

To parents and guardians of school children in Ireland,

I am very aware that many of you are worried about the reopening of schools and the associated risk of COVID-19 for your children. This concern is natural and is to be fully expected after a period of six months during which we have all had to adapt to the challenges posed by COVID-19.

The decision to reopen schools has not been taken lightly and has been based on guidance produced by international bodies including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC); scientific evidence regarding the risk of COVID-19 in school children and staff; the experience of other countries that have not closed, or have reopened, their schools; our own experience having reopened childcare settings and summer camps since June; and evidence regarding the importance of school for the overall health and wellbeing of children.

International evidence shows us that child-to-child and child-to-adult transmission of COVID-19 in schools is uncommon. In addition, our own experience to date in Ireland, and indeed that reported internationally, demonstrates that for the overwhelming majority of children who are diagnosed with COVID-19, their symptoms will be mild.

The importance of schools for the overall health and wellbeing of children cannot be overstated, and the risk of COVID-19 has been carefully weighed against the very real harm that can be caused by sustained school closures. Schools play a fundamental role in the social life of children; they are where children are educated, make friends, share interests, learn social skills like self-confidence and empathy, and participate in sport and cultural activities.

Of course, as we continue to navigate our way through this pandemic, there are no zero risk options for reopening schools or indeed any other environment; the aim, therefore, is to reopen in as safe a way as possible by ensuring that all appropriate public health measures such as physical distancing, hand washing and respiratory hygiene are implemented where appropriate.

Schools are at the heart of our communities and the best way to protect them is to keep the level of COVID-19 in the community low. As parents and guardians, you can play a key role in this, both through your own actions and through the influence that you have on your family and friends. If all of us continue to make small changes to the way we live, we can - together - starve this virus of opportunities to transmit.

While it is okay to send your child to school or childcare if they only have a runny nose or a sneeze, if you have any concerns that your child has symptoms of COVID-19 - fever, cough, shortness of breath, loss of taste or smell – then please keep them at home until you have spoken with your GP by phone. Lots more information is available at [gov.ie/backtoschool](https://www.gov.ie/backtoschool) and [hse.ie](https://www.hse.ie).

There will be cases of COVID-19 among children over the coming days and weeks, as there have been throughout this pandemic to date. But when this happens our public health teams in the HSE will respond and liaise closely with the school involved and ensure that all necessary measures are taken to protect other students and school staff.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for all you have done to keep your family and our communities safe over the past seven months. I also want to thank all teachers, principals and school staff who have worked so hard to ensure that our schools are ready to reopen – it is just one more example of the incredible solidarity that has defined the way in which people all across the country have come together to play their part in getting us through this pandemic.

Dr. Ronan Glynn, Acting Chief Medical Officer, Department of Health.