids are out of school. Can you sustain that?

Keeping them actively engaged in something that is crucial to their learning. That could be backyard fun or it could be reading, even helping out with chores around the home. There's rich learning opportunities to be had through something as simple as helping prepare dinner or baking a cake: measuring ingredients, differences between volume and weight, temperature, and so forth. It needs patience, though, to do this.

With regards to missing out on Naplan preparation, I think this is a godsend. Personally, I wouldn't be worrying about it. Let the kids enjoy learning for its own sake, or take some time to play and create.

If you are working from home and have kids in the background, then that's a real challenge. If you are a working person, what's the obligation to your employer with regards to being a primary carer while working. How do you effectively do both, or is it even possible to do so?

Don't jump into it without considering really carefully the implications.

If I was still in the chair as a principal, I would say to parents "go ahead with my blessing, but realise the challenges may be more acute than you initially think".

If you are able to do it, it could help support health experts' advice about flattening the curve and slowing the spread of the disease.

I would be reluctant to say that people should do it, but I understand if some parents want to do it.

For some kids, the safest place they get to is school because home can be a tough place.

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